

32 - Same Old Same Old

It was halfway into the next week without much changing for the girls. Joyce worked and Emily tried to find any to begin with. It all started with online job searching, but the more and more she scoured, the more discouraged she was feeling.

Hence a woeful Wednesday morning with Joyce getting up for her regular work hours. Quietly yawning, she silenced the buzz from her phone, awkwardly maneuvering her upper half to do the task. Her strained movement tickled her heart as she stroked Emily's hair, who sound asleep had an arm draped over Joyce's side with her head laid near close to Joyce's chest. It'd clearly become a popular spot for Emily, not that Joyce had a single complaint.

But as always, the fun could not last forever. Joyce carefully lifted Emily's arm, trying to slip out of bed without an issue. Issue however was not avoided this time, as the girl was already groaning as she stirred in bed.

"Joyce...?" Emily muttered in a tired voice.

"Go back to sleep, hon." Joyce whispered before kissing her on the head.

Emily was delayed on the uptake, but shook her head, somehow finding it in herself to sit up in the bed.

"N-no, I--" she paused for a great yawn, "I'm up too..."

"Emily, you really don't need to..." Joyce said, almost frowning. The girl's eyes weren't even open.

"I do..." Emily adamantly answered in a tired voice. "I can't slack just 'cuz I don't have a job..." she yawned yet again.

"How about ten more minutes? Just to give yourself a small boost?" Joyce suggested. Call her cruel, but frankly she wanted to trick Emily into going back to sleep. Not for any malicious reason but instead for her own wellbeing. This jobless predicament wasn't getting any better.

"You're my boost..." Emily groaned as she slumped out of bed, nearly taking herself to the floor. Her feet found stable purchase in the last few seconds though as she stood up.

Joyce disapproved, but she wasn't going to make anything big out of it.

“Wanna eat breakfast with me?” Joyce asked, slipping her fingers between Emily’s hairs and scratching her scalp, then stepping into the bathroom.

As Joyce did some light prep for herself in the mirror, Emily in its reflection could be seen walking in from behind, a stuffed mochi plush in her arms. She squinted her eyes though, teary from the irritation of the light.

And as Joyce worked on herself, Emily either with a clouded conscience or deliberately no care, dropped her bottoms as she sat on the toilet. She squeezed Pip at the same time whilst she did her business.

“Good girl...” Joyce spoke lowly and to herself, watching briefly with a small smile. Despite everything that happened up until now, Emily still regularly made a habit of what Joyce told her to do. Whether Emily was aware or not, Joyce was hoping to build a second kind of association to the bathroom for the girl. One that hopefully helped her when in diapers.

Both were in the kitchen soon after, just beginning to see the night sky fade away.

“What do you want? Eggs and toast? A bagel and some fruit? Something else?” Joyce asked.

“Don’t you have to leave soon, though?” Emily asked from her chair at the table.

“That wasn’t the question?” Joyce peered into the fridge.

“I can make myself something after you leave...”

“And that wasn’t one of the answers,” Joyce tutted. Where this all stemmed from was becoming terribly obvious, but it still didn’t feel right to seriously push the matter, at least not yet. They’d made headway on their personal matters but seemed to be feeling a wedge caused by joblessness.

“I think you’re going to love eggs and toast.” Joyce decided for her, already reaching out for the necessities.

“What if I called in today? Two heads searching for postings is better than one?” Joyce offered, though expecting a likely answer.

“I can’t make you miss work because of me...” Emily said, dwelling sorrowfully over the offer. To her, it felt like a soft reminder that she needed to fix this issue fast. Already she wasn’t contributing financially in any capacity, but that didn’t mean she could be out of a means to

rectify that. Her perception and Joyce's were like night and day, but it was Emily's own fears and insecurities that kept them from seeing eye to eye.

"Okay..." Joyce didn't fight her on it. "I just want you to know you're not in this alone, alright?"

"Mm..." Emily gave a small nod, keeping her weary eyes aimed at the tabletop.

Joyce bent over to set a plate in front of Emily, but not before planting a kiss on her cheek.

"...I'm sorry." Emily suddenly apologized.

"Sorry for what?" Joyce asked, sitting down in front of her own plate.

"I'm being grumpy. I don't mean anything against you..."

"I know you don't. What I'd like though is to not hold yourself to so high of a standard... It's okay to relax, you know?"

"Says who...?" Emily grimaced, hating to constantly be faced with her own incompetence.

"Says me?" Joyce raised an eyebrow. "I think all the effort you've put into finding a new job really shows your determination. That being said, seeing you break down because of it isn't something I like to see..."

Out of impulse, a knee-jerk reaction, Emily said, "Well sorry my struggles don't look nice to you..." But instantly she felt regret in her words. "Wait, no-- I didn't mean it like..." Before she could even see a reaction from her girlfriend, Emily's remorse was already sounding thick as her voice quivered.

Joyce, outwardly didn't seem fazed by her words though. "I know, it's fine..." But internally, despite knowing the circumstances, her words did sting a little. "You'll always have my support, Emily, but it's my advice that you give yourself at least a small break today."

Emily had been rubbing her eyes, hiccuping. "I'm sorry...you didn't do anything wrong...!"

Joyce sighed with a sympathetic smile before walking behind Emily's chair. She slowly rubbed her back as she crouched. Her look seemed to soften as a tender aura came about her.

“You know, I think what the real problem is that somebody is up far too early for their own good...” she soothed. “Good little Emily’s like you need at least a full eight hours before they can even *think* about what they need to do today.”

Her tears were just about done, but her objections were not.

“But Joyce, I’m--!”

“Emily?” She softly called, interrupting her, but looking her directly in the eyes. “That’s enough.” Her words were simple, yet rang like ironclad authority. They were girlfriend and girlfriend, yet almost instantly the dynamic felt completely different, yet familiar all the same.

“I will never force you to stop doing what you want,” she made another bold move in pulling back Emily’s chair after standing up. “However, I certainly reserve the right to at least put it on hiatus.” The girl made a noise of surprise as Joyce hoisted her into the air.

“Joyce! Put me down! I’m fine...really, I am!” Emily complained, resorting to her weak protests rather than flailing her sluggish limbs.

“You will be after some more shuteye.” Joyce corrected. Back into their bedroom they went.

Joyce deposited Emily onto the bed yet was quick to pull the covers out and under from her then slipping them right back over her.

“Sleep. Or else.” Joyce said grimly, but then made a playful growl with her hand shaped like a claw.

“Don’t you have work?” Emily asked, remaining in the bed. “...I’ll just get out after you leave.”

Joyce exhaled through her nose. “The reason why I am working today is because you told me you didn’t want me staying home for your sake. If I’m not going to help you out today, then I need you to at least give me this peace of mind?” And if she really did want to be stubborn, Joyce could as easily read her bluff with the security cameras. But, of course, she wouldn’t for something like this. Now that they were an item there was a definitive line that shouldn’t be crossed for when it came to absolute privacy, and this didn’t qualify.

Emily didn’t look sold on the idea, but the difficult position between pleasing Joyce and continuing her search for validation tore her strained and tired mind in two. It was the straw of very few that broke the mentally exhausted camel’s back. She was already rubbing her watery eyes.

“My little crybaby...” Joyce said with a soft chuckle, leaning over to grab Pip then slipping him into her arms. “I’ve instructed Pip to not let you out of this bed until you’ve gone back to sleep and get a couple more hours of rest. Otherwise, he’ll tell me all about it. Understood?”

“That doesn’t work...” Emily wiped her eyes. “I’m an adult right now...!”

“Yes, you are, but I’ll use every ace up my sleeve to cheer you up.” She kissed her on the forehead. “Sleep. After that, you’re free to do as you please.”

Joyce stood up from the bed, watching Emily turn to her side and get comfortable.

Satisfied, Joyce walked to the doorway.

“Wait...Joyce?”

She turned her head.

“I’m...” Emily sniffled. “I’m really sorry...”

Joyce nearly winced, it felt so powerful. “Everything’s forgiven. Sleep well, okay?”

“Uh-huh...” Emily nodded.

Joyce started to leave, but...

“Wait, Joyce?”

“Yes?”

“...I love you.”

“I love you too.” She smiled, then gently closed the door on her way out.

Shame was what resonated the most when Emily was finally in a conscious and coherent state. It was her not so well-kept secret that getting up so early had left her with mere puddles in her tank and why she was so high-strung and so fragile. Barely arguing with Joyce and instantly crying

over it... Being able to reflect on how she was acting practically made her cringe now. The most she could hope for was that Joyce didn't take her temper to heart from this morning.

But even now, given the chance to do things differently, she would, but not to go back to sleep. Sleep was exactly what she needed and that's why she didn't want it. Giving herself a moment's rest is the last thing she could ask for, because in her frenzied state of momentum in trying to find a new job she was running herself into the ground. Going to bed late, getting up early. The only reason she found time to eat between her searches and stressing was because Joyce always forced her to eat something, thankfully.

So, after pushing herself so hard for so long, it was inevitable that any real pause would make her crash entirely. Sleep just a couple more hours? Judging by the time on her phone, it was past four hours of sleep.

The assumed responsibilities and urgency in her mind hadn't changed, yet as she groaned and turned in bed, holding Pip tighter, everything except her own mind was fighting and begging her not to get up. Everything was too comfortable. Too easy and too simple; a stark contrast to the emotional gauntlet she'd been launching herself into.

Laying in bed she narrowed her gaze, focusing on what was invisible.

"Everything sucks..."

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the city, the usual chime of a bell to a familiar store had rang. Ahead, a man and woman as a pair were dealing with a blonde-haired woman behind a desk, seeming thankful as they received two flat rectangular boxes.

"Hope you two enjoy these at the ceremony." Amy smiled, waving them off. Joyce politely stepped to the side to let them past. Now it was just Joyce and the proprietor herself.

"Joyce!" Amy beamed. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" She exaggerated in a grandish kind of manner. "Let me guess, judging by the look on your face...you were so satisfied with my work as always and felt the need to come back and thank me personally while also putting in another order?" She said, her voice leaning into sarcasm. Then her expression turned into a small grin before looking entirely sympathetic. "...Or not. Right," she sighed in a knowing voice, "figured as much."

Joyce, who had yet to speak a word, now alone with Amy had a small annoyed expression on her face. A look that told she'd been thinking to herself in circles all afternoon, which added to the total of days she'd been like this, unable to find any effective solution to her problems.

"Are you free right now?" Joyce asked. Joyce herself had her lunch break, but Amy...

Amy didn't bother looking at the clock. "I suppose I can start my break now." She walked from behind the desk to close up the front of the store. "So, jokes somewhat aside, I see it that I'm playing counselor again today?" She smirked, yet Joyce still looked bothered. Not by Amy, but by her own problems at home.

"Okay, come on..." She placed a hand behind Joyce's back, gently pushing her alongside. "In all the time that you've had me employed, I can't say I've ever seen you so expressive as you have been the past month or so... Is this about Emily?"

"...Yes." Joyce sighed. "I don't know what to do."

"So you thought your seamstress was the best person to consult?"

On a dime Joyce stopped. She already started turning back.

"Fine, I can see you're busy. I'm sorry for inter--"

"Stop." Amy halted her with one word. "I was joking. Come on back..." She grabbed Joyce's arm to keep her moving. "It's fine, Joyce. This gives me a weird kinda deja vu though...feels like we've done this before."

They both walked up the stairs in the back up to Amy's spacious apartment. Everything was white and clean as per usual, accented by the light coming in through all her windows.

"Want to eat lunch with me, at least? It isn't much, but I have stuff for sandwiches?" Amy offered.

"I'm not hungry right now. Just stressed."

"Perfect reason to eat something. Give yourself more brain power."

Joyce sat on a barstool by the window looking into the kitchen. Amy was already in her fridge pulling out deli meats.

“So, what are you two arguing about?”

“We’re not arguing...” Joyce sighed, though saying that out loud did somehow feel reassuring. Instantly it reminded her that they together weren’t the issue. “It’s about Emily and her work.”

“Mhm?” Amy left a crumb, waiting for the explanation to continue.

“She’s been out of work for almost three weeks now, but only two weeks ago did she find out that she was losing her job. And it wasn’t even her fault!” Joyce outraged. “That...stupid company she was working for cut her department!” Originally she thought more rationally of the business decision, but with how everything had been going, Joyce would be damned if she even thought to use logic that might pit her against total and complete support for Emily.

“So they just let her go?”

“Yes!”

“Hm.” Amy frowned. “That definitely is shitty. And she hasn’t found a job since?”

“No. She’s constantly been searching, sending her resume out as far as I know. But nothing... I don’t care that she’s jobless. I already made that clear to her. What I hate is what she’s doing to herself in trying to get a new job. She goes to bed late, wakes up early, only eats when I make her...”

“Hm...Correct me if I’m wrong, but wouldn’t being the one in charge of her meals be something that you actually--”

“Not like this!” Joyce countered preemptively, hiding a flustered shade in her cheeks. In tense moments of ranting like this, it was easy to forget that Amy had some idea of what they did... “I...I just want things to go back to the way they were.”

“Isn’t she searching for a job though?” Amy reminded Joyce, putting together her sandwich. “It may suck, but if you give it some time she’s bound to find one eventually. Then you both get what you want?”

Joyce acknowledged the point somewhat, but that moment right then, seeing what Emily was doing to herself, it bothered her. It felt wrong to just let it sit. “I just can’t fully understand why it’s so important for her to put herself through all this...I mean, I support us both! I refused her money from the start! Maybe I should forbid her from--”

“Ah-ah! Stop! Stop!” Amy interjected as she formed an ‘X’ with her arms. “Even if that’s just a joke, don’t think like that. No matter how close you two are, that’s a kind of agency you can’t take from someone.”

“...I know...” Joyce sunk her head into her arms on the counter. “I’m terrible...Emily’s been trying her hardest, and all I can think of is how to get her to stop...”

“Relax,” Amy put a hand on Joyce’s arm. “Your heart is in the right place, but I think you could use some perspective. You said it yourself: you refused her money and you’re the one that financially supports you both?”

Joyce nodded.

“And you both live in *your* house? That you exclusively pay the bills for?”

“Yes...but I told her that--”

Amy continued. “Does she cook meals for you? Do laundry? Clean?”

Joyce went silent. It’d been unfortunately a long time coming as the laundry list was read. “...I do most of it...”

“So you’re responsible for the finances and all the housework?”

“...Yes.”

“Joyce, I don’t mean this in a bad way, but it sounds like the only responsibility Emily was left with was her own job. Without that, what does she have?”

“She has me!” Joyce said defensively.

“Yes, she does. Calm down, mama tiger,” Amy held up her open palms at her fierce reply. “But in all seriousness, if all she has is her work which you won’t let her use to contribute to both your livelihoods, wouldn’t you expect her to be a bit shaken if she loses her last thing?”

Only now were her faults starting to feel strikingly glaring. Up until now it had only ever been about placating the issue, or kicking the can further down the road. Joyce had taken everything from her. Joyce cooked, cleaned, worked, provided, paid and managed. She only ever expected Emily to be carefree, lackadaisical and comfy. But...of course that would get boring. Of course, being sat next to someone that handled quite literally everything and with such ability would

make you feel less than. It makes you scrutinize what you do have, and makes you much more critical and forces you to value your few contributions.

Inadvertently, in trying to be a godsend for Emily, maybe she was being the exact opposite. She wanted to take care of Emily in every sense, which might work when she's her baby girl, but as an adult, all she was doing was taking away everything Emily could do to lead her life like one. Her job was the last real thing she had.

And as the revelation passed through her mind, Amy finished preparing her lunch, and Joyce felt terrible.

"I took everything from her..." Joyce whispered sullenly.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. You're possibly being a bit too over the top about it."

"But what you're saying makes sense!" Joyce said. "When she was working, it was just work then go home to wait for me to get back and do everything...Emily has always been my equal, but maybe she never felt like it..."

"Slow down a bit," Amy said. "If you've gone this far to only have an issue once she lost her job, that can't mean she's been completely dissatisfied? I'm sure she's been happy?"

"I...I think so...?" Joyce suddenly said, oddly unsure of herself now. She smiled, she giggled, flirted and all those other things... Were they real though?

"If I had to guess, maybe this is all subconscious then. Without realizing it, maybe Emily's been put in this headspace because that's how things played out. I highly doubt she'd ever hold anything against you, Joyce. You seem to have had the best of intentions, albeit what they are."

"But...would her finding a new job really fix anything, then?" Joyce aired her passing thought. Now it didn't seem like a full solution; just a band-aid for a bigger problem.

"I don't think there's one thing that could be called a complete solution..." Amy supposed. "Sure, she gets a new job, but then it's back to the way things were before. Maybe if she had some other forms of routine in her life so that it's not just work and waiting for you?"

Joyce furrowed her brow, trying to think. Finding more things for Emily to do did make sense, but if she was being honest, Joyce still liked being the one largely in charge. Having control was what gave her pleasure. To know now that maybe it was hurting Emily, it put her at odds with her desires and her love for Emily. Of course Emily would win, but the imagined victory felt bitter.

“I know it sounds selfish...” Joyce started, “But I like being the one to do the lion’s share...”

“I’m sure you do.” Amy figured, given their discussion thus far. “There’s plenty of ways to diversify her lifestyle, and maybe if you’re willing to compromise, give her some chances to feel like you rely on her for more than what you two have now.”

“Chances?”

“Simple stuff. Like maybe three nights out of the week she’s in charge of cooking and cleaning?”

“...Three whole nights?” Joyce asked, her skepticism sounding obvious. Not that she doubted Emily for a minute, but...Joyce liked doing those things for her.

Amy shrugged. “Two then?”

Joyce nodded, but still... “...What if we did one night, just to see how we both feel about it?”

Amy rolled her eyes. “I’m not your couple’s therapist. These are just ideas.”

Joyce shook her head. “No, no. Thank you. You’ve helped me consider stuff I don’t think I would have noticed on my own...” Which bothered her the most, not being able to read these things through her own intuition.

“But huh...” Joyce reflected, “Maybe she doesn’t even need to work. At least, it’s not as important as she thinks...”

“I wouldn’t say that right away,” Amy steered her conclusion, taking a bite from her food. “Sure, monotony and lack of responsibility might be this problem, but being a working adult at her age is another. I’m not a mind reader, so this doesn’t necessarily speak for Emily, but what if the next day tomorrow, you two were to break up? Where would that leave her without even a job to support herself?”

Joyce pressed her hands on the counter, standing herself off the barstool with a raised voice. “That’ll never happen! I would never break up with her in a million years!”

“It’s just a hypothetical,” Amy laughed at her serious reaction. “I don’t expect it either, but we always consider the worst case scenario. This is all speculation though. For all we know, Emily wouldn’t have any issues as long as she has other things to fall back on.”

“And then it’s back to where we started...” Joyce miffed.

Amy chuckled through her bites as she went on to say. “Well, an eccentric relationship comes with its unique trials and tribulations?” Her lunch came to an end as her useful advice did as well. “I think that’s plenty of food for thought though?”

“It is...” Joyce pensively agreed. “...Thank you, by the way,” Joyce added with a sincere look, albeit slow on the thanks due to brainstorming already.

“Of course,” Amy smiled, “other than for a friend, it suits my interests to keep my clientele happy, too? Course, I remember making a certain somebody a whole lot of special outfits I have yet to see them in...” Amy raised her eyebrow with a coy smile.

“Amy, I...” Joyce smiled through her moment of pause. She did want to show off Emily in Amy’s tailored clothes as a form of gratitude, and an excuse to see Emily herself in such adorable outfits, yet obviously things were difficult for a list of reasons, privacy being the utmost...

“Relax,” Amy chuckled, seeing just how seriously Joyce took her, “just kidding. Sure, it’d be a nice plus, but it’s not exactly policy to see them wearing it myself...But, could I still float you ideas in the future if I get any?” And she was back to having stars in her eyes. “She’s such a niche that I’ve barely been able to work in! Besides, you wouldn’t mind putting in an order if you like it too, right? Right?” She eagerly pushed and pushed.

“Y-...let me sort this out first...” Joyce sighed with her own smile. “...But yes, please keep me in the loop...” Hence why Joyce could be Amy’s favorite customer; lined with pockets that ran so deep that the store itself could make demands of the buyer.

Amy’s reaction was an unbridled ear-to-ear smile. “Great! Don’t get me wrong, I love what I do, but this is like a special treat!” And like a dog that heard a noise trained to only their ears, she murmured to herself, “I gotta remember to draw something in my sketchbook...!”

“Wait, really? Can I take a--!” Partway into her sentence Joyce clamped down on her mouth and came to her senses, suddenly looking like a guilty child. “I...should go. Before I get too sidetracked...” Joyce shuffled embarrassingly on the barstool.

“I think you should too. Frankly you look like a kid in a candy store when you’re here for Emily.” Amy cheekily giggled. “Besides, fashion is art!” Amy then changed her tone to scold Joyce. “Maybe if it was something specific you wanted, but otherwise I don’t share my imagination! Wait until it’s done!”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh...” Joyce sighed as she stood back up. “Sorry for cutting into your break. I need to get back to work as well. Thanks for letting me ramble a little.”

“Of course. What are friend-slash-seamtresses for?” Amy laughed, leaving Joyce looking a bit bashful yet again. “Which reminds me,” she turned away from the counter to scribble something on a piece of paper, then handed it to Joyce.

“Is this your phone number?” Joyce asked. “But I already have your--”

“Business number, which essentially is my normal one, but I sometimes remember that I have a social one, too?” She reached out to Joyces hand, curling it up with the paper in her palm to drive the point home. “Use it from now on. Frankly I’m not sure why I didn’t just give it to you sooner. I think you’ve bothered me plenty about stuff that’s a far cry from making clothes.”

“It wasn’t intentional...” Joyce looked the other way.

“Well now it can be,” Amy smiled. “Now I won’t have my business phone buzzing in the middle of the night?”

“You’re okay with giving me your number, though? I don’t want to bother you...”

Amy was rolling her eyes. “Joyce, we aren’t dating. Don’t make this any bigger than it really is! We’re *friends*. Now be a good friend and let me go back to work!” She left the kitchen and opened the door for Joyce.

“...Right. Thanks.” Joyce nodded simply, oddly put for a lack of emotion as she went down the stairs first.

At the front of the store Amy saw her out.

“And again, I one-hundred percent understand privacy,” Amy began with a hardened and serious expression, yet naturally melted into a gushy melt, “but try and butter her up for me? I gotta know how she looks in the clothes!” Amy glowed like an addict in need of their fix.

“I’ll see what I can do after all this...” Joyce gave a sympathetic look, one intimidated by the massive expectations Amy seemed to boast.

“Bye~!” Amy waved her off as Joyce went back to her car.

Joyce sat in her vehicle, silently staring at the scribbled number on the piece of paper. She glanced back at the store.

“I guess we sorta are friends...” Joyce quietly said, morphing into a small smile.

And if she needed an explanation for all the new faces that’d come into her life, her phone vibrated, signaling a text.

FROM: Emmy

Emmy: *I’m really sorry about this morning... u aren’t mad, are u?*

Joyce gave it a few minutes of thought before sending a reply.

Joyce: *Only if you haven’t forgiven yourself yet?*

There wasn’t an immediate reply, likely meaning that the message caused Emily to stew. Satisfied with the supposed reaction, Joyce felt a bit more rosy on her drive back to work.

“Hey!” Joyce called out as she stepped inside the apartment. It was the same day only much later into the afternoon. No response, which unfortunately had become the norm as of late. Along that same trend, Joyce knew where to find Emily.

Slipping off her heels and walking down the hall, she lightly knocked her knuckle against the open door frame.

“Hey?” Joyce announced again in a casual tone.

In her home office behind the glowing screens a black head of hair perked up. The swivel chair wheeled back just a little for Emily to stand into view.

“Hey,” Emily said back, somewhat neutral. She was engrossed with a cocktail of emotions, attributed to her unemployment, exhaustion, stress and remorse from her attitude that morning.

“Was work good...?”

“Enlightening,” Joyce kept it brief and cryptic as she walked around the desk. Emily was looking over the computer screens as she sat in the chair, “You made yourself lunch, right?” She started to massage Emily’s tense shoulders.

“I had an apple...” Emily murmured. She was both too focused and too sheepish to admit her irresponsible time management.

“How about we have dinner, then?” Joyce leaned forward to rest her chin atop Emily’s head. “I’m hungry, and I know you can eat, too. Keep me company in the kitchen?” Anything to get her away from obsessing over something that just caused her pain.

“Mm.” Emily quietly nodded. “I’m just gonna send out a few more emails...I had to re-do my resume today...”

Since Emily wasn’t looking up, she couldn’t see Joyce’s brief frown.

“...Actually, uhm, I thought I could use your help tonight?”

Such an unexpected request gave the shock factor one might expect from Emily. She stopped typing and gave her full attention to Joyce.

“You need my help? For *cooking*?”

Joyce nodded. “Yep. A second set of hands’ll help make dinner faster and let us both relax?”

“Uh, okay...” And Joyce was ready to sing as that was enough to get Emily out of the chair. “Is it okay if I leave this stuff here? I’ll take care of it after we eat.”

“Of course,” Joyce smiled, seeing her out of the office first. Frankly she hoped somehow Emily wouldn’t set foot back into that office until the next morning. A cruel, yet effective thought crossed her mind -- just install a lock. Then she’d really feel like a mommy...

“Shoot,” Joyce bit her tongue, realizing it only as an afterthought. “I told myself since the last time we cooked together I needed to get an apron more your size...” She said out loud while she tied one of her own on Emily’s. It certainly got the job done, but of course a more properly sized one would better suit her build.

“I mean, it’s only once in a while that I help...” Emily softly countered, allowing her hair to be tied up.

“Well, maybe if we get you your own apron, that might force things to change a little?” Joyce said.

That certainly struck Emily as odd, even in her preoccupied state, still weighing the troubles of employment on her mind. “But...cooking’s your thing?” She confusedly said.

“It is,” Joyce agreed, “but no reason why it can’t be yours, too? You don’t have to cook with me if you don’t want -- I just figured since the time you said that you wanted to bond mo--”

“--No, I do,” Emily cut her off, “I’m just a little surprised, I guess. But no, I mean, that sounds good. I don’t really cook as well as you, though...” She started to recline into her own insecurities.

“Emily, you cook just fine.” Joyce warmly corrected her. “Besides, I’ll whip you into shape if I think anything seems amiss!” She finished tying on her own apron.

“Is this what ‘enlightening’ work does to you?” Emily laughed, turning away to go to the fridge. It didn’t seem to elicit a response as Emily turned back to see Joyce looking silent. “Is something wrong?”

Joyce shook her head. “No. At least, I don’t think. You sorta guessed it...I did some thinking and talking today, and I guess I wanna hear your take on it.”

“...Okay?” Emily raised a brow, not sure to what extent she was about to go, nor what she had to say.

“But first, let’s start washing some veggies,” Joyce walked over to the fridge, “I don’t wanna make this seem like another ‘talk’, because it’s not. Just wanna pick your brain a little.”

“Sure?” Emily replied, accepting two red tomatoes.

Over the running faucet they stood side by side while they washed.

“Emily, when you were working, what did a normal day look like for you? Before I got home?”

Emily was silent, thinking to herself.

“Uh...I dunno. I guess I sorta just...lay around...” It felt a bit embarrassing to admit. “...Watch tv, I guess...”

“And that’s completely fine!” Joyce was quick to reassure, seeing that Emily might be interpreting it as accusatory than something much more sincere. “I made it clear from the start that I wanted you to enjoy yourself. I said that I’d handle all the heavy-lifting.”

“Mhm...” Emily nodded.

“But in trying to give you a relaxed kind of lifestyle, I’m only starting to think now that I’ve made it *too* relaxed for you...”

“Too relaxed?” Emily asked, setting aside a polished vegetable.

“Em, once you get home from work and have the apartment to yourself, doesn’t it get boring?”

Boring.

Not once had the word ever crossed Emily’s mind, yet Joyce saying it aloud had her oddly resonating with it.

“Boring? I mean...I dunno if that’s how I’d describe it...” Emily said as she stared down at the sink.

As Emily gave a lukewarm answer, it was enough to really confirm Joyce’s suspicions she sprouted with Amy, yet by the same token nor did it dispel them either. In all fairness, the assumptions she made about Emily craving for hobbies, tasks to do, more routine -- even Joyce couldn’t imagine herself being able to put a pin on such a stretch. Naturally Emily’s feelings knew what was really going on, but of course the emotional heart doesn’t communicate in words to the brain. How could Emily say if she didn’t even know herself?

For what kind of life Emily had started to lead Joyce felt completely responsible for. It wasn’t all bad, of course, and largely good. But, in Joyce’s demands and Emily’s willingness to abide by them, it proved to not only be progressive, but particularly regressive for her. What stung the most was again what she felt so conflicted about while speaking with Amy. Change did need to occur, but Joyce just couldn’t settle herself on Emily finding another job. It’d just be a return to the status quo. And yet it wouldn’t. It would be worse. Nevermind the job possibly being worse than her previous one, but be mindful of how it might validate Emily’s misguided thinking, believing that being employed again is what’ll keep her in a state of complacency.

“Joyce?” Emily got her attention again, gently swinging her hip into Joyce’s thigh. “Veggies are done being washed. What next?”

“H-huh? Uhm...now we chop them up. Don’t forget, kitty paws...” Joyce passively reminded as she tried to think of what to say next about their conversation.

“I think one of these jobs I’m gonna apply for might be a decent chance...” Emily half-smiled, trying to stay positive, but also steadfastly grounded by the realities of seeking employment.

“Mm.” Joyce made a noise of acknowledgement while she chopped.

“‘Mm.’ That’s it?” Emily turned her head over to Joyce, yet a hand quickly grabbed her head of hair, gently turning it back to where she was chopping.

“Eyes on where you’re using the knife, please,” Joyce reminded in a friendly manner. “And yes, ‘Mm...’. I just have a lot on my mind, is all...”

“Stuff on your mind you’re gonna share?” Emily asked, though keeping her eyes where they should be.

“Stuff I’d...rather let stew for a bit longer...” Joyce dodged the question.

Emily’s look faded into something hovering above a small frown. Resting the butt of her hand on the halved onion, she carefully and slowly chopped. “Is it about me not having a job?”

“...I don’t want to make waves...” Joyce said, hoping that it could be left there. While she thought Emily might be too focused on the prospect of getting a job, Joyce also didn’t want to seem like an obstacle to that very goal. It was obviously important to Emily, and Joyce just didn’t know how to circumvent that without direct confrontation.

“...I wanna talk about it, though.” Emily finally decided. “We agreed that we were always gonna face our problems right away, didn’t we?”

Joyce with part of her face turned away bit her lip. That they did.

“You’d be feeling like me right now if I used that against you, you know...” Joyce sighed, trying not to lose the airy atmosphere.

“Probably,” Emily agreed, “but you’d still think it’s for the best?”

Ouch. That gave Joyce another scrunch in her look. She pondered choosing her words more carefully in the future... But naturally, she was right.

And as Joyce thought, Emily was thinking as well. Her mind drifted to what was the hot topic of her life right now and by association, Joyce’s too. Employment. Ever since the night Emily

confessed to losing her job, Joyce really hadn't offered anything very opinionated on it since. Was it because she was suppressing her impatience for Emily not having a job by now? As kind as Joyce was, Emily at least expected something like that... But Emily knew her efforts were known, so maybe Joyce was just looking to get the feeling off her chest. Emily could handle a few more expectations.

"And...I think I might know what you're thinking already," Emily started. Joyce gave her a caught off-guard kind of look, wondering if she really did know. "Look, Joyce, I know I'm not working right now...but I promise, I'm working as hard as I can and I'm sure I'll get one soon...If there's anything else I can do in the meantime, I..."

Her words started to fade once she saw the look on Joyce's face. It was a frown. Unmistakable disapproval. The slight dip in her expression as she held a hand on her hip.

"Emily, this entire time I've wanted you doing anything *but* looking for a job..." She finally spoke her mind, spinning Emily's head upside down.

"Are you joking...?" Emily asked.

"Are you?" Joyce retorted, she didn't mean for it to be rude, but her disbelief was genuine. "Did you really think that I'd want that of you? Emily, I've always refused your money and I've always wanted you to be happy. I also told you this morning that I wasn't going to get in the way of what you really want, but if I'm being honest, this really feels like a time when I'd be doing just that."

In retrospect, Joyce being in the opposite camp wasn't so unimaginable, but seeing that her assumptions were shattered right there, Emily needed help finding a new one. "Wh...why?"

"Because of this morning!" Joyce raised her voice, not at Emily, but just from thinking of the past week. "Every day it's been getting up early and every night going to bed late. Every afternoon when I come home I always find you in my office! It looks like you forget to eat lunch... I've debated whether or not I should be leaving you something in the fridge for when I'm at work!" She let off some steam, and Emily stood still, taking it all in with hurt. Has she really made her that upset?

"I'm sorry, I..." Emily started to apologize, "I have the savings to buy my own computer, I'll remind myself to eat..."

"Emily, that's not the point!" Joyce made it clear. "I love you more than anything, which is why I hate that you're so fixed on this idea that you need to put yourself through all of this just to get

something that you think you need, but really don't!" Her long-winded sentence ended on an audible breath. Every spoken word lifted an emotional weight off her chest, yet without her own context, it merely offloaded more stress onto Emily.

"Emily, all I mean is, I don't care whether you're an engineer or struggle to tie your own shoes. I've already decided that you're the one I love and that I'm fully prepared to support you in every way imaginable. If getting a job is important to you, that's fine and I will respect that, but I won't respect you day-in and day-out stumbling over yourself for ungodly hours on end just to rush yourself into something that you have all the time in the world to figure out!"

As Joyce left it with silence and she started to calm down, Emily aimed her gaze at the floor with a difficult expression. She had her hands at her sides, though fumbling with the edges of her apron while she tried to think of something to respond with.

Joyce, however, was feeling quite good. She got to say what she wanted and it was what Emily wanted. It may have come off as a bit forceful, yet Joyce was glad to let it be known now. Really, all thanks to Emily and her words of wisdom... Joyce sighed, ready to chuckle as she tried to transition things again. Joyce looked over at Emily again with a cheery smile.

"Huh, didn't expect you to make use of my number so quickly?" Amy laughed over the phone, sounding as if she was preoccupied with something else. "What's up?"

There was a meager sigh from Joyce's end of the line. "I think I messed up..." Joyce mulled with a hand underneath her chin. She rested her arm on the counter while she stirred what was in the pot on the stove. Emily was no longer in the kitchen, currently in the bathroom. Crying.

"What? You messed up?" Amy said sarcastically. "What'd you do?"

"I...told her about what we talked about this morning..." Joyce confessed. Thinking about it now, maybe her delivery was a bit off, too...

"What? Joyce! What happened to the soft power plays, or whatever? Small delivery! Did you at least explain why you thought that way?"

"So...sort of..." Joyce glanced to the side, as if avoiding eye-contact with the imaginary Amy in the room. "I tried to explain that I didn't want her looking for a job... But she confronted me about that. I was trying to get her to cook with me!"

“So then where is she now? She didn’t leave, did she?”

“No, she’s in the bathroom right now...crying...” Joyce bit her tongue, feeling guilty. Apparently she was too hasty to have ended her speech on a smile.

“And you decided to call me?” Amy asked in a tone pointed at curiosity. “Shouldn’t you be tending to her right now?”

“I know, but I’m a little afraid that I’m going to say the wrong thing again...” Joyce hesitated with a soured expression from the thought alone.

“And I know that I gave you my personal number to reach me better, but I think this is a time when you should be talking to Emily. You don’t need any advice. You already started explaining yourself, so give her the rest of it?”

“I was already thinking of that...” Joyce said, standing up as her gaze turned back to the hall. “Guess I wanted a second opinion.”

“I really am gonna start charging you two favors for this, you know?” Amy warned with a grin over the line.

And before Joyce could even think of how to respond, she heard the bathroom door down the hall open. Shortly thereafter were the small footfalls of a teary Emily walking back into the kitchen.

“I’ll call you back...” Joyce said, hanging up the phone.

“I’m not mad at you...” Emily said, sniffing. “I was crying ‘cuz I was mad at myself...”

“I didn’t explain myself very well,” Joyce said in the form of an apology as she walked over for a hug. “I just...you mean so much to me, Emily, and I want you to know that it doesn’t have to be like this.”

“But what else am I supposed to do?” Emily rubbed her eye. “I can’t just sit around here all day, Joyce. It...it feels depressing. I...I barely do anything as it is!” It was already hard enough to stomach being barred from financial contribution, but from Emily’s perspective she felt lost. She didn’t have the same ideas as Joyce right now, hence why she felt such a burning need to strive for the one thing that she *did* think would solve her problem. “At least when I was working I got to feel like I was doing something...”

“Emily...” Joyce was sympathetic. The more Emily elaborated, the more her hypothesis seemed to ring true. Emily was feeling strained. She felt limited, minimized and didn’t know how to cope.

“I’ve hated this week.” Emily said resolutely. “I hate having to get up early to throw my resume at every single listing and never getting a response other than rejection. I hate losing my whole day to sitting in front of advertisements...! I hate when I get angry and snap at you...! I hate thinking that I need to find a job, but if I don’t it’s just gonna be more of what I did before! Nothing!” She sniffled as she was getting ready to sob. “I’m not mad at you, Joyce, I’m just upset because I thought I was doing the right thing! But I hate what I’m doing, and it doesn’t feel right, but I don’t wanna be a total freeloader! I...I’m just so stressed...” Emily ran her hands through her hair, flushing her face as her internal temperature began to climb.

It’d only been stress and confusion since her indefinite “vacation” had begun. It’d been a bit nice having some time off at first, yet as the days went on it only seemed to show just how little she had going on outside of work. Of course there was Joyce, but what if she wasn’t around? Then what? Once she realized what little there was she had, her feelings had shifted from excitement to concern. It wasn’t about trying to fill her empty days with new things to do, but worrying about whether she was going to get her old routine back.

“I...I thought getting another job would fix everything, but...” Emily paused to sniffle, “maybe you’re right.” It was an admission to something she rathered wouldn’t have been true. She still hopes now that it isn’t. In her eyes, maybe it was the daunting intimidation that came with having to explore and navigate a whole new kind of lifestyle. By now it was the definitive point for Emily that things had certainly changed since being with Joyce. For better, and for what felt like an excess of grayness.

Maybe it was the spell Joyce had on her, she wasn’t sure, but she was willing to give in to her temptations at least this time.

“Please help...!” Emily buried her face into Joyce. “I don’t know what to do anymore. Whenever it’s not you, it just sucks so much...!”

Emily could feel Joyce’s hands gently wrap around her wrists as she eased them back down. Joyce seemed as if she’d just heard music to her ears. Her pleasure didn’t come from Emily’s guilt or sorrow, but from a gesture that invited her opinion. Her guidance. Her affection and love.

Joyce wordlessly kissed her on the forehead before leaving the kitchen.

Emily nearly thought to follow, but stood there awkwardly in the kitchen.

After the sound of a door inside the apartment, Emily watched Joyce come back looking no different than from when she left.

“Where...where’d you go--!” Emily just finished her question, but not with the rise in inflection as a silicone teat found its way between her lips. Instinctively her tongue brushed it as a familiar coating imparted a dash of its taste unto her taste buds.

Bananas.

Joyce had a smug look of content on her face as she gently pressed on the shield of Emily’s pacifier, making sure that it was all the way in. But her brief moment of victory subsided as her expression softened back into her hybrid form of Mommy and girlfriend.

And with a final declaration before going back to making dinner, Joyce said,

“Let’s try things my way for a little while.”