

Bingo

THE MAGNIFIED MIRROR REFLECTED MY SHAKY hand as I put on my jet-black liquid eyeliner. I removed the foam curlers from my short hair and teased it out as far as I possibly could without exposing the scalp peeking out underneath. I didn't plan on growing old overnight, but damn if it didn't happen. My hair turned white and thin, I found folds on my skin that I could stick a finger in, and I was wearing polyester pants with elastic waistbands. It was official.

I heard a faint knock at the door and opened it to Georgia in all her glory, my best friend since grade school. Georgia was the same age as me, but you'd never guess it. There was hardly an age spot to be found, as if she had been using Porcelana since her thirties. She wore a bright blouse with yellow and purple paisleys swirling about the top half of her body. Her yellow pants slowly swished as she walked into my apartment. The yellow was the same color as my canary, Harvey, who died ten years ago.

"Here," she said. She was holding a small clay pot with a jade plant, wrinkled, and dry. "I'm killing another one. I told my daughter to stop bringing me these things."

I took the plant from her and put it on the table. "Needs water," I said. "You should know that."

"I water it, when I remember."

She smiled with the well-fitting dentures I longed for. My dentures looked like dentures. Her dentures looked like teeth that you wouldn't find floating in a glass on your dusty oak nightstand.

"You ready?" she asked.

"Almost," I said, putting on my gold-rimmed glasses and looking in the mirror. My hair was puffy on one side, a little flat on the other. I teased out the flat with my fingers and looked at the jade plant; it was past saving.

"Hurry up, Maxine. I want to make sure we get a seat next to Jake."

Jake was a recent addition to the Ralston Towers, recent being four months. The Towers were hard to get into. They usually had a waiting list for apartments that became available as other people left to go to nursing homes or funeral homes. Jake often wore denim jeans and cowboy boots, and because of his youthful attire and swagger, most of the other ladies, including Georgia, had taken a liking to him.

I first saw Jake when he moved into his apartment on the second floor, just down the hall from me. I was leaving the lobby on my way out to the garden, and he walked by with a black suitcase and a bag of books. Behind him was a much younger man with sandy blonde hair, holding a cardboard box. As I passed them, the awning above the walkway billowed from a hot dry wind. The scene was a familiar one - the older one followed by the younger one with cast-down eyes, carrying the heavier box. It was moving day and neither son nor father was too sure about it. I had no family to help me move. I moved in and gave up my house at the insistence of Georgia, who said this place wasn't so bad.

My old house was too much for me. 'Couldn't keep up with the cleaning without it wearing me out. And forget the yard work. Couldn't push a lawnmower around in the South Carolina heat. But I liked my plain small house, with the white aluminum siding and green shutters with cutout moons. Liked my flower garden best, its zinnias standing tall with their bright colored heads looking up at the sun. Georgia assured me that I could have a garden at Ralston Towers.

But Georgia didn't tell me that I would miss my house and the memories it held. I had lived in that house with people who loved me. And although they had died, I could walk in the rooms of that small cottage and feel their presence. I had memories of my only son, Reese, as a small boy growing into a young man. The son that always pulled up my flowers.

He would walk in, flowers in hand, dirt falling off the roots, and I would cut the dirty ends off and put them in cut-glass vases. As he grew older, he realized the error of his ways, but still pulled the flowers up by their roots anyway, just to irritate me.

GEORGIA AND I TOOK THE ELEVATOR DOWN FROM the second floor to the first and entered the activity hall. The signs of aging unfolded before us with stooped-over people, thick glasses, bald heads, and crooked lipstick. I had been lucky. I could still stand up straight without a walker or a cane, but I leaned on the railings in the hall when I was tired. Some of my fellow tenants, however, were not so fortunate. They hunched over their walkers, canes, and sometimes relied on wheelchairs for their mobility. We all took our pills for our various ailments; most popular were medications for arthritis. Gradually our eyesight worsened and our prescription glasses got stronger so that we could read large-print editions of the *Reader's Digest*. Getting old was full of pain and stiffness and regret for what we did to our bodies when we were young.

In the corner of the activity hall, Jake was sitting at a small table with a deck of cards and a glass of brown liquid. He told the attendants he drank Coca-Cola, but we all knew that it had a taste of Wild Turkey to it. The attendants knew, too, but Jake only drank when he played solitaire, and he never bothered anyone, so they let it go.

Georgia pulled at my arm and motioned toward a table in the back near Jake. We huddled close together and walked through the crowd, hand in hand, leaning against each other for support.

Jake reminded me of Harry, my second husband, possessed by his own thoughts. A quiet that I found disturbing and comforting at the same time. I married Harry when I was sixty, and he died of leukemia seven years later. I never remarried again. Two husbands' names were enough for me.

We reached the table near Jake's and sat down in the padded aluminum chairs, which always grew more uncomfortable with the passing of each game.

"Hello, ladies. How many bingo cards tonight?" Lily asked. She was an assistant at the Ralston Towers. She smiled with tiny teeth and the saccharine sweetness of too many years of working with the elderly.

"Three. I feel lucky tonight," Georgia said, handing her three dollars.

"One for me." I dug out four quarters from my leather coin purse and slid them out on the table.

The money collected from bingo was saved and used to send flowers to the residents that eventually left for the sterile sanctuary of a nursing home or mortuary. I sometimes thought the nursing home would be better than this place because they let you wither away without trying to make you feel good about it. At the nursing home, most people were already dead, just waiting for someone to make it official. I had visited friends there while they lay in bed all day because they were in too much pain to move. Other friends could move, but their brains were gone. They'd just look at you with an empty stare or ask you the same irritating question over and over. At the nursing home, you lost the dignity you fought to hold onto as your body broke down against your will. They bathed you in a wheelchair with a mop, cooked your meals, and brought in younger old people to sing hymns to you. And as bad as all that sounded, it was somehow strangely inviting. I wouldn't wonder about when or how I'd die, I'd just wait.

Every morning I'd open up the paper and read the obituaries and look for the names of friends and acquaintances, I had outlived my siblings, my son, my husbands, and most of my friends. All I had now was Georgia, and thankfully, she would probably outlive me.

Georgia spread her cards out in front of her with flamingo pink fingernails. Last week, her nails were tangerine. Georgia loved her nail polish and makeup. Said it made her look young. Her makeup was never too heavy, her lipstick was always even, and black mascara eyelashes batted above her faded hazel eyes.

I placed my one card in front of me and wished that I was back in my room, sitting in front of my TV watching *Wheel of Fortune*, Pat would be joking with the guests, and Vanna, in her glamorous, shimmery gown, would be walking back and forth, turning the large, glowing letters with the finesse that we lacked as we placed the red plastic discs next to our cards.

Lily started calling numbers when we were all settled, The microphone squeaked and whistled much to the dismay of my hearing aid.

"B-3."

Georgia looked at me and smiled broadly as she placed a red dot over the coveted number.

"Told you I was feeling lucky tonight," she said.

I nodded my head, knowing that I felt anything but lucky. Today was the forty-year anniversary of the day I buried Gray, my first husband.

Gray was a stout man who ate too many fried foods and languished too long in front of a TV. His fatal heart attack was shocking but not surprising. When he was gone, I missed the sound of his boisterous laugh, which would catch me unaware in the kitchen as I made him a BLT. Every Christmas day as long as I knew him, he dressed up like Santa Claus and visited the children's ward of St. Augustine's. Gray was lucky. He was the first to die.

GEORGIA ELBOWED ME AND SAID, "MAXINE, AREN'T you going to cover your number?"

"What?"

"G-l, silly."

I placed the dot over the square on the bottom row. "I see I'm not the only one lucky," she said.

I looked back at Jake sitting at the card table alone with his almost empty drink. His face was long and thin, almost egg-shaped, with a narrow forehead and chin. His fair, speckled skin fell over the bones in his face in drapes past his cheeks, softly outlining what had probably been a firm jaw. He wore tortoiseshell glasses down along his nose underneath his hawkish eyes. I looked at Jake and understood his game of solitaire.

The first time I ever talked to Jake was in the garden, a small patch of land in front of the Ralston Towers. There were cement statues of rabbits and frogs surrounded by roses, zinnias, cosmos, marigolds, green beans growing on strings, and clumps of other vegetables, still green, too early for picking. On that first day, he walked up wearing an Atlanta Braves baseball cap and chewing on a weed,

"That's some garden you got there," he said.

I was kneeling with my thick knees on an orange piece of foam, digging at the ground with all the power my arthritic wrists could stand. He got down on his knees and reached for the shovel in my hand. I hesitated, but then gave it to him.

"Looks like you need some help," he said,

"I guess," I said. I stood up and watched as he dug at the sandy soil.

"Is that a tomato you planting?" he asked,

"I was planting. Looks like you're doing it now."

He laughed a dry laugh like a cough. "Not a Better Boy is it?"

"No," I said. "It's just a cherry tomato. It was all I could find at the Farmers' Market."

"My wife grew Better Boys. The best tomatoes you ever put in your mouth," he said with a slight distance to his voice. "Lost her a year ago and I haven't had a good tomato since."

"Well, I doubt I grow 'em as good as your wife did, but since you're digging the hole, you can have one of these when they're ready."

"That would be nice," he said, He smiled a toothy grin and reached for the plant in the white paper cup.

A week later, he gave me a tomato plant - a Better Boy. He said his son bought it for him. "I told him about you and your garden," he said.

I reluctantly accepted the plant, uncomfortable with the thought of another old man trying to give me something. There were plenty of other ladies that would like him just fine. Let them play the part of widow, pick out the coffin, sprinkle the dirt over a gaping hole.

I looked up at the third floor window of Georgia's apartment, and could barely see her face with those smiling, gleaming teeth. Later that evening, she said he liked me. I just laughed.

"I'm too old for a boyfriend," I told her.

"You ain't never too old for a man," she said.

"Well, you take him then,"

"I think I will," she said.

Jake continued to visit me in the garden, slowly revealing his life. He talked about how he missed his late wife, and his family, whom he was too proud to lean on. He had a daughter and son. I had seen the son, Jake Jr., the day Jake moved in.

"I love that boy," said Jake. "But I'm not going to interfere with his life. He and his wife don't have time to be keeping an old coot like me," He sheepishly explained that he was getting forgetful and it was just a matter of time before he burned his own house down. He was leaving kitchen appliances on for hours at a time when he wasn't cooking. "You got kids?" he asked.

"You choose to live here, instead of with your son?" I asked as I watered the plants.

"I like my independence," he said. "How about you? Why are you here?"

"This isn't independence."

He looked at me with knitted eyebrows, "You've got a bad attitude. You know that?"

I ignored him, turned off the water, and walked away.

The only time I would talk to Jake was in the garden. He would smile at me in the hall or in the elevator, and I would politely return the smile, but from a distance that didn't invite him. He was always the one to approach me as I tended to the dirt and the flowers. Sometimes he and I wouldn't say much at all. He would just watch as I deadheaded the zinnias or watered the Better Boy tomato.

"BINGO!" ELLIE SCREAMED FROM THE FRONT OF the room.

Ellie stood up slowly and waved her hands - excited, broadly smiling as she turned her short round body to and fro. Ellie had enough family for all of us. A couple days a week the lobby on my floor would be filled with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Occasionally I would sit in the lobby and imagine myself as one of them. Imagine my son, Reese, grown with his own children at my dried and curled feet, with the one toe that crossed over the other. Reese had married before he went to Vietnam, then lasted there only a week. The thought of his fear as he heard the shots around him sometimes filled my sleep. The last time I saw his wife was at his funeral, the smell of grass and freshly dug dirt circling our heads. She moved to some distant state, and we drifted apart easily because we were reminders to each other of what we had lost.

Georgia poked her long, flamingo nail into my arm. "Where are you? B-14," she said,

I placed the disc on the card and forced myself to listen to Lily's voice ringing in my hearing aid, The game progressed with "Bingo!" yelled from one side of the room to the other.

Georgia began to tell me about her daughter's visit last week. She told me that she was coming again tomorrow with Georgia's great-granddaughter in tow. I had seen the child. Three years old with chubby knees and cheeks, clumsily walking as if her feet were too small for her toddler body. She was pleasant enough, and cried sometimes, but not too much to get on my nerves.

"We're going out to eat tomorrow," said Georgia. "Why don't you come with us?"

"I don't know that I'll feel up to it, Besides, you should have time with Stella."

"Oh, don't be silly. How do you know how you'll feel tomorrow?"

"I know," I said.

Georgia turned her head as Jake got up from his table leaving the short stack of cards resting in the center. He began to walk by us slowly, holding his empty glass.

"Hello, Jake," Georgia said.

He smiled back and tipped a make-believe hat on his head. "Ladies," he said. He continued to pass us,

"Why don't you join us?" said Georgia. She pointed to the empty seat next to me. "You can play with one of my cards."

I reached under the table and pinched Georgia's thigh. The table jumped with her leg.

"That's okay. Think I'll go up to my room," he said.

Georgia gripped my hand under the table, her nails cut into my fingers. Damn, she was strong.

"Come on, Jake. I'm feeling lucky tonight," Georgia said sweetly. "I bet I give you my lucky card."

He hesitated, looked down at the floor and then at the empty glass.

I felt my face growing flushed. Georgia was a shameless flirt.

"Come on," she said. "Sit right there next to Maxine."

I wanted Jake to walk away or Georgia to shut up, but neither was happening. Jake stood there looking at both of us, as if he was waiting for a thunderbolt. I pulled my hand away from Georgia and motioned to Jake. "Oh come on. I ain't gonna bite," I said, hoping I didn't look like some old fool.

Georgia looked at me with a raised, gray eyebrow.

"Don't say nothing," I whispered.

Jake crinkled up his face and looked at me with glassy eyes, "Maxine, do you mind?"

"I said I didn't."

"Well, I guess that's the closest I'll get to an invitation," he said, pulling out the chair next to me and placing his empty glass on the floor.

"Been a long time since I played bingo," he said.

"Hell, I was probably a kid last time I played."

Georgia slid me one of her lucky cards and I slid it in front of him. I put my red discs between us so that we could share.

I watched him as he played with one of the red discs and noticed dirt under his thumbnail. "You know, I

saw some green tomatoes on that Better Boy this morning," I said.

"You did? Well, there," he smiled. "I'll be expecting a fresh tomato sandwich any day now." He laughed softly.

"You don't expect much, do you?" I felt a smile spread across my face as I thought about placing large fleshy tomatoes on white bread with mayonnaise.

We sat together, moving our discs over our numbers, quietly responding to Lily's cracking voice. I noticed the thin fingers, the rough hands, as he slid the red discs with the same grace he used when dealing his cards. I thought about the green tomato plant growing outside under the glow of a full summer moon.

Georgia poked me. "You've got I-28," she said. I slid the disc in place.

"Bing," I whispered.

"You need an 0," said Jake.

"Maybe I don't want an 0," I answered.

"Maybe you need one," he smiled,

Just what I needed in my life. An O.

"Bet I win next," said Georgia. She slapped her hands together and rubbed them quickly, as if she was in Vegas with hot dice.

"0-62," said Lily.

I grabbed a red disc. The wrong O. I needed 75.

"That was close," he said.

I looked at Jake. "Why do you care about playing bingo? I thought you liked solitaire."

"I can't play solitaire with you," he said, fiddling with a red disc. "You try to be mean, but I see the way you take care of those plants, like they're your babies. Woman like that has a lot of heart."

"You want someone to take care of you, don't you?" My stomach felt like twisted knots.

"If I wanted that, I'd go live with my son," he said. "I can take care of myself." He paused. "Well, almost," His hand, spattered with spots, was only inches from mine.

"Do you talk to your son often?" I asked.

He looked at me, as if surprised by the question, "As often as I can."

"You should be thanking God everyday for your children."

"I do," he said.

I heard Lily calling letters, Georgia telling us to look at our cards. We ignored both and talked like we were in the garden. Him being nice, me being a little mean. He thought he saw through me, but I knew he couldn't.

Later that night, after Georgia had finally won a game, we all left.

When the elevator stopped on the second floor, Jake and I walked off, leaving Georgia standing alone. She winked and said, "Goodnight, you two." She smiled a perfect denture grin.

"I'll be looking forward to that tomato sandwich," Jake said, as we hobbled down the hall.

I grabbed the rail along the wall. "Those damn chairs get to my bones every time," I said.

"Me too," he said, taking hold of my free hand.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Did I say you could hold my hand?"

He smiled. "Maxine, you like to be difficult, don't you?"

"I am difficult," I said. "But apparently not difficult enough to stop you from getting ideas in your hard head." I squeezed his hand and noticed the curl of his fingers around my palm.

"What was Georgia winking at?" he asked.

"Winking? I think she just had something in her eye." He squinted his eyes as if he didn't believe me.

When we got to my apartment, Jake dropped my hand.

"Can I open your door for you?"

"I think I can manage," I said, grabbing the key hanging from a string around my neck. I lifted the string from inside my blouse and took it off over my head. I put the key in the lock.

"Well, I guess I better let you go in before I wear out my welcome. Will you be gardening tomorrow?"

"Probably. I'll need to water those tomatoes."

"Maybe I can walk down with you," he said.

"Maybe," I said, unlocking the door.

I opened the door and said my goodbyes to Jake. He walked down the hall to his apartment, while I went inside my own and turned on the kitchen light. I picked up the wrinkled jade plant and stuck it under the faucet. The water flooded the dirt, and specks of black fell toward the drain.

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