

## Now and Then

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I look around the room and try to figure out who knows. I mean, I'm sure they've always known, but now they *know*. Between Facebook and gossip around the bridge table, anyone who didn't already does now. It's a fortunate thing that we split the DeMarco Thanksgiving tables by under and over age 30; otherwise, I might have spent my whole night fending off uncomfortable questions from well-meaning aunts.

No one has said anything yet, that's the surprising thing. I didn't expect the worst, but I was prepared for it. This morning, I spent an hour sorting through my clothes for my most polite outfit. I took out every earring except the two in my earlobes and combed my hair down from its perpetual puff. I look every part the sweet niece they expect of me.

Aunt Tyra enters from the kitchen carrying a steaming platter of marshmallow and sweet potatoes. Her daughter, Olivia, peeks out around the corner. She's the one who layered the marshmallows. I know this because she announced it loudly and repeatedly the moment I came through the door. Olivia's the youngest cousin I have by far. Most are off at college or just out of it and settling into adult life. Except, of course, for Caleb. We missed a shared birthday by a week.

None of us were sure he'd come this year. It's a long drive from Virginia to Manhattan and his family only chooses to take it every couple of years. But here he is, sitting across the table from me in his blue Martha's Vineyard bow tie and khaki pants. It's been two years since

I've seen him, but funny enough, his clothes haven't changed at all. I'm sure if I looked, I could find a picture of the both of us at fourteen standing in front of this table--he in the same bowtie, I in the same scuffed saddle shoes.

He doesn't say much. It makes me uncomfortable. Usually we can't get him to shut up long enough to get through with the prayer. Judging by his frequent glances downwards, he's texting underneath the table. I don't want to think about what it is he's saying, especially when he flicks his gaze up to me for half a second before flicking it down again.

Caleb sits between our older cousins, Nikki and Thomas. The pair are engaged in an animated conversation over his head. Caleb seems to shrink beneath them. Aunt Tyra interrupts my observation by placing the sweet potato casserole in the center of the table. Cousin Riley has the serving spoon dug into the corner before she even manages to pull her hands away.

All of a sudden, cousin Nikki turns to me. She's a sophomore in college, the closest in age to Caleb and I. With an encyclopedic knowledge of punk bands and feminism, Nikki's certainly the coolest DeMarco. When I was younger, I sort of worshipped her.

"Kiri, you're 18 now right?" she asks.

"Yeah," I nod, "since August."

"What's your take on all these dating apps?" she asks. "Apparently Thomas," she points, "swears by them."

Thomas grins, nodding in the smug way he adopts sometimes when he wants to pretend he's more of a jock stereotype than he is. In reality, he fences and has probably never played a game of beer pong in his life.

I take a second to consider. "Well, I haven't ever really used any."

"No, I know you wouldn't need them," says Nikki, waving away the comment. "But, like, your friends, your classmates. Are they all on them?"

A small warmth takes root in my chest. I wait for her to add something, to make a bigger deal of the acknowledgement, but she doesn't. Instead, Nikki simply cocks her head in anticipation.

"Um," I say, too fazed for quick words. "I don't have a lot of friends who use them, but, ah, they've worked all right for, you know, hook ups, and stuff."

Caleb shuffles, visibly uncomfortable with the conversation. He still isn't looking at any of us. Instead, he puts all his focus into precise cuts into his turkey. I stare at his face and try really hard not to hate him. It should be easy. I have seventeen years' worth of memories of shenanigans at weddings and Cops-and-Robbers games in the yard to go off of. There are far

more of those than the ones of scrolling through Caleb's Facebook in the past year. But it's hard to wash away a "God Hates Fags" text post with a six year old memory of a game of Red Rover.

The thought takes the warmth straight out of my chest and discards it onto the table next to the cranberry sauce.

"Hookups suck," Nikki says, drawing me back into the conversation. "I mean, I get the appe-"

She pauses mid-word as Olivia bounces up to the table. She hops into a seat just slightly too tall for her to reach easily and scoots up to her plate. Riley, sat next to her, turns to help her with the serving spoons.

"So now on to literally any other topic," Nikki says quickly. "Kiri, college."

Nikki and Thomas take turns firing off questions about next year and when they're satisfied with that, turn to telling stories. Each is edited for Olivia's ears, but this makes them no less hilarious. Nikki spins tales about hallway jousting and waitressing. Thomas outlines the time he almost pulled a Holden Caulfield and misplaced his rapier just before a tournament. I'm lost in listening until Nikki scoops the last of her dessert up and swallows it down.

"Mm," she pats her stomach. "Tyra is welcome to take over Thanksgiving anytime."

Just as she says this, Aunt Tyra swoops through the room. She's got a stack of dishes in one hand and a dish rag in the other. All of a sudden, the comforting warmth of communal story telling washes away because it's then I remember what I'd forgotten to worry about amidst all the uncertainty of whether Caleb would come: The Family Football Game.

I will lay it out honestly, I am not an athlete. I am the sort of science geek that spends less time studying the great world around us and more time studying books on what other scientists have learned about the great world around us. Likewise, Caleb doesn't find much time for athletics between his busy schedule of drawing and learning the comprehensive trivia of every Star Trek episode ever produced.

Therefore, every year while the rest of the family kicks the ball around in the yard, Caleb and I are relegated to kitchen duty. It seems this year will be no different when my dad leans back in his chair from the adult table to signal me in to help my aunt.

I fold my napkin carefully and push back from the table to begin gathering dishes. Caleb doesn't wait for confirmation from his father to help. He scoops up his own plate first and then goes about collecting the cutlery. I deposit my current stack by the sink before swinging back out past Caleb towards the adults' table.

I notice Nikki toss her napkin on the table and scoot out of her seat.

"I can wash the dishes," offers Nikki. She swoops in to help me transport the stack from the adults' table into the kitchen. "I don't want to trap you alone with garbage child."

"Garbage child?"

"I've seen Caleb's Facebook," she says in way of explanation. "If he posts trash, he is trash," Nikki shrugs. "Simple."

"I don't know that I--" I begin, but by then we're in the kitchen and Caleb is within earshot. He's got all the kids' plates stacked up beside the sink and a little turkey hand towel spread out over the counter. Nikki steps up next to him to deposit the dishes before turning back around to face me. She jabs a finger at Caleb's back and raises her eyebrows. I shake my head, 'It's all right.' Nikki shrugs and disappears out the big glass doors and into the yard. In the dim twilight, I can see the outlines of my family running back and forth across the field. A couple of the uncles stand backlit by the fire pit sipping beers while sparks dance around them. A tiny shape that must be Olivia shoots away into the darkness holding the ball.

I squeeze my hands into little fists and then release, exhaling in time with the motion. Then I turn towards the sink.

"What can I do to help?" I ask cautiously.

"Uh," says Caleb to the plate he's scrubbing. "I guess just scrape off the big pieces."

He knocks his foot against the cabinet that hides the trash and I duck down to pull it open. It's easier to ignore my discomfort when I'm working so I grab a plate and start scraping. We work like that for a little while, Caleb doing the heavy lifting while I discard our relatives' scraps into the trash. The silence is broken only by the eerie scrape of metal fork on ceramic and the white noise of water wash.

Normally, we'd be talking about parties and drinking and all the things we wouldn't have been able to at the dinner table. Caleb would tell me about some girl he liked and I would tell him about the pranks we'd conspired to pull on our hellish pre-calculus teacher. Strangely, I still expect it. Every time he clears his throat, or moves to grab another dish, I think he's trying to start a conversation. But he doesn't.

In fact, it's not until we've almost finished with the dishes that he speaks at all. By this time, I've moved to replacing crockery in the cabinets while Caleb dries off what he's washed. The family hasn't come inside quite yet, but we can be sure they're flagging.

"Kiri," Caleb begins. The sound catches me off guard and I turn to face him with a cautious hand still lingering on the cabinet door. Caleb won't look at me. Instead, he seems to stare down his own reflection in the stainless steel sink hose. I wait for him to speak, but he takes his sweet time.

"Do you guys all hate me?" he finally asks, placing the dried dish onto the turkey towel.

"Hate *you*?" I ask incredulously before I can even really process the question.

Caleb doesn't stop cleaning. In much the same way he chewed, he washes with mechanical rigidity. "Yeah," he says quietly. "None of you have talked to me all night."

Is that true? I remove my palm from the cabinet and place both hands on the counter. I can't remember saying anything to him, but surely somebody has. Even if they haven't, does it matter? He brought this on himself.

"Do you hate *me*?" I ask, turning to face him. "Because it really seems like you might."

"I-" he fumbles the word, spilling it into the soapy contents of the sink. Caleb removes his hands slowly from the water, his palms deckled with miniscule soap bubbles. "I don't hate you. I just don't like that you have a, you know-"

"Girlfriend?" I ask, crossing my arms.

He nods. I shake my head and a piece of bang springs free of its clip and into my eyes. I brush it back, trying to keep my expression hard.

"It's just not," he starts. Then he pauses and rearranges his words. "I don't think it's-" he stops again and looks up at me. "No matter what I say, you're just going to yell at me."

I open my mouth, then close it. Then I pinch the top of my nose, hard, and squeeze my eyes shut.

"Yeah," I say slowly, evenly. "Because everything you put on Facebook about 'the gays'—or, God, worse words--That's me, Caleb. I'm the object of all that garbage."

Caleb clenches his hands around the lip of the sink, but doesn't respond.

"Shocking, I know," I add, waving a pair of sarcastic jazzhands in his direction.

"Kiri," Caleb thumps his hand down on the counter. "What do you want? You think I'm going to be okay with it just like that?" Caleb snaps his fingers and I flinch at the noise. "Give me a minute to deal with this."

"Deal with it? It doesn't affect you."

"It's just weird," Caleb sighs. "'Cause now when I see you, I think about the fact that you're, you know, and it's just weird. I don't like having to think about that."

I hadn't yet had anyone react poorly when I told them. The Facebook photo of Gwen and I that I used to come out "officially" got more likes than anything else I've ever posted. No one's

cared when we held hands at lunch, much less said anything about it. My parents didn't mind, and had to put on a real performance to pretend they didn't already know.

But in the fifteen seconds it takes for Caleb to refer to my sexuality as “you know” and “weird” and “that,” my illusion of a seamless transition into “out” shatters. It's like every warm reaction I've gotten withers in the face of this single rejection.

I try and keep the tightness in my throat from showing in my voice when I say, “Then don't. You're letting this one thing about me change everything. And that sucks, Caleb.”

"That's not true!" he says, with a sudden strength in his voice. "I'm trying to let things be normal. Because obviously I still love you, you're my cousin. But... I can't do that if none of you will talk to me!"

I take a deep breath, balling the corner of the turkey towel in my hand. Caleb is breathing hard, trying to calm down. I wonder absently whether anyone has been watching us from outside. I half expect Nikki to bust in and break it up, but no such luck.

I'm forced to face him, only I don't want to. I don't even want to look at him. I think about all the jokes he tells that are only funny if you aren't the punchline. I think of all the things he's said on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram in the year since he began his one man campaign against “PC culture.” I think about the fact that he stopped liking my posts after that photo with Gwen went up.

I hate him so much. I think I've never hated anybody more, even though I know it isn't fair. I know it's only this bad because it's him. It's worse because how he is now casts a shadow over every happy memory I've collected growing up with him. It's like I've lost half my childhood to narrow mindedness.

With that thought, it all breaks. The frustration and anger race out of me in twin tears down my cheeks and I'm left staring into the marbled orange countertop feeling shattered.

"I know you want this to be normal," I manage to say without my voice breaking. "I know you're trying to pretend like it is. But," I pause just long enough to swallow the choke from my throat, "it matters to me how you feel about queer people. Because it makes me think that's how you think about me."

Caleb brushes at his eye quickly, glancing away so I'm less likely to see the glossiness in his eyes.

"Kir," he says, adopting the nickname he hasn't used on me since we were kids, even when we were still close. "I'm trying to try."

I bite my tongue before I can ask, 'How?'

“I don’t know if what I think’s gonna change,” he explains slowly, “but if it is, it’s going to take a really long time.” He runs a hand back through his hair, accidentally shaping his fringe into stalagmite peaks. “I mean, I don’t like it. But it’s not like I don’t still care about you. It’s... you, but not you... You’ve had a lot longer to get used to this than I have and you’ve gotta be fair about that.”

His expression seems genuine. I know the voice he adopts when he’s trying to convince the aunts that he hasn’t shaken the Christmas gifts or snuck a beer at a wedding and this is far from it. Even so, I don’t think I believe him. I know it’s unrealistic, but yeah, I did want him to change “just like that.” Everyone else could. So why not him?

I squeeze my hands by my sides, preparing to say it. But then I notice Caleb’s expression. His jaw is head clamp tight, but the gloss has returned to his eyes. He stares away at the darkened window over the sink, his cheeks twitching with the force of trying to restrain tears. It’s that expression, more than anything he’s said, more than any childhood memory, that convinces me.

I draw in a long breath before looking at him again. “Okay,” I say.

“Okay,” he says.

And we stand in the kitchen just like that: Caleb at the sink, I at the cabinets, resuming our tasks like no time has passed. The family slips back in, sore and soaked in mud. Nikki claps a

hand on my shoulder before sliding upstairs to change. Caleb finishes the last dish just as Olivia weaves her way back into the dining room to scout out any remaining desserts.

He extends the plate to me and I take hold. Caleb hesitates before letting go, considering. Then he asks, “What’s her name?”

It takes me a second to put the context together, but then I would have been too surprised to answer quickly anyway.

“Gwen,” I reply.

Caleb nods and turns back to the sink to pull out the stopper. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t have to.

From the counter, the little turkey towel smiles up at me.