

Apartment 2J

By Jessica Cobbinah

Before the posters and news trucks, the TV interviews and search parties, there had been this: a wooden crib, a rocking chair, and a stuffed, long-haired rabbit. The day Natalie first saw the rabbit, when she and Jasper had already been living in Apartment 2J for over a year, it was easy to hide her stomach underneath the coat that the November weather required her to wear, which meant it was far too early for her to be even thinking about browsing through the baby section at Target. Jasper had told her as much when he found her inching the cart closer and closer to it while they were supposed to be getting new bedsheets.

She was so excited when she brought it to the checkout line that Jasper had no choice but to yield to her. The rabbit had caught her eye because it reminded Natalie of a similar one she'd had as a child—a gift from her mom's sister, who had died in the exact same hospital Natalie was born in a week later. Her own rabbit stuck around through scraped knees and bad dreams, and it kept sticking around even after her other, attic-bound-since-age-thirteen toys were donated to Goodwill.

By the new year, the inevitable happened, and her stomach stole any sense of secrecy she had been able to hold onto for the first several weeks. Congratulations flowed anew each time she ran into an old friend or made small talk with a

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Walmart cashier, and on more than one occasion, hands had reached out and touched her protruding stomach without permission or warning. The bigger she got, the more it seemed that she wasn't *Natalie* so much as a disembodied pregnant belly, unattached to any full human form. It was bearable when it was family or friends, but when it was from strangers, it was hard to suppress the urge to swat their hands away.

The urge manifested again when she noticed one of her neighbors, a petite woman typically dressed in colorful nursing scrubs, eyeing her bump as they both inserted their keys into their respective mailboxes. She'd been there slightly longer than Natalie and Jasper, and even though Natalie had a distinct memory of her stopping by the apartment to introduce herself when they had first moved in, the woman's name was escaping her.

Natalie offered up a small smile as she retrieved the papers waiting for her inside her box. There was the typical collection of bills and credit card offers, but she discovered a Macy's catalog boasting discounts on onesies and car seats folded longways on top. She planned on going back to her apartment and circling the good stuff as she indulged her newfound craving for pickled jalapeños, but before she could turn to leave, the woman asked, "How far along are you?" A second later, she added, "I'm sorry, was that weird? I'm just, like, obsessed with babies."

"I'm five months," Natalie replied, and the woman's thin lips parted in a smile.

"Is this your first?"

"Yeah. It's been good, I just didn't know I'd feel so exposed." She placed a hand on her stomach, partly out of habit and partly as protection in case the woman decided to get touchy-feely without warning. Instead, she surprised Natalie by saying, "Like you're a public petting zoo, right?"

"Right," Natalie said with a laugh. The woman nodded.

"I definitely don't miss that part of it. Don't miss the morning sickness, either."

In the year she'd been seeing this woman around the complex, Natalie had never seen her pushing a baby in a stroller or bustling an overly-energetic kid into their car seat. Natalie hoped her confusion didn't show on her face or in her voice as she told her, "Mine hasn't been so bad." Then, her curiosity got the better of her, and she said, "I didn't know you had kids."

"Miscarried. Twice."

Natalie let her mouth fall open an inch before she had the sense to control her reaction. After muttering a simple apology, she scrambled to find the right thing to say. It'd be wrong for her to just change the subject without addressing it, but what could she tell her that wasn't insensitive? *You're still young! You can keep trying! Sometimes I worry about that happening to me, too, so I understand how you feel!*

"It's alright," the woman continued before the pause got too long and awkward. She tucked the hand that wasn't holding her mail in her jacket pocket." Kids can really make or break a relationship, you know? I mean, I got lucky that my ex and I were only engaged when we split, but... oh, my God, I'm sorry. You don't want to hear this right now."

Feeling very aware of both her bump and her wedding band, Natalie said, "No, it's fine."

"I was just meaning to say that it's not all bad. I was putting so much energy into this relationship that wasn't working, and now I have time to go back to school. For pediatric nursing."

"That's good," Natalie told her.

“Kids will happen for me when the time is right,” the woman said, but by then, the conversation had reached a point where its resuscitation was no longer a possibility.

The woman wished Natalie good luck with the pregnancy. Natalie wished her good luck with nursing school. With promises to “see each other around,” they retreated back to their apartments.

Inside, Natalie entered the nursery. She liked to do this some nights when she had a moment to herself in the time between when she got home from work and when Jasper did. She would survey the work the two of them had done hanging pictures and arranging the dainty lace dresses and floral-patterned shirts they’d received at the baby shower.

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When all seven pounds and nine ounces of Daisy came home to the apartment, it took less than a week for her squirming hands to start seeking comfort from the rabbit’s silky ears. Natalie started losing count of all the times she had to pull them out from in between the baby’s soft gums, and by the time she was two, the fur couldn’t bounce back no matter how many times it cycled through the apartment’s half-functioning washing machine. This was what she had wanted though—an object that could soothe Daisy no matter what she was going through.

That’s why Natalie couldn’t stop crying long enough to call Jasper and tell him that she’d found it outside on the concrete stairs, their little girl nowhere in sight.

“You say she doesn’t have a habit of hiding or running away in public places?” the officer asked, the tip of his ballpoint pen grazing his notepad.

“No, never,” replied Jasper, “she doesn’t like to be far from us.”

At first, Natalie had only been able to answer the most basic questions from the pair of cops standing in the living room, her mind stuck on a loop of the ten seconds between when she walked in and when she noticed Daisy's disappearance. Since the moment Jasper had burst through the front door and taken over for her, she hadn't moved from her spot on the couch, gripping the rabbit with both hands. If she closed her eyes for long enough, she could imagine Daisy reaching up to pluck it away from her.

A third officer alternated between Daisy's room and the outside landing where the toy had been found, but Natalie had little hope that any evidence would be collected. In the time it took for her to dash into the kitchen to drop the groceries off, Daisy had vanished, even though Natalie would swear on everything she owned that she had seen her enter the apartment behind her.

"I feel like this is my fault," Natalie whispered when Jasper joined her on the couch hours later. He tried to pry the rabbit from her hands, but this only caused her to sink her fingers into its body and pull it closer to her chest.

Natalie turned to look out the window, where life went on as normal for everybody else. Up until then, she'd never had any reason to feel unsafe where they lived, except for the faulty security cameras that she hadn't known about until then. Her neighbors were teachers, salespeople, and nurses, the sort of people who waved when they passed each other. The area had a high safety rating. Something like this shouldn't have been possible in a million years.

"I swear she was right behind me. I turned my back for three seconds," Natalie said, her voice hollow.

Jasper said "I know," out of instinct, but it was so weak and unconvincing that it made Natalie feel worse than before.

He'd asked her to tell him the story three times now, and it was clear that it still didn't make any sense to him. Instead of asking again, he placed his hand on the center of her back and tried his best to comfort her. Still, the thought didn't dissolve on its own, and the dregs of it remained in her mind for the rest of the night and beyond — how could she be so careless?

The first forty-eight hours came and went, and Natalie's ability to sleep through the night went with them. Jasper never woke up when she did. Most nights it happened right before three A.M. — once, it was at five twenty-three, the exact time Daisy was born. She couldn't go back to sleep at all after that one. Like a twisted routine, she would awaken, thinking that she'd heard a cry had come from Daisy's room, and she always wanted to get up and run across the hall before the moment of remembering stole the instinct away. After it happened, Natalie would stare at the ceiling as she waited for the cry to come again, the anticipation making her heart beat with such intensity, she was astonished that it didn't wake Jasper.

On one of her sleepless nights, she flipped from one side to the other and discovered that Jasper was already up, reading by the dim light of his book lamp. His expression bore no surprise at seeing her awake at this time of night, but he didn't say anything to her.

"You know what I can't stop thinking about?" Natalie asked, turning her head so that she could see him better. He avoided making eye contact through his reading glasses. "A few weeks ago, I left the room to make a call when she was eating lunch, and when I came back, she had grabbed a bunch of pasta off her plate and launched it. It got everywhere — I mean, the floor, the walls, her hair. And I blew up. I didn't mean to, but I'd just spent the whole weekend cleaning, and I was already mad because the washing machine was acting up

again, and I just... I mean, I know she cries all the time, but all I keep thinking about is how wide her eyes got when I started yelling at her. I feel like I'll never forget that look on..."

She trailed off when she realized Jasper wasn't responding. His focus was still trained on the book in his lap, but his eyes were no longer tracking the words on the pages. He let them shift over to his wife, but the only thing he managed to say was, "It's not your fault. Get some rest." He didn't allow his voice to surpass a whisper even though she'd spoken at her regular volume.

The phrase "it's not your fault" always dissolved Natalie's words into incoherency, and Jasper had to have known that by this point. Coming from him, it felt like a backhanded way to remind her of what she had allowed to happen, so he chose to utilize it at prime moments. Typically, that meant Natalie was descending the slippery slope towards hysterics, but she was calm this time – undoubtedly emotional, but not frantic enough to warrant him prodding at a sore spot in order to silence her.

Natalie felt her attempt at an olive branch deserved more attention than this, but she couldn't place the blame entirely on her husband. They'd already spoken to the police, countless reporters, and their families. That much speaking was exhausting when all they wanted to do was grieve, and it meant there was nothing left to say to the person who was supposed to matter most.

Natalie watched Jasper dog-ear his book, set it on the nightstand, and travel to the bathroom. When he returned, he turned out the light, twisted his body to face the wall, and pulled the covers around his shoulders. Natalie did the same.

"This is a courtesy call to remind you of an appointment for *Daisy Bowen* scheduled for Tuesday, April fifteenth, at three P.M."

Natalie lowered the phone from her ear before the automated voice finished speaking. Hearing her child being talked about in the present tense, as if she could just buckle her into her car seat and drive her to the doctor's office, was maddening.

It had almost been a year since the day she'd called Jasper crying, and here she was unable to resist doing it again. He answered on the third ring, giving a half-interested, "Hello?"

His poorly-concealed *sigh* seeped through the phone speakers in response to her sobs. He silently listened to her explain the situation, but the dull quality of his voice as he told her that things would be fine and it wasn't her fault hurt just as much as hearing Daisy's name, if not more. It took forty-five minutes after she hung up for the flow of tears to stop, and once it did, her lungs filled with air from the first real inhale she'd taken since that afternoon all those months ago.

Instead of ignoring the perpetually-closed door to Daisy's room like she and Jasper tended to do, Natalie forced herself inside, knowing that she'd back out if she paused for too long before turning the doorknob. For some reason, she'd thought the police would have altered the room in the chaos of their investigation, but everything remained in its place. There was the rocking chair, the crib, the shelf of Daisy's books. All of them were her favorite, it seemed. Jasper questioned if she even understood what was happening in any of them or if she just liked the voices they made while they read to her, but it had never mattered to Natalie. She took a step towards the bookshelf but stopped short when she glanced inside the crib.

Looking into the rabbit's glossy, brown eyes reminded her that they were the last to see Daisy. The only consolation

she felt was that if something had happened to her, Natalie would have felt it when she picked the rabbit up and stroked the places where the fur had been matted down over time, if not the moment she walked into the room itself. She didn't need forensic data or a police report to tell her that her baby was still out there; this token was all she needed. She just wished she could ask it where to go next.

She and the rabbit were gone by evening.