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The high-pitched beeping of a garbage truck jolted David awake from a thin and restless sleep. The window was still open, letting in the cool, damp air of a surprise summer storm. He wiped the moisture from his cheek before forcing himself out of bed, the sheets clinging to his body as if willing him to stay. The spare room was bare and empty, the bed too big. The temporary sleeping situation was never supposed to last this long.

David hesitated before stepping out of his room into the long hallway that inevitably stretched before him. It was the same ritual every morning—avoiding the bright blue door of Paul’s room. He never looked at it directly, but it was always there, its color vibrant and accusing in the corner of his eye. His stomach tightened as he descended the stairs, trying to focus on each creaky step below him instead of the hollow echo of the room behind.

Julie was already in the kitchen. A pot of coffee sat on the counter. Dark roast, freshly made judging by the rich scent that

filled the room. David approached the fridge to get the milk. Their movements around each other were careful and practiced, a familiar choreography from the many silent mornings they'd grown used to.

Julie broke the silence first. "I was thinking of making some eggs. Do you want—"

"I'm good," David said quickly, cutting her off as he poured coffee into his mug. He liked the feeling caffeine gave him on an empty stomach, a temporary energetic high. They fell back into their quiet morning as Julie rustled through the kitchen and David kept his eyes firmly focused on the morning news app.

"David," Julie said. Her voice had become almost muffled to him, blending into the sounds he'd grown to expect like clattering pots or running water. He continued to scroll through his phone.

"David," she repeated, louder this time. He looked up, meeting her eyes, which were filled with a resolve he hadn't seen in a long time.

"We need to talk."

He set his phone down. The room seemed to contract, the walls inching closer as she prepared to speak.

"I guess there's no reason to sugar coat it. I've been trying for months, and nothing's changed," Julie said. Her voice was soft and clear, "I want a divorce."

Her words lingered in the air between them, heavy and absolute. David's chest squeezed, sharp and deep, but not entirely unexpected. He'd seen the signs, felt the growing distance, but hearing the words made it real in a way he hadn't planned for.

"Jules," he said, reaching out to her hand that was resting on the table. She quickly snatched her arm back toward her body. He shouldn't have used that nickname. David struggled

to control his now uneven breathing.

“This isn’t a discussion. I’m telling you what I want,” she said, her words felt careful and rehearsed.

David sank back into his chair. The shock of a moment he’d known was coming still left him spinning. He searched her face for a sense of familiarity but only found the contours of someone carved out by grief.

“You don’t understand?” Julie’s voice broke through his thoughts, her knuckles white from gripping the mixing bowl too hard. “Our son died, and you shut down. Completely.”

“I’m grieving,” David said quietly, but even he knew the words felt hollow.

“You’re not grieving. You’re shutting out the world and simply existing.” David closed his eyes and took a deep breath, resisting the urge to retreat to the silent safety of his office, but Julie kept talking.

“You eat when you need to, sleep when you need to, speak when you need to. You’re running on autopilot.” David felt his heart beat in his chest, hard. Outside, the rain continued to fall, heavier than when he had woken not even twenty minutes before. He wondered how cool and refreshing the rain would feel on his skin again, a welcome change from the heatwave they’d been drudging through the past few weeks

“Are you even listening?” Julie said, holding a deep frown. Little lines had formed on either side of her mouth, dragging down the sides of her lips.

“I just need some time—”

“No, David,” she interrupted, her voice softened slightly, but she stayed firm. “It was a horrible accident, but I lost you too. Paul’s gone, and I’ve been completely alone ever since.”

Alone. David fixated on the word. He craved being alone.

“I planned the funeral alone. Opened condolence cards alone. Had to fake a smile when people showed up at our door with their ‘I’m sorry’ casseroles alone. I did everything alone while you hid in your office.” He hadn’t heard her speak this much in a long time. It reminded David of when they first met. Sitting in the small sushi restaurant, he was captivated by the way she spoke. She had so much to say that she would speak without taking a breath between sentences, her passion for life radiated in her eyes. The surrounding chatter and atmosphere of the restaurant dulled in comparison to this vibrant, colorful woman.

“I’m sorry, Julie.” It was the first thing he’d said, and actually meant, in months.

“We’re past apologies. I can’t heal living in this time trap.” He could see the pity in her eyes.

“You’ve made up your mind?” David asked.

Julie just looked at him with her sad mouth and nodded. There was nothing left to say. The conversation had run its course, a conclusion reached not through anger but resignation.

“What about the house?” he asked, his voice low, tired.

“I’ve been talking to a real estate agent,” Julie said. “The market’s good. We could both live comfortably.”

David nodded, feeling the finality of the decision, but was surprised he didn’t feel more than the thumping of his heart echoing his ears and a small annoyance at her betrayal of not consulting him before talking to the real estate agent. He merely itched retreat back to his solitude as fast as possible.

“Okay,” he said simply, standing up. The chair scraped against the floor, a harsh sound in the quiet kitchen.

“I’ll call the lawyer,” Julie said.

David walked away, the weight of the morning settling around him, heavy and cold as the rain falling outside.

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David's stomach grumbled, reminding him that he had yet to eat that day. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a bowl of Cheerio-O's. The house was empty, but full of the sounds of a bright summer morning – the scrambling feet of squirrels on the roofs and birds chirping happily at the morning sun. Julie was out like she had been every day since their talk the week before.

He ate mechanically, his gaze drifting out the window to the leaves dancing in the morning breeze. Julie had left early her new routine started immediately after their conversation. Pilates classes, maybe, or coffee with new friends, the details of her life were now a mystery. Placing his bowl in the sink, David walked through the now empty living room. The contents of fifteen years of life together now sat in cardboard boxes labeled "David" and "Julie."

He knew he needed to stop procrastinating packing the rest of his belongings. A family had shown interest in the house. It was only a matter of time before he would need to move—not that he'd begun looking into living arrangements. David walked up the stairs and towards his room. The bright blue door to Paul's room remained closed. No one had stepped foot inside since the funeral.

His hand hovered reluctantly over the doorknob. He remembered Paul asking if he could paint the room his favorite color. The hallway was a stylish, muted gray, complemented by fresh white doors. Initially, they told Paul he had to wait until the next school year, but he persisted, asking every night before bed. They eventually caved, taking him to the local paint store

to pick the shade. David showed Paul how to paint and let the 8-year-old believe he had painted the door entirely himself, but that night when Paul fell asleep, David crept over to paint over the streaky blue strokes until the door was solid and vibrant.

David felt nauseous. A majority of the house was packed, ready to move, but neither of them brought up how to pack this last room. David tried to avoid thinking about it. It brought up questions he didn't begin to know how to answer.

Who would get Paul's favorite fire engine? His baby clothes? The cape he insisted on wearing every time they watched a superhero movie? Custody battles with living children were painful and messy. This one was quiet.