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Engagement

Daniel J. Barotti

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My seabag thumped down outside my girlfriend's door. With a deep breath, I raised my hand to knock.

Catherine's mom yanked the door, beaming. "Helloooooo! So happy you're here! Come, come. Hurry, dumplings are almost done. It's almost time—I thought you wouldn't make it." She beckoned for a hug, but refused to wait.

I wheezed, "Good to see you too, Mama Dong. It's okay, Jane Ma is keeping Catherine distracted a little longer at the spa." I tried to return the hug, but her five foot four frame locked onto my arms with surprising force.

"Oh, this is just so nice. Come. Come! Stove is on. Jane Xu is inside. How was the flight?" She released me and whirled back into the maisonette without waiting.

Mama Dong rounded the corner to the kitchen before I could respond. I groaned, leaning over to sling the sea bag onto my back. Through the door, Jane leaned on the second floor railing while waving.

Jane laughed, "She's on a mission. She really does like you, Dan. I never saw her like this with any of Catherine's exes."

"Well, I suppose that's fortunate given the circumstances. Glad you could make it too Jane. It means a lot, and it's gonna mean even more to Catherine."

Scents of pan-seared dumplings and red bean paste drifted down the hallway. "Smell's good, Mama Dong!"

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“Oh, thank you! I’m just making some rice cakes! Something light. Also, some zha jiang mian. Good noodles, you’ll like it! Some fried pork belly too. Some deserts also. Not too much. Go get dressed! Are your parents here?”

My phone dinged with a message from my dad.

“Outside with mom. Be up soon.”

I projected down the hallway, “My folks are on the way up! They should have a cake!”

Jane spun down spiral stairs and ran in for a hug. Ready this time, I returned it properly.

“Really. Thanks, Jane.”

“It’s literally nothing. We survived med school together. I’m going to see her get engaged, and I want to help.” She backed up and looked me over.

“You look exhausted. Did you sleep at all?”

“A bit on the red-eye from Tokyo to San Francisco. The toddler behind me on the last leg to Richmond has a promising future in kick-boxing. No luck on that one.”

“Oh my gosh, sit down. I got this. Do you want me to iron your uniform?”

“No, it’s alright. I can manage. Did you get the photos I sent you?”

“Yes! I printed them, but we couldn’t find anything good to hang them from. I was just looking upstairs to see if Catherine had anything, but the closest thing I found was a string of Christmas lights.”

“Let me think.” I rubbed my eyes, and inhaled deeply.

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The living area was messy, but not as bad as I'd expected. Half-folded blankets mingled with tossed sweatshirts and mismatched socks on the couch. Catherine was good at many things, keeping her apartment clean wasn't one of them.

"I can finish cleaning up the couch."

"Thanks. She'd be upset if we took photos with that in the background." Jane must have followed my gaze. I had to focus. My phone dinged again, this time from Jane Ma.

"On our way back. Any more and she'd get too suspicious. 15 min ETA."

I typed back, "Easy day. Thanks for distracting her. I'll cover the extra hour at the spa. Didn't anticipate the flight delay."

"Just surprised she didn't think twice about this Army girl visiting out of the blue and demanding spa time in sundresses. Not my style."

I smiled, "You're right. I'm hoping that if she suspects anything, it won't be me coming back from Japan to propose." I returned my phone to my pocket as a knock came to the door.

"Coming!" I patted my face, hoping to manifest a second wind. My mom rushed through the door the moment I opened it. For the third time in as many minutes, I enjoyed an embrace I'd missed for years. Over her shoulder, my father's wide smile pushed up his cheeks so much it looked like he was squinting. Crow's feet arced out from the corners of his eyes. I missed that smile, despite inheriting it. Dad raised the cake he held and shrugged.

I welcomed them in, "Y'all are the best. That's all there is to it. I missed you."

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“No more being gone for over a year, you understand?” Mom hugged tighter as I nodded. She proceeded to ask the questions Mama Dong and Jane Xu already had.

Dad squeezed by us with the cake, towards the kitchen. He returned with empty hands, clapping a heavy one on my shoulder.

“Doing alright, bud?”

“Well enough. Japan is nice, but I’m glad to be stateside again, especially today. Much appreciated with the cake.”

“Mom made lasagna too, with garlic bread. Let me grab the cooler, I’ll be right back.” Dad scurried off.

“Just a heads up, Catherine and Jane Ma will be back in less than 15 minutes.” I projected that last part for everyone to hear.

“Mom, can you see if Mama Dong needs any help in the kitchen? Also, I’m gonna need you and dad to hide upstairs when they get here. Catherine only expects her mom to be home.”

Mom smiled, her hands trembled, “Of course!”

I wondered if mom’s hands tremored out of excitement or nerves. Looking down, my own shook the same. There wasn’t much time.

Jane finished making the couch far more presentable. Dirty clothes were nowhere to be found. “Jane, still got those photos and the string of lights?”

She handed them to me. Attached to a corkboard by the door hung a container of thumbtacks.

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“We’re going to run with it. Let’s use those thumbtacks and ask for forgiveness after we hang the line and pin these photos to the wall.” I thumbed through the photos as memories spilled out of them. Meeting Catherine and walking the Charleston battery. Touring Newport, Rhode Island. That selfie at Christmas by the boats in port with Christmas lights on. Jane tacked them up memory by memory. It felt rushed, but it looked right.

Jane asked, “Weren’t you going to wear your white uniform? You better get ironing.”

“I may not have enough time, but I don’t care if everything isn’t perfect. I’m here.” I relished the thought. “I’ll get on it. If you manage to get rose petals, can you drop them from the door to the kitchen, and get my folks upstairs when you’re done?”

“No problem, and you’re gonna do great, Dan. This is so exciting!”

Seabag in hand, I ran upstairs. Jane had set out a board and iron. I got to work. It felt as rushed as our work with the photos. As I held my whites, they no longer looked like they were stuffed in a seabag for the last 18 hours. My hands held the uniform without shaking. Catherine must be only a few minutes away, but the nerves left and calm flowed in their place.

“I choose her,” I said aloud. Throwing on my uniform, I stopped before putting on my shoes. From inside my left dress shoe, I pulled out the ring box and opened it. Small lights inside illuminated, shining on the ring I’d had designed by a man a world away. Catherine had plenty of input, so she’d be happy with this. Donning my shoes, I finished buttoning my uniform. My gig line was satisfactory, a once-over in the mirror proved the same.

I careened down the spiral staircase, nearly hitting my head on steps above. My phone dinged as both feet hit the platform. I didn’t check it.

“She’s on her way up!”

Jane Xu and my parents ran upstairs, out of sight save for Jane’s phone peeking over the side of the ledge above. I stood at the door, where the line of rose petals extended around the corner to the kitchen. I followed them to stand out of sight. Mama Dong waited there with a smile that just kept growing.

She hugged me once more. “I’m so proud.”

Muffled conversation crept from the front door. A key turned inside the lock. I forgot to lock the door. The key twisted in the lock once more, right on cue, and the door crept open.

“Mom? Are you home? Why is it dark, and what’s all this stuff on the floor?”

I shrugged at Mama Dong.

“Oh, it’s nothing! Can you help me out over here in the kitchen? I’m making dinner.”

Silence followed. Could she not see the rose petal trail in the dark? She wasn’t following them. This wasn’t working. I stepped around the corner.

Catherine stood frozen. Her brown eyes met mine. She glowed behind silken straight black hair. Her pastel green floral dress hung flared out from turning in the moment. Her arms and legs looked soft and smooth from a spa day. Her arm thawed, raising a hand to her mouth before erupting into a sprint through rose petals. She leapt, landing as much into arms as onto my torso.

Catherine bawled, “What are you doing here? You said you were in Japan! Are these roses?” I lowered her to the floor. Jane Ma behind her. She stood there showing all teeth in a proud and knowing smile.

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Down on one knee, I took the box from my pocket. I opened it towards Catherine, but she'd walked back down the hall mumbling while trying to look at the photos that were now on the wall. My knee sent messages of pain up my body. I left them on read. I was going to enjoy this.

“Dan, what are you doing back?” Halfway down the hall, she turned back and noticed my pose.

“Will you marry me?”

Stumbling to me through the rose petals, she spoke intelligibly between gasps. Hand over mouth, crying, she knelt down with me.

“Yes!” She nodded vigorously, throwing around tears and hair.

Sitting on the floor in front of her friends and our families, I held my fiancé with exhausted but steady hands.