

BEN SIDE #1

What about the rocks?

KATE

I can do both! Look down, there's a rock. Look up, there's a bird. Look straight, there's my wife.
(He kisses her.)

BEN

Well, that's...great. Hey, get this. I think Leaf went to Dartmouth!

KATE

What? Get out.

BEN

He said he went to the local college in Hanover, New Hampshire? That's Dartmouth! And he's a *life coach*!

KATE

What are you, BFFs now?

BEN

Leaf. Is a life coach. I need you to be as confused by this as I am.

KATE

Meh. Literally anyone can become a life coach. I looked it up once.

BEN

You did?

KATE

After a bad day of work. Trying to figure out what else I could do in this town besides help people who packed their laptop in their suitcase and had shampoo leak all over it.

BEN

Or watch birds?

KATE
(teasing)

Yeah.

BEN

(Beat.)

Zach called today. He said there's an opening for a senior engineer in his company. Said I should apply for it.

In...California?

KATE

Yeah.

BEN

(Beat.)

I know it's far. And like, your position...

KATE

Yeah...I can't really leave. I'm tenure track.

BEN

There's a lot of universities in California.

KATE

Right, but tenure doesn't always transfer. And these jobs are impossible to get. I know a guy who was full time at NYU, and moved out here for his wife's job, and he's never been full time again anywhere. In twenty-five years.

BEN

Yeah. I get that. It's just...there's nowhere to do what I do in this town.

KATE

We've talked about this. There are plenty of places. It's a big town.

BEN

We *have* talked about this. The only jobs available here are for junior engineers. That's like, 50K.

KATE

Well, that's more than you're making at Best Buy.

BEN

(with distain)

It's not even about that. I was a senior project manager, Kate. I was making three times that. I'm not going to go be a junior engineer for some guy younger than me.

KATE

Look, babe, I know it sucks, but you might have to work your way back up again.

BEN

But I wouldn't if I went to work for Zach.

(Beat.)

It's just—the fact that I *know* someone there, who reached out to me—I actually have a real shot at this job. That might never come around again.

(Beat. He throws up his hands in pretend surrender.)

Let's talk about something else.

KATE

Let's.

(Beat.)

Oh, guess what? Remember Mitchell?

BEN

Was that the kid that kept bringing his typewriter to our house?

KATE

Yes! He came by my office today and told me he got into grad school! Columbia! How amazing is that?!

BEN

That's great!

KATE

It's unbelievable! I spent hours—*hours*—working with him.

BEN

I remember. The smell of the white-out is burned into my brain.

KATE

He could barely write when I met him, and now he's going to grad school! I'm just over the moon for him. I almost exploded when he told me!

BEN

Aww, good for Mitchell! I feel like I contributed in a small way, for the pots and pots of coffee I made you two while you were working on this thesis. Back when I was learning how to roast beans and make foam art and stuff.

(She hugs him playfully)

KATE

You sustained us!

BEN

Is it weird that I feel like...proud of him?

KATE

No! I'm so proud of him I could burst.

BEN

Man, if we feel this proud of weird little Mitchell, imagine how it will feel when it's our kid getting into grad school!

KATE

I know, right?

BEN

(playfully)

~~Well, we should get on that.~~ What's the date? Is it an ovulation day?

(KATE sighs.)

CONTINUE →

KATE

Wow. That is like your superpower.

BEN

What?

KATE

To somehow turn every topic of conversation to ovulation. Can we please take one night off from this?

BEN

We take plenty of nights off from—

KATE

I know, Ben. But like, somehow in the last couple of years we went from being these cool people that like, travelled and watched documentaries and had dinner parties and had sex just because we felt like it to...I don't know, these weird maniacs who only talk about mucus temperatures. Would you be friends with us? I wouldn't be friends with us.

BEN

Oh my God, Kate, I'm trying to...

(He stops himself.)

KATE

What?

BEN

Nothing.

KATE

No, what?

(BEN sighs.)

BEN

Look. I'm like, a modern, progressive guy, right? I cook. I do dishes.

KATE

You exfoliate.

BEN

We're not telling people about that one. But I...I don't know. You're doing this awesome work with your students. I have this menial job. I'm not providing. I can't get my wife pregnant. And it's so stupid, but it's like...I don't feel like a man, or something. And then I feel like a caveman for feeling that way, but...I can't help it.

(KATE leans forward and takes his face in her hands.)

KATE

You are the best man in the whole world. None of that stuff matters.

BEN

Except it does. We say it doesn't, but it does. And if it's an ovulation day we don't want to miss—

(She stops him.)

KATE

I know. I get it. I just...I miss us.

(Beat.)

BEN

I miss us too.

(Beat.)

Should we have Secret Hour?

KATE

Yes, yes, yes! Oh my God, we haven't done that in a long time. It always makes me feel better!

BEN

I don't know why. It's a humiliating game.

KATE

But after you humiliate yourself, you get the comfort of knowing you are loved and accepted for exactly who you are, no matter what. Let's play!

BEN

Very well.

(He leans back and pretends to light a cigarette; very dapper.)

Tell me a terrible secret.

KATE

(she laughs)

Um—

BEN

Just so you know, I have kept all of your previous secrets. *Including* that you once made up a fake language to get out of talking to a telemarketer, that you have pulled a hair from your own head to use as dental floss in a pinch before an important meeting—

KATE

Forgot I told you that one.

BEN

--and that though you pretend to hate it, you cry every time you hear The Christmas Shoes.

KATE

His mom is gonna die! *On Christmas!*

BEN

And so now, in this baby-free zone, tell me a new secret.

(Beat.)

KATE

Baby-free zone, huh?

BEN

As you requested.

(Beat.)

KATE

Ok...um...

(She thinks a long time; she seems nervous; really considering. Something shifts, an idea is discarded. Finally she sighs deeply and speaks.)

I think three-legged dogs are creepy as hell. And I know people adopt them and my heart is supposed to be warmed and I'm supposed to be so happy that that dog is having a good three-legged life, but it makes my stomach flop to watch them tripod around with an *empty spot where a leg should be*.

(She playfully hides her face behind her hands.)

I'm pretty sure that makes me a terrible person.

BEN

(also playfully)

You're a monster.

KATE

I know!

BEN

You're a *monster!* Who hates three-legged dogs?!

KATE

I do! It's my terrible secret and we're married and you already promised to love me forever, so now you have to take it to your grave.

BEN

Oof. That was a rough one.

KATE

Ok, your turn.

BEN

I don't have any secrets.

1.12.23

KATE

Oh, no you don't. You don't get to judge me and then not share one!

(She playfully crawls across the couch to him.)

I just know you have a deep, dark, terrible secret you want to get off your chest.

(She laughs, he smiles. A long moment that somehow becomes incredibly uncomfortable. She backs away a little. Silence.)

BEN

I do.

(Another long moment.)

KATE

(apprehensively)

What is it?

(Beat. We see a similar shift in him that we saw in KATE, where an idea is discarded and another is picked up.)

BEN

Until like, three months ago...I didn't know about the word "wreath."

(Beat.)

KATE

What?

BEN

I thought it was reef, and it was two things. Like, the great barrier reef, and a Christmas reef.

KATE

You're kidding.

BEN

I swear to you.

KATE

You're married to a *teacher*! That is so much worse than mine. I'm telling everyone.

BEN

You can't. You have to accept me as I am, secrets and all. Those are the rules of Secret Hour, and they are written in stone.

KATE

Well, there we have it. I'm a monster, and you're...an idiot.

(BEN laughs.)

BEN

END

Monster and Idiot, together forever.

(He pulls her close and kisses her. KATE stands up and crosses left, and she is back in her lecture hall. BEN remains on the couch. Transition to--)

Scene Three

(The next day. A split scene. KATE is back in her lecture hall, teaching a class. BEN is at home, splitting his time between frantically typing on a laptop, and texting furiously on his phone.)

KATE

So, before we head off on spring break, we will focus on the Confucian side of our argument. Contrary to what many of you wrote on your pretests at the beginning of the semester, he is not --

(She reads from a student's paper)

"The dude who writes fortune cookies." Fun fact, while Confucius is from China, fortune cookies are not. They started in San Francisco. Confucius, our Chinese philosopher, says that your highest ethical calling is to your family and society. His big idea is the concept of "ren." No Stimp. "Ren" means humanity, and in Chinese, the literal translation is "two persons in relation."

(She glances at a particular audience member as a "student.")

Get your mind out of the gutter, Mr. Stanley. He means that we are only truly human when in relation to other people, fulfilling our roles in society.

(Beat.)

Those might be the roles of a parent, a colleague, a daughter, a spouse. A part-time pizza delivery guy, in Mr. Stanley's case.

Here's the kicker. Let's say you are a parent caring for a child. That role requires patience, care, selflessness. Confucius says you can't just go through the motions--you have to actually *feel* those things. And he says people who don't lack virtue. They remain self-interested and egotistical; trapped in themselves. You go from being "ren" to being "xiaoren," which means a "small, petty, or diminished person."

(Beat.)

That's not to say you can't learn virtue—both Aristotle and Confucius agreed on this. They also agreed that the best way to do this is to mirror virtuous people—identify people around you who genuinely inspire you to live a better life, and then try your best to model what they do. They are your "Polestar," as Confucius says. So on these index cards, I would like you to write down your Polestar for the second half of the semester.

(She starts to hand out index cards, and the focus shifts to BEN on the other side of the stage, in their house. He works on a laptop. LEAF enters from the bathroom and stands behind him for a moment, observing the laptop.)