

Unfit Matches

Matthew was waiting for me when I opened the door. For what seemed like the hundredth time I regretted giving him a key to my apartment. The apartment was brightly lit, the canvas blinds completely rolled up and he was sitting there in a pair of his innumerable khakis reading one of my books. It looked like it was *Pride and Prejudice*.

"Why are the blinds open? It's dark. People can see in here." *And why are you reading my book?*

"Well, I'm glad to see you too. How was work?"

"It was fine. Tiring."

I kicked off my sandals, they landed underneath the wooden bench in the hallway. I set my canvas satchel down on the floor against the wall.

"Did you cook dinner for me?" I could smell the fragrant scent of herbs. I felt my shoulders slightly loosen as I saw him walking from window to window letting down the blinds. His movements were fluid without being slow. I liked watching him move. He was graceful.

"Yes I did. Since you were working late I thought that we could just stay in tonight instead of going out." He had come to a stop in front of me.

"Well, I'm going to go and change. I need to get into some comfortable clothes." I had avoided it for the moment. I could feel Matthew watching me as I walked away and heard his steps as he walked toward his chair to sit down. I felt a slight sense of relief.

I stood in the mirror looking at myself. Brown hair and expressive eyes; eyes that could reveal a lot but chose to hide.

"Are you ready, Clara?" Matthew asks. "Don't want the food to get cold."

The scent of the white daisies in a vase on the table mingles with the freshness of basil, reminding me of summer even here in the city where the sounds of honking horns drown out the music of crickets. The soft clink of silverware against ceramic is soothing in its repetition.

"School was interesting today. Trying to get fifteen year olds to read Shakespeare has been an adventure. Thanks for the suggestion to have them watch Romeo and Juliet. They all paid attention to Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes."

He is waiting for me to speak. I should answer him. "You're welcome. I thought the kids would like that. It's somewhat better than the one I saw in school. The guys were the only

ones that liked watching it. They just looked at Juliet's, I guess, her ample bosom, the whole time." This wasn't exactly the topic I wanted to be discussing with Matthew.

"I remember that movie," Matthew said, laughing. "All the guys in class really enjoyed it. The girls complained the whole time."

"I'm thinking about flying down to Williamsburg this weekend."

Matthew checked his laugh. "Ok, what for?"

"I just thought I'd visit my parents."

"You're voluntarily going to see your parents?"

"Yes, voluntarily," I said laughing softly. "They've improved with age."

"You going alone? I'd like to come with you," he paused uncertainly. "If you'd let me. Meet the distant parents. See the place where you grew up."

I silently reminded myself that he was part of my life now.

"Good night, Clara. I'll see you tomorrow morning." Matthew began to lean toward me.

We were standing in the open doorway. A warm breeze blew, slightly ruffling his black hair. His hair was a compromise between straight and curly. It reminded me of the soft waves of a lake. I brushed away the strand of hair that always seemed to fall across his eyes; eyes that reminded me of the ocean.

"Good night, Matthew."

He was watching me again, his eyes fixed intently on my face, asking me something. I looked down at his shoes. His lips were cool against my forehead.

The house was statuesque, complete with wraparound porch and swing. It was dark and silent. It was just like my parents to not be at home. And it looked like they hadn't been home for a while. The grass needed to be cut.

"Well, I guess that's what I get for not telling them I was coming. They must have gone away for a while."

They often did that. Packing up their car and leaving; not telling me where they were going. They had at least given me a warning when I was a child; dropping me off at the neighbor's house. The old couple had died a few years ago. They were sweet and untroubled, never showing any signs that they thought it strange for a child to be dropped off at their door with instructions to "feed her and let her sleep there at night, she was fine on her own for the rest of the day."

It had always been them and me. From the time I had been able to understand, around the age of five, I had known that my parents were a pair, there was no one without the other. I had intruded on them, arriving in their world noisy, blotchy, and unwanted. Sometimes, in the rare times when my father wasn't around, my mother would tell me stories about how they met, how they came to love one another.

It was that time in summer when everything became tired; the leaves were ready to rest on the ground and wait to be raked into piles along the sides of the streets. The grass was just beginning to go brown, like graying hair, the strands of green interspersed with shades of sand. She was tired too; tired of the heat, tired of having to leave the house to avoid the fights.

They fought all of the time, her parents. She often wondered what had made them get married. They didn't match at all. Her father was tall and slender. And wild. Not fit to be married her mother often said. Her father reminded her of sunlight on a winter day. He had the appearance of warmth but he left her cold. He'd had dreams when he was younger of traveling

the world, seeing for himself all of the places he'd read about in books. But life, the kind where days blend into one another, had stopped him.

Her mother was almost thin, the beginnings of plumpness just starting to show on her figure, enough to start her considering buying the next size up, but not enough to erase the lines in her face that told of her sternness and her disappointment. Her mother had been introduced to her father through their parents, a how would Patricia like to go out with Jonathan kind of introduction. It was a quick relationship. A moment of recklessness when she had been entranced by the way he spoke of things she didn't understand and he had been intrigued by the quietness in her that he believed to be mystery. Their parents had made them marry. Jonathan put away his books and Patricia was reminded of it every day. It was out of this union that she had been born. She was slender and tall. Like her father. Wild.

It was in these last weeks of summer that she first met Alex. It was quiet and it was hot. Not even the leaves on the trees moved. The heat had paralyzed everything, silenced the chattering of squirrels and the whistles of the birds. Everything was still, except for her parents. They were arguing again, over something trivial like the way her father left his clothes lying around the house. So she escaped out into the woods where fathers didn't disappoint and mothers didn't nag.

She had a favorite tree in those woods. It was a grandfatherly tree, large and strong with thick branches. She liked to sit beneath it and allow its leaves to shade her. It was quiet out there under that tree. She could forget about her parents, forget about their endless fights, forget about how alone she was.

He was far away when she caught sight of him. The outline of his body seemed to waver around the edges the way things did in the distance when it was hot. He seemed to wander through the trees, sometimes hidden behind a particularly dense patch of wood; other times he was clearly visible to her and coming closer all the time. When he got close enough for her to see what he looked like, she saw that he wore glasses. He was wearing cut off jeans that had strings hanging from them where he or someone else had cut them and a white t-shirt that had long ago stopped simply being white, it was now more the color of cream. His hair brushed against his shoulders, the sandy threads of it reflecting the little bits of sunlight that made its way past the leaves. She liked the way he looked.

"Hey."

'Hey, yourself," she'd said.

He was standing in front of her now, near enough to see the freckles sprinkled across his nose but far enough away that she wasn't scared of him.

"I'm Alex. Alexander. But everyone calls me Alex." He had a voice like water, fluid and changeable. "I live over on the other side of the woods. Just moved here a few weeks ago."

He was scuffing the toes of his shoes into the ground. Looking at her with his head tilted slightly to the side. Watching her. Waiting for her to say something.

"I'm Nora. I live over there," she said, pointing in the general direction of her house.

They never were apart after that.

I grew up near those same woods where my mother had first met my father. I played in those woods and would imagine that I had a brother or a sister to play with. I was often by myself during that time. My father would be upstairs in his studio working on his writing and my mother would be near him, reading or drawing. She always kept close to him. I would often hear traces of their voices floating down the stairs, his deep and fluid, hers warm and tinged with honey; both of them complementing each other.

That was how it always was. The two of them together. They hadn't told me in so many words that I hadn't been planned for but I could tell. It was in the way they looked at me when I did some unexplained thing or other. They would look at each other and shake their heads softly from side to side, both wondering how they had gotten this child that neither of them understood.

It wasn't until I was older, around eight or nine, that they would leave the house altogether. I could notice the signs of when they were about to go away on one of the trips that took them to places that I wasn't welcome in. They would glance at me with a look of partially hidden irritation on their faces. It would be easier if I wasn't there. Now they had to at least attempt to make sure that I was looked after. I would hear them upstairs packing, the muted thumps of closing drawers and books being dropped into bags signaling to me through the floor that my parents were leaving.

When my parents left, I always stayed with our neighbors who lived about half a mile down the road from us. They were an older couple even then. The type of people that I imagined grandparents were like. I don't know what they thought of my family, my father and mother dropping me off with a small bag that contained my pajamas and a toothbrush, sometimes bothering to wave and other times not. I think they just accepted us for what we were. I sometimes overheard them talking about me at night when I was supposed to be asleep, the words "artsy type" and "poor Clara" drifting up through the vent in floor.

They would always come back. Sometimes they were away for a few days and other times they were away for a week. I always looked forward to their coming home. If I was at the neighbor's house I would hear the crunch of the tires on the gravel as they pulled into the driveway, honking their horn to let me know that it was time for me to come home. It was those first hours and days when they came home that I looked forward to the most. My parents would be almost affectionate with me, sometimes patting my head and asking me questions that parents asked their children, had I been good, had I brushed my teeth before I went to bed. I felt like they had missed me while they'd been gone. But it never lasted. They would become used to me again and they'd retreat back into their world.

I never asked them where they went.

Matthew is watching me intently. His forehead has a faint wrinkle in it, the one that forms when he is concentrating. I've never talked to him about my parents before. I've only mentioned them in passing, using a dismissive tone so that he knows not to ask me about them.

"Thank you." Those are the only words that he says to me. I know what he means.

The ride home from the airport was unobtrusively silent. I could see Matthew's profile out of the corner of my eye. Chin and nose. His hair and brief glimpses of his eyes.

"Are you trying to memorize me?" he asked softly, I could hear the amusement in his voice.

I didn't answer him. I just slid my hand a little closer to his, my fingers close to touching his. His hand is resting on the console between us. His fingers are long and slender, like he should play the piano. I've always thought that his hands were beautiful. He was lightly strumming his fingers to the sounds of the soft strands of jazz that came from the radio. He wasn't looking at me.

I let my mind wander then as I slowly take in every detail about him. He is everything that my parents are not. Matthew's pants never have wrinkles in them, even when he sits for hours in my apartment grading papers while I write and casting glances at me when he thinks

I'm not looking. He is always present. Letting me know what he's doing even though I never ask.

"I kind of love you." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Matthew glanced at me then, his look and a slight swerve of the car the only things that showed he had heard me. And then he smiled.

And in that moment I think I've finally found my match.