

JESSICA BRIEN

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## *Soup for Starters*

*Audrey*

My husband stretches his mouth into an unnatural shape when he looks at me. It is not a smile. He sits rigid at the dining room table, half concealed beneath the oak. Glassy, bloodshot eyes protrude from his skull, unblinking. His lips curl at the edges, recoiling at my arrival. It's as if he's a puppet and someone is pulling the strings, encouraging his every movement.

*My puppet. My strings.*

The grandfather clock strikes the hour, my head pounding with every toll of the bell. I lean over, plant a kiss on his cheek, his stubble grazing my lips. I leave a red smudge in my wake. He glances at me. Nods. He takes his glass to his lips. Sniffs. Checks to see if I'm watching. He gulps it down too quickly, chokes.

*He is afraid of me.*

He should be. I've been reading through his messages. Every last sordid one. He's done things with her we've never even discussed in our twenty-two years of marriage. He's risking our lives in the middle of a fucking pandemic—to screw this stranger.

*Only she's not a stranger.*

I cried when I first read those texts. I lay curled up in the foetal position on our bed and I thought about killing myself. Just to spite him. Just so our son would never look at him the same way again.

I thought about the first time I met Matthew, back in college when we took the same sociology class. I couldn't resist when he asked me

to tutor him, blinking at me with soft brown eyes, flicking his dark hair from his face. I remember that surge through my body when our hands grazed as he handed me a pencil. Walks on the beach in the hazy rain, sharing a bag of chips. A kiss. Dancing skin to skin, his calloused hands on my waist as I caressed his cheek and called him mine. Weekends in Prague and nights under the stars. August 15<sup>th</sup>, the day he gave me his name. The light in his eyes, and the darkness in my mother's when she told me I'd live to regret my decision.

"I'm just going 'round the shop to get milk, love," he would say.

There's already three bloody cartons in the fridge. All with the same stupid date. I think back now to all of those 'runs' he went on, unable to shed a single pound of fat. How stupid of me. It was as if I didn't know him at all. He was lazy when I met him and he was lazy now. That's what broke our marriage. He didn't put any effort into anything. As though the very idea of dinners and dates pained him. He didn't want to bother with polite conversation. Light flirtation. All I got from him were eye rolls and empty grunts. Even in bed.

I thought he was too lazy to cheat. That was my mistake. It's not like I didn't try. I bought the most beautiful negligees and leather lingerie sets. I invested in sheer stockings and spunks. Botox and liposuction. A personal trainer and a gruelling military diet. Do you know how fucking hard it is keeping to a consistent diet when you aren't permitted to leave the house? I work on myself every day—on my body and my mind and my hobbies—and he dares to sit there, looking at me like a bug that must be squashed. Sending pictures of his junk to other women. I'm trapped in this prison with the worst kind of offender.

How easy it must be, to be a man. He can walk away from us and fuck anything with a pulse. Lead this whole other life. He can forget about his family. Start a new one. Mothers don't have that luxury. *Women* don't have that luxury.

*I hate him.*

He has given me nothing while I've given him everything. OK—that's a lie. He gave me my son. My world. Xavier.

Xavier was born thirteen years ago. We bonded instantly, his tiny pink fist enclosed around my manicured thumb. He was always mine. I couldn't bear it when Matthew held him. He was clumsy,

always forgetting to support his head. Changing him over the cooker. Leaving him unattended on the couch to answer the door. “I was gone one minute, Audrey,” he’d huff. As if one minute wasn’t long enough. As if we hadn’t almost lost him once before.

Matthew left us for two nights when I told him I wanted to home-school Xavier. He said it wasn’t normal to keep a child hidden away like that. He said Xavier would have no friends. But Xavier didn’t need friends. He had me. The other children would make him sick. Expose him to germs. I’d never seen a child with an immune system quite like his. He was always sick. I spent most nights sitting in an armchair at his bedside, watching his chest rise and fall. Days checking his temperature and spoon-feeding him chicken soup. He never cried. He was always a good boy. When this pandemic started, I knew he didn’t mind being at home. He was always there anyway.

“Would you like a glass of wine, dear? Pinot Noir? Chardonnay? Merlot? Cabernet Sauvignon?” I asked Matthew, blinking slowly, simpering.

“No thank you, I’m quite alright, darling.”

His eyes didn’t sparkle. They reflected only my plastered-on smile, pearly whites threatening to unleash themselves and become embedded in the flesh of his neck.

“How about a beer? Lager? Stout? Pilsner? P..”

“No. Thank you.” He fidgeted with a table napkin, his expression souring.

“A short? We’ve got gin. Vodka? Perhaps some whisky?”

“I’m not thirsty, love,” he said all at once, forcing a half-hearted chuckle. A vein pulsed in his forehead. I longed to reach out a slender finger and press down on it.

“As you wish.” I gritted my teeth. I watched Xavier from the corner of my eye, sitting on the short side of the table, staring dreamily into space. Such a good little boy. He had set the table as I had taught him, carefully arranging the silverware and placing neat little folds in the corners of the napkins. He placed three glasses of milk on the coasters—of course Matthew couldn’t handle the slightest hint of spice. Xavier even helped me prepare the dinner. We were having his favourite that night—chicken alfredo with tomato and basil soup for starters.

I would do anything to make him happy.

The family dog died last week. It was a terrible affair. Rupert was six, a healthy Doberman, in his prime. We'd been having a pest problem. Matthew left the shed door unlocked, and our Rupert ingested the poison. I will never forgive Matthew for that, even if Xavier does.

*I will never forgive Matthew a lot of things.*

"How was work, dear?" I ask as I stir the soup. I turn back to look at him, sitting with his head bent, staring at his stupid phone. Beads of perspiration etched across his forehead.

"Busy, love."

"Is Richard still micro-managing?"

"Richard?" His cheeks redden, and I know I've caught him in a lie. "Yes, Richard's a pain, I'll admit."

"I was always fond of his wife."

Matthew doesn't respond, and I wonder if he's slept with Richard's wife too.

I straighten my smock dress and smile at the boys, walking towards the table. I carefully balance the ceramic bowls of steaming soup. The bread is already buttered. I sit at the far end of the table, teasing out a blonde curl. I'd had to dye it myself, over the bathroom sink. I submerged my head in the lukewarm water until I couldn't breathe. Screamed.

I spent hours applying my makeup, focused intensely on each fine stroke of the brush and puff of powder. I pressed my dress to ensure there were no creases. Pressed it again. I wanted to look perfect. This was the image I wanted engraved in his mind forever. This is the last time he will ever see me.

*Us.*

Tonight I will announce that we're leaving, Xavier and I. I'll take the packed suitcases from beneath the dining table that I've carefully concealed beneath the oil cloth. He'll be green when he sees them. Then he'll be sorry.

*All I have to do is wait.*

*Matthew*

I don't like the way Audrey is looking at me, the way her left eye is twitching like that. In unison with the flickering bulb above the dinner table. 'Witchcraft', I think.

I never should have married the woman. I hate the bitch.

She leans in so close I can smell her sweat, masked by perfume. Citrusy, like a detergent. Like bleach. She kisses me, her hot breath on my cheek.

*She knows something.*

I tell myself I'm just being paranoid. That woman doesn't know shit. She didn't know about Gina or Heather or Sarah or Alice or any of them. I felt guilty after the first one. Couldn't touch Audrey without remembering Gina's taut skin beneath my lips, her thick thighs wrapped around my waist. I got depressed. 'Snap out of it.' Audrey said. So I slept with Heather.

It's Audrey's fault we're broken. She drove me away. That robotic little head tilt is making me antsy. The sickeningly sweet aroma of the soup wafts through my nostrils, forcing my stomach to swirl. I take the frothed milk to my mouth, sip. It's sour. I gag.

The bitch must have done it on purpose. Left the milk out all night. She does shit like that. Cuts holes in my favourite boxers. Throws away single socks so I'm left with no matching pairs. She tried to kill me once, I swear it. Cashew nuts in my fucking salad. She knows I'm deathly allergic. I wanted to die right there and then on our kitchen floor so she would spend the rest of her miserable life in prison. Or better yet, be institutionalised.

The woman is insane.

"Did you do something with your hair babe? It looks great," I say, winking at her as I place my napkin in my lap. It's better to play her at her own game. I know it aggravates her. And I play to win.

She whispers thanks, turning away from me so I can look at her ass, or lack thereof. She works out every day, but she looks worse for it. She is shapeless, a shadow of herself. I used to squeeze her hips as she washed dishes over the sink, but now when I touch her it's just bone. She used to have dirty blonde hair, and she'd let me brush my fingers through it each night before bed. Now she's dyed it peroxide

blonde and gets it blow-dried once a week. It's crispy and dry and she pushes me away whenever I try to touch it.

She reaches inside our drinks cabinet, offers me wine. I say no. Do I want beer? No. She keeps listing all the drinks, as if I don't already know what fucking alcohol I keep in my own house. She recites like she's reading from a script.

She tries to get me drunk all the time, just so she can roll her eyes at me and tell me I'm a good-for-nothing alcoholic. Just like my father. My blood boils. God forgive me, but I want to hit her. Smash her head against the damned cabinet. Just to draw blood. Just to know she feels something. Just to know she's human. I don't know when or why she became a Stepford Wife. She's a dead-eyed robot. Even when we sleep together. It feels like I'm fucking a corpse. I can't even get it up anymore.

*For her.*

I remember loving her, what it feels like to be loved by her.

We used to be good. We spent three months in Thailand, four weeks in Vietnam, two years in Australia. We went on nature walks and had sex outdoors. We spent weekends drinking too much wine and smoking cigarettes with all of our friends.

But she decided she wanted a baby. Because her sister had a kid or some shit, I don't know. We tried. I don't know when it stopped being fun. We'd fuck and then she would roll over and cry herself to sleep. Ask me to fuck her again tomorrow. She was pregnant.

And then she wasn't.

I wasn't allowed to grieve. She cried for the two of us. She said it was my fault she miscarried. She said I didn't want our baby enough, and that's why God had taken him away. So I packed my bags. She got on her knees and begged me to stay. Used her body like a weapon. I ended up back in our marital bed, with the suitcase left gathering dust on the landing.

And then we had Xavier.

And then Xavier got sick.

Audrey thinks one of our friends kissed him on the mouth. I don't know if that much is true. All I know is he nearly died. And we don't have any friends anymore.

Xavier is cursed to live in this godforsaken house forever. She

loves our son more than she loves me. He is her doll. Clean and perfect, unblemished and unblinking. Unable to fight back. I think that's another reason our marriage has fallen apart. I refuse to be her doll, and she thinks that means I refuse to be her husband.

She never lets him just be a kid. You know what he got for this thirteenth birthday? It wasn't new football boots or money to go to the cinemas with his mates.

He got a fucking ant farm.

What's worse is that he wanted one. The kid's never been around other kids. I got him to Facetime some of the cousins once. He shrank into a caricature version of himself, a mute, a freak. They asked if he was a bit 'soft in the head'. But of course, darling Audrey didn't find that one bit funny and now we don't send them Christmas cards anymore.

*He's a strange kid. Sometimes I wonder if he's mine at all.*

"Could you pass the pepper, Daddy?"

I shudder. That's what Samantha called me last night, when I had my hands around her throat. He's a teenager now. Too old for this Mummy Daddy bullshit. It's her that has him like this. I regret to think what the other boys will call him. To his face, definitely to his face.

I met Samantha at work. She's twenty-two, big hips, tiny waist. Horny little thing. She doesn't ask for money and she laughs at my jokes. She says she likes my 'dad bod' and calls me her silver fox. I'm her dirty little secret and she is mine. When she smiles I notice her crooked row of teeth. She's real. And I think I'm falling in love with her.

Samantha texted this afternoon.

*'Daddy, I'm waiting on a covid test.'*

*'Fuck.'*

Audrey would kill me if I brought that into this house...

It doesn't matter.

*Not anymore.*

The divorce papers came through today. They're in a sealed manilla envelope. I'm holding them between fingertips doused in perspiration, concealed beneath the table. We talked about it before. Separating. She refused. And I'm not thick. It's not because

she loves me. It's because that woman is cunning and manipulative and she'll try to fleece me for all I'm worth. So I filed for contested divorce. I'm going to give her the papers after dinner. The Last Supper. Surprise bitch!

And that's just the half of it! I plan on suing her for custody of our son. She ruined my life, now she's ruining Xavier's too. I won't stand for it. She won't nag at him about the tiny nooks and crannies that need dusting, or swat him away from the cooker and sigh and insist on doing it herself. She won't tell him whom he can and can't speak to. She won't destroy any semblance of personality he has left. He will not be emasculated.

It's cruel, but I wish I had a camera so I could take a picture of her face when she realises I'm taking everything. I'd savour it forever. I take a mouthful of my soup, tell her it's delicious.

*All I have to do is wait.*

*Xavier*

I've always known my family was different. We are nothing like the people I read about in my books, or the images I see on television. We look like them, with our designer clothes and freshly cut hair and wide smiles. We sound like them too.

"This is marvellous, dear."

"How delightful, darling."

"I love you Mummy. I love you Daddy."

Our love is like stale bread. We are covered in mould. Sour. Decaying.

I see it in the way they look at me. My mother, fawning as though I am a precious jewel, something to be admired. Untouched. My father, sighing and rolling his eyes. Disdain. Disappointment. He thinks I'm effeminate.

I think he's an asshole.

I don't love him. I don't love either of them. She's like a cobra, always squeezing too tight. Eating all the other snakes. If she is a cobra, then I am a mongoose.

I don't appreciate being a pawn in this little arrangement of theirs. We've been locked away together for approximately ninety-

one days, thirteen hours and forty-five minutes.

*I have been locked away my whole life.*

I tried to connect with others, but they mocked me. My mother would kiss my skinned knees and tell me I was special, much too clever to be around the likes of them. She'd gently place the plaster on before marching across the street to the accused's house. I expected her to knock on their door and shout but instead she would peer inside their windows, look over her shoulders. Key their car. Slash a tire. Steal their child's bike.

I'd watch it unfold from my bedroom window, stripping the plaster from my leg and tearing at the wound from my knee. Ribbons of flesh. I liked how it felt. Masochism. I read that somewhere.

There's a lot of things you can learn from reading. There's lots of things you can learn from the internet. Babies are not delivered by storks. People fuck. Naked, sweaty animals at their most primal. I've seen it. People hurt each other. Sometimes they fuck and hurt each other at the same time. People kill each other. They shoot and they stab and they gouge and they post videos on the internet for the whole world to see.

My father fucks his assistant and it kills my mother inside. My mother fucks that silver thing in the nightstand and that kills my father.

*Neither of them are good enough.*

My father searches for happiness at the bottom of a bottle. My mother is addicted to Xanax. She thinks I don't know. She tries to make me forget, but every ivory pill remains unswallowed beneath my curled tongue. I'm surprised the pills haven't killed her yet.

The mutt pissed on my fresh linens so I killed him. Pesticides rolled into thin slices of deli ham.

I keep my hands concealed beneath the table, tugging at the skin of my nailbed. There is a searing pain as the skin is torn away, droplets of blood pooling in its wake.

My father flexes his hands beneath the table and she smiles too wide, red lipstick staining her teeth. Do they really think they're fooling each other? They're not fooling me.

"Aren't you going to have some of your milk, dear?"

"No thanks."

JESSICA BRIEN

It's in the soup. Enough to kill eight full-sized adults—and some  
in the buttered bread, just in case.

*All I have to do is wait.*