

29 - Closing Remarks

“What happened? Get lost on the way?” Frank joked to Emily while he quartered off another piece of pancake.

“Hit a pothole...” Emily slumped onto a stool by the island. Frank’s association with Mary was enough to make him out as an imaginary proxy, as if she were being ogled by the woman herself right now. The thought itself was enough to make her shiver.

“Did you forget to change shirts, too?” More lighthearted fun, but facts were facts. Unless she had a duplicate shirt with the same syrup stain in the same spot, bigger fish had taken her attention.

“Yeah, guess I did,” her voice danced, yet turned like gears. “I sorta got wrapped up with Joyce in something...”

Frank nodded along, his eyes closed as if the reality were too grave to witness.

“The way Mary moves like a tornado, half the time I feel like she’s knocking thing after thing outta my own head,” he laughed, then quickly composed himself. “Don’t tell her I said that, though...”

Emily did smirk then. “Pinky promise.” Had she been drinking a beer, there’d have been a toast to that.

“Joyce doesn’t fall too far from the tree,” he sipped from his glass, “she can be about just as driven as her mom.”

Maybe, but at least Joyce knows where the brakes are...

Still, the Summers family was certainly coming off more as a matriarchy than anything else. Very, very strong-willed women...

“Is her whole side of the family like that?” For her sake, hopefully Mary’s type was a rare breed.

“Well...Christmas and Thanksgiving definitely get a little hectic, but it’s always lively?”

Out of sight, Emily practically shuddered. Frank was too nice for his own good, especially when it came to dishing out the details that mattered. Then again, trying to be indirect was just about the same as being totally direct, just with a little more class.

“How big are your get-togethers?”

“Thanksgiving can get a bit big, but Christmas definitely takes the cake,” he scratched his chin. “Let’s see...there’s me, Mary, our son John, Hannah, then we have Mary’s two sisters Carol and Martha along with their husbands. Carol has a girl and a boy, Martha has a son. Who else...” he tapped his finger. “Sometimes we have more, but those’re the regulars... Oh! Right,” he heartily dropped his open palm on the table with a laugh, “I forgot about my own brother, Mark! He and his wife Laura pop around for at least a second.”

Meanwhile, Emily had been counting one finger after the next, until there were more people than fingers, and she didn’t plan on moving to the toes.

“Fifteen, I think,” Frank answered her thoughts for her, realizing he’d been watching her simple arithmetic.

“Fifteen? Really?” For a split-second, all those fifteen faces were that of Mary’s. Quickly she shook her head, trying to physically knock the traumatizing thought out of her. “I thought it was a little less...” Maybe she counted wrong?

“Well, let’s see...” Frank blew some wind from his mouth. “Thirteen of us...then that leaves you and Joyce, so plus two. Fifteen sounds right?”

“Oh,” Emily looked a little dumbfounded for a second, then laughed. “Guess I forgot to count us.”

“Well, of course Joyce would come, but you know you’re more than welcome too, right? Don’t worry about us though, we won’t be offended if you can’t come. I’ll only cry a little,” already he went to wipe one of his eyes.

“Stop, stop! I haven’t said no yet!” Emily laughed. “I take it Mary would really want me to go?” The mere mention of her name was a sore spot for conversation, but if Emily didn’t mention it, she figured Frank sure would.

“Oh,” he jokingly scoffed, “you and Joyce have it easy, you know that? You two get to have her for the weekend, but I live with her, ya know?”

Emily snickered. That was one of the best things about Frank. He was self-aware and could take and make jokes about it. He'd never insult his wife, obviously, but he wasn't scared to joke about her less-than-perfect qualities.

"Don't worry about Mary. Whether you choose to go or not, I'm still never gonna hear the end of it until the actual day comes," he chuckled. "Maybe even a few days after!"

They shared a few more laughs until the city streets below were louder than themselves. Who'd have thought Emily would be bonding with Frank over Mary?

"But to set the record straight," he paused to finish his last bite of breakfast. "Mary does mean well; she's been very excited to meet you. Though, she's always been known to...come off a bit strong. So if you do ever get upset with her, no one's gonna be too hard on ya. I'll try my best to keep her on a leash."

A leash was definitely what she needed. Frank would have been a godsend just a little bit ago... Hopefully Mary wasn't a liar though. The thought of facing her was already scary, so having to think what it would be like facing Frank after Mary told him anything was terrifying.

Frank stood up to wash his plate in the sink, toweling off his hands. Leaning his head out into the hallway, he looked back at Emily.

"Speaking of tornadoes, where are the other two?"

"Uh...still cleaning, I think." Half-true. Cleaning and probably chatting; a subject-matter that made Emily feel small and embarrassed, and Joyce probably downright uncomfortable.

"Hmm. Well, how about we have them get a move on?" Before Emily could answer, he was already walking ahead.

Emily's heart skipped a beat. Where was he going? He wasn't going to the room, was he? He couldn't! The scarring image flashed in her head, all in its swollen and infantile splendor. Under no circumstances could Frank enter that room. If he saw, then for sure he'd--!

"Joyce? Mary?" Frank stopped short halfway down the hall, calling to Joyce's room. "You two kids ready to get the day started?" A couple feet behind him was Emily, frozen mid-step.

The door opened in response and it was Joyce's head that stuck itself out.

“Huh? Oh, sorry, Dad. Mom was showing me one of her ‘home remedies’. We just finished up now.” She opened the door some more to show her full figure in the frame. Stepping to the side Mary came out next.

“Did you just finish your breakfast now?” Mary asked as she walked by. In her hand hung a filled black plastic bag. Emily only knew because she couldn’t help but keep her eyes on the ground, otherwise she might accidentally see Mary’s.

“It takes time to enjoy food, ya know,” Frank stepped around Emily, following his wife. “What did you show her? How to get dust between the drawers?”

“Oh shush, what would our house look like without me...” their conversation faded away the farther they were. Looking back at Joyce, they both exchanged blank faces for a second, each stuck on their factory reset smiles. Joyce was first to break the silence.

“Wait, didn’t you come to change your shirt last time?”

Emily pupils were doing cartwheels. “First your dad says it, now you? I feel like I’m the only one who forgets...” Joyce stroked her nails across Emily’s head as she walked in the room. It smelled different; not that the smell was bad before. Just more...refreshing? Like soap, almost.

“To her credit,” Joyce sighed, “she does know how to clean...”

“Sorry...” Emily meekly spoke, guessing what may have needed to be cleaned.

“It’s fine regardless, but if the carpets come out of this unscathed too, that’ll be a nice bonus.” She was mindful to shut the door.

“So...” other than the stain, Emily couldn’t help but feel the need to address the other elephant in the room. Rather, the one that just left. “...How did it go?”

Joyce frowned a little, and Emily’s heart and expression sank.

“Considering what it could’ve been if she found everything out...it went really well, actually. Just...very weird.”

Emily looked a bit more hopeful. “So it did go well? What happened? What did she say?” Then she remembered what Joyce had asked her in the bathroom. “...What did *you* say?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Joyce asked a bit reluctantly. “Nothing bad happened,” nothing worse than what already did happen, “but the whole conversation was...well,” her linguistic skills weren’t so sharp at the moment. “Weird...”

“Do I wanna know?” It was her right, but the truth wasn’t always a good thing.

“Go change your shirt. I’ll try and summarize all the noteworthy stuff.”

And so she did, whilst Joyce did her best to package recent events.

“So, she definitely thinks you have a medical condition...” It wasn’t very shocking to either, since they could gather that much from their initial conversation. “She sort of talked herself into it, but I first made it clear that you wear protection next to never, though she thinks stress and excitement is why your ‘accidents’ are so ‘frequent’ right now.” They were Joyce’s words, but even to her they sounded ridiculous, simply because she knew they weren’t true.

“Stress? Excited? So she really thinks I am a kid?”

“No...” she didn’t completely think that, but even Joyce couldn’t give a flat ‘no’. “But...I definitely think she has a soft spot for you. Face it, Emily, you’re cute.” She spoke like it was an absolute truth, though it heated Emily up a little. “I’m not saying that to be flirty, just as a reason why, objectively speaking, my mom is taking so well to this... Maybe on some level, even if she won’t admit it to herself, yeah, she sort of does see you like one.”

“So...so like, what? I get a free pass, or something?” She wanted to be offended, being seen as anything less than an adult, but after everything thus far, had she given Mary much reason to think otherwise?

“Maybe? I really don’t know. From the sound of it, she really doesn’t seem to mind you wearing diapers. If anything,” Joyce cringed a little, “...she turned into a talking point...”

“...That does sound a little weird.”

Joyce merely nodded.

“And included with that, she also tried to ‘educate’ me on how we should be throwing away your diapers...” she blew at a loose strand of hair.

“How...what?” Even with context, the mere mention of Mary seemed to encrypt it all again entirely.

“Since she doesn’t know about the nursery and the diaper pail inside it, she thinks it’s a bad idea to use any normal bin in the house. She’s not wrong...” Joyce sighed, falling through the same hoops yet again. “But I’m not wrong either. I wanted to tell her so badly I know what I’m doing!” Tightly she clutched her intangible gripes. “But...” she relented with a sigh. “That’d defeat the purpose of damage control.”

“Thanks for swallowing your pride,” Emily awarded her with a peck on the cheek. She happened to look around a little. “Where did the other thing go, by the way?” She already sounded uncomfortable, and for good reason. Quite frankly she’d had enough of using the ‘d’ word for one day, especially in ‘Emily’ mode.

“Hm? Oh, it should be right over...” she started to explain as her eyes fell on an empty space, then her tone reared into an agitated growl. “Rrrgh, damnit, why does she have to be so persistent?!” Her little outburst was enough for Emily to inch away, causing Joyce to put back on some restraint. “I’m sorry,” her face sunk into her hand, “I didn’t even notice she slipped away with it.”

Thinking back, what else could have been in that black bag? What’s more, if Emily decided to think about it any harder, she just saw her girlfriend’s mother throwing away her very own used diaper. And the fact that they acknowledged it and were still sitting there was cause for concern in Emily’s eyes.

Joyce could see the slight bit of expectancy in her eyes. “Don’t worry, after the whole lesson about getting a separate trash bin for diaper duty, I highly doubt she’ll be doing anything other than what her mantra preaches.”

“A-are you sure?” Emily didn’t exactly doubt it either, but Mary was proving to be an irritatingly unpredictable person.

“Positive,” she nodded. “She’s definitely a headstrong mother, which is why I choose to believe in her motherly conviction...” Finally, she ran her hands through her own hair for a second. “Were you still looking to get those extra five minutes from this morning?” Joyce slumped her head into Emily’s lap. “It’s either that or I need a drink...”

“You said we were gonna go out, right?” The raindrops against the window faded into earshot. “Somewhere indoors, hopefully?”

“A very good idea,” Joyce continued to mull, stirring in Emily’s lap. Begrudgingly, she lifted herself from such a wonderful position. “Actually, that new shopping center finished their renovations a few days ago?”

“Like a mall?”

“Sort of... Along the lines of lots of different stores, just without the parking and it’s built into the city.”

“That could be fun. Browsing could kill some time.”

“It could, but so does actually shopping, you know?”

Emily frowned. “I don’t need any new clothes.”

“Very true. You don’t need anything new right now, and neither do I. But, that doesn’t mean we can’t *want* things?”

“Why do you have to make so much money?”

“So I can get nice and comfy homes to put nice and comfy beds in. With how high maintenance your wardrobe is, I’ve had to start working overtime, you know?”

“I would call that a first world problem, but I feel like you’re too rich for that. That’s like a...a zeroth world problem, or something.”

“Well, my money is your money, so by association you’re a ‘zeroth’ worlder too,” Joyce snickered as she slung her arms over Emily’s shoulders. She suddenly groaned. “After all this, I’m gonna need a vacation. Where are we gonna go? France? Italy? The UK?”

She almost picked one, but considering Joyce’s wealth, Emily couldn’t say for certain she was joking... “It’s too soon to talk about that stuff. I’m just getting off vacation, you know. And hopefully back to work...” she spoke pensively.

“Everything’s gonna be fine. F - I - N - E.”

Not that Emily doubted her, but she tended to be pessimistic at times like these. “How do you know?”

“Because I’m the breadwinner?” She didn’t say it mockingly, but more like it was a given.

“Well, yeah, I know you are, but...it’s a mental thing; having a job. It proves to me that I’m independent. I don’t wanna be the stay-at-home girlfriend.” Even if that sort of was what she was being right now...

“Or what? Then I’d be a real sugarmama? Huh?” Joyce teased, starting to peck her on the cheek.

While Emily did laugh, it wasn’t at the forefront of thought. “I appreciate it, but like I said, it’s nothing to do with you. It’s a personal thing... I already depend on you so much, voluntarily. If I didn’t have my own income...then I’d really be a freeloader.” She looked over to the head sitting beside her shoulder. “Did I kill the mood?”

“Yes,” Joyce said quite plainly, pointing her tongue at the offender. “You know, did you ever consider that you’re maybe being a worrywart for no reason right now? I’m gonna make the executive decision and close this topic of discussion. We’re only gonna go in circles and you’re only gonna be upset.”

“Kay...” For a moment they merely existed, apart from Emily shifting sides on the mattress. “I don’t want any new stuff.”

“No promises~.”

Thankfully it wasn’t as much of a show this time getting to the car and driving to their destination. And to Emily’s credit, she fought quite hard to stay awake this time and her efforts had paid off. However, relying on a public parking garage wasn’t as successful.

“Guess everyone else in the city had the same idea as us...” Joyce miffed. For a moment, all you could hear was her thumb rapping the steering wheel. That, and the downpour cascading all the windows and windshield.

“It can’t be a fun day if it’s only easy,” Frank assured her with a hand on the shoulder.

“Honestly, why can’t they have reserved parking, or something?” She hated standstills, especially when she was trying to host a group of people.

“You never know,” Mary leaned over, just to see the line of cars in front of them. “There’s probably some section for bigwigs?”

“Why couldn’t they put this next to *my* company...” Joyce groaned. “When I come to visit you guys, I want you driving, Dad.”

“I woulda drove here, you know? Though, you can’t charge me if I scratch your car.”

“First one’s free!” her voice stretched an octave as her arms did so. “Should’ve seen the old model before Emily totaled it,” she snickered.

“Hu...what?” Her head had been rocking back and forth like a pendulum in the backseat, but the snide remark snapped her back into reality. “I never crashed your car!”

“See? Total denial!” Everyone laughed but Emily.

“More importantly,” Mary started to shift gears, “it looks like it’ll be a bit until we can get in...”

“Maybe it’d be worth trying a different parking garage?” Frank suggested.

“There probably is...” Joyce pondered, still keeping her eyes forward. “We may have to walk a little though...” The windshield wipers swept across their view. “In this rain...”

“Did we bring umbrellas?”

Unfortunately. Only one. The only one Joyce knew of. In hindsight, she was the fool for not even considering...

“I packed a couple,” Emily spoke up.

“Really?” Joyce asked from the front. “When?” And as an aside she also thought to herself about how many umbrellas she actually owned? *One for the car...for the office...* She continued to ramble.

“I figured just in case.” Emily played it off nonchalantly. She looked under her feet and funnily enough there were in fact two umbrellas sitting there. “It’s only two though...” Well-placed intentions, though only half-baked.

“That makes three then,” Joyce already turned out of the lane, sacrificing their hard-fought space. They turned just enough to see the countless other cars sitting in a long line behind them. “Mom and Dad can use those two and we’ll use mine.”

“How far of a walk is it gonna be?” Emily couldn’t help but ask, seeing the farther they drifted away in the pouring rain.

“Under ten minutes, hopefully...” Joyce sighed. She could feel exactly what was going through the girl’s head, precisely because it was the same thing she was going through too.

“Let’s call it a lesson learned, then.” Frank chuckled. “I’m sure we’ll survive!”

“E-Emily?” Joyce spoke, her voice could be heard right next to splashing raindrops.

“Yeah?” Emily looked up, finding Joyce’s hesitant expression close to the roof of their umbrella.

“Don’t you think it’d be better if I held the umbrella?”

Willing, yet dumbly, she said, “I guess...? Why?”

Joyce laughed a little. “So I don’t have to keep slouching over?” It finally clicked once Joyce slapped her in the face with it.

For some reason Emily the much shorter girl elected herself to hold the umbrella. What she thought was a kind gesture had actually been a hindrance...

“S-sorry...” Emily kept her eyes forward but held the umbrella a bit higher. Joyce politely received the torch and raised their shield a bit higher. Higher than Emily would have been comfortable doing.

“I can finally see again!” Joyce laughed as the pair continued to walk. Mary and Frank were right behind, each with their own respective umbrella.

“At least it’s not windy,” Mary offered some encouragement from the rear.

Emily didn’t answer, but took down the note. She cautiously eyed her own shoes which were starting to look a bit wet on the edges.

“Something on your shoe?” Joyce asked. She couldn’t help but notice she’d been staring at them.

“Water.” Emily answered conflictingly.

“Ye-...” Joyce cracked a grin. “That so?”

“Forget it,” Emily dismissed herself. “It’s stupid.”

Joyce had paused, yet nodded. “You’re right, it probably is.” Then, she could see the girl’s eyelashes flutter, as if she’d just blinked. The kind of blink to be followed by a stupefied look.

Emily was stupefied. Of course she was being hard on herself, but she didn’t exactly expect Joyce to feed into it.

“What?” Joyce kept a neutral look. “What is it?”

“Nothing...”

“You’re right. It probably is nothing.”

Now Emily did look at her, only with narrowed eyes.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what?” Joyce innocently chuckled, willingly oblivious to any crime she may have committed.

“Stop agreeing with me!”

“What? What do you mean? All I said was that--”

“--It was stupid, yes.” Emily cut her off. “Then I said it was nothing, and then *you* said it was nothing!”

“I-...” Joyce scratched her temple with a confused smile. “I don’t see the issue here...”

“Because whenever I talk like that you always say ‘it’s not stupid’ or ‘tell me anyways’, no matter what it is. You’re not doing that this time.”

“Mmm...well?” She gave Emily a hopeless look. “*Do* I do that?”

“Okay, fine, I’ll tell you!” Emily gave up, leading to another smile from Joyce. “I hate it when you tease me...”

“You really are like a cat...” Joyce fawningly mused. She simply had too many tells, hence why she considered Emily such a bad liar. Not because she couldn’t lie per say...but because Joyce simply knew her too well. “So? What’s on your mind?”

“It’s just... You’re gonna think this sounds ridiculous...”

“Probably will,” Joyce chimed in with a grin.

“...I don’t like getting stuff you bought me dirty...” she mumbled more the longer her speech carried on. “Even the shoes...”

“But clothes already get dirty when we wear them, don’t they?” Joyce retorted. To her credit, Emily expected some kind of joke about her silly logic. Instead, she knew exactly how to stoop to Emily’s mindset.

“W-well...I don’t mean *that* kind of dirty.”

“Dirty isn’t a very selective thing, though?”

“You know what I mean,” Emily sulked.

“Somehow, I do,” with her umbrella hand, she stuck out her pinky to trace the small crevice behind Emily’s ear, leading to her visible shudder. “But also, somehow, you don’t know better by now than to not fret over that kind of stuff... I’m gonna have to look into hypnotism or something...”

“Sorry for being thoughtful,” Emily ‘humphed’ and puffed out her chest.

“Maybe I should hog the umbrella a bit? Just to get you wet enough to finally break those shoes in?” She started to twirl the handle, teasing as their overhead drifted slightly more to Joyce’s side.

“Then if you do that I’m gonna stomp in every puddle we walk by,” Emily haughtily fired back.

“Oh? I’m not wearing heels, you know? I can always outrun someone as tiny as you!”

“I changed my mind. I want the umbrella back.”

“Hey girls? Watch out up ahead,” a distant Frank called from the back, though he went unheard.

“Really?” Joyce exclaimed. “You want *my* umbrella?”

“No, *our* umbrella,” Emily corrected. “What’s yours is mine and mine is also mine!”

She could only raise a brow to her twisted logic. “R-really...?”

“Exactly. So, I’m gonna give you until the count of three. One!--” And ‘one’ was as far as she got.

Had they heeded Frank’s warning to keep their eyes forward, they would have noticed the gradual incline in the aged sidewalk that’d been filled to the brim in near ankle-deep water. Joyce was the first to go as she wasn’t prepared for the sudden drop, leading to the collapse of her entire balance. Emily wasn’t more than half a second behind, but somehow her nobility gave her the reactionary speed to at least try and grab for the tumbling Joyce. Not that it meant much. Because Joyce was the larger of the two and Emily was...well, Emily, the smaller of the two merely accelerated their own tumble and descent by grabbing on to another sinking weight.

They both fell to their knees with a loud and heavy splash. Water soaked their pants, shoes and socks, and had even reached their shirts from the splash. What’s worse, dirt was in the water and covered them in mud as well. Their umbrella lay discarded nearby, washing themselves anew in the downpour.

“Ugh...” Emily groaned in disgust.

“‘Ugh’ is right...” Joyce sighed in a similar fashion.

“Don’t say we didn’t warn you!” Mary said from behind, holding an umbrella over Joyce’s head. Frank did the same for Emily. “You two were so busy with your little argument that you didn’t see this up ahead.”

Both stood up, feeling no less worse. There were large dark stains all over the front of their pants, seeping into the material and clinging to their skin.

“Let’s table our ‘discussions’ for when we’re not in the rain.” Joyce did her best to stay positive, but even she wasn’t immune to a shitty situation.

“I’m ready to go home now...” Emily whined. She pinched at her pants, trying to separate it from her skin. Instantly reminded of her last ‘adventure’ in the rain, she was utterly disgusted to force the memory of being totally drenched.

“Well, guess this makes a good excuse for us to go shopping now,” Joyce muttered, doing her best to separate Emily’s strands of hair.

“If you say it like that then I’m gonna think you planned this all to happen...” Emily moped, sitting on the public bathroom counter. For no visible reason she let out an agitated groan. “This sucks! Why can’t anything we try to do go right?!” Her expression turned down another level. “I think even my underwear is wet...” And need it be mentioned, the not good kind of wet. Sulking some more, she took stock of their close surroundings. “Is it okay for us to use the family bathroom like this?”

“We’re family, aren’t we?” Joyce spoke as she looked into the mirror, adjusting herself. “At least we’re with my mom and dad. I guess that counts? Should I ask my mom to come in and help?”

“Not a funny joke,” Emily deadpanned, thinking to just a few minutes earlier.

After their little “dip” in the water, the group trudged onwards to the mall which was a very much less than exciting journey, especially when you’re covered in water and have to walk around in squishy shoes. They made it to a bathroom before catching the social spotlight, but had to strictly forbid Mary from entering. Of course she was insistent on helping them clean up, but thankfully Frank had reigned her in. That in itself triggered another recent memory related to eating pancakes, where Frank promised he’d keep a tight leash.

Such a nice man... Emily’s eyes glistened, which in eyeshot left Joyce looking at her weirdly.

“You wouldn’t get it,” Emily had read her mind. “It’s a pancake thing.”

“Don’t tell me you hit your head when you fell...”

“What are we gonna do about our clothes?” They at least weren’t dripping anymore, but they could certainly feel an uncomfortable wetness all over still. And an unfortunate thought crossed Emily’s mind.

Be it the rain or my own pee, somehow I always end up wet...

“Get as dry as we can then find something new to wear. Even once it all dries off, we can’t do much about mud.”

“Mm...” Emily nodded, looking down at her shoes. They were certainly dirty now. Had the puddle water not been enough, they decorated in streaks of mud. What was going to come off already had, and now the rest was starting to stain and crust.

“I’m sorry, I know you don’t like throwing away gifts, but I like keeping clean clothes on our backs,” Joyce sympathized, squeezing her shoulder.

“Can we just clean them back home?”

“Of course,” probably. She’d never cleaned a pair of shoes in her life, but certainly it could be done. “But for the time being let’s find something else to wear? Just so we can finally start this day on a high note?”

They weren’t much longer before they had done enough maintenance to at least be passable. Faces and expressions were back in order, but the clothes...

“You two clean up awfully nice!” Mary smiled as the quartet formed again.

“Best we can, at least...” Joyce groaned, Emily choosing to stay passive. “It’s a new shopping center and all, but do you think we could go for some clothes first?”

“Clothes?” Frank exasperated. “All the new and fancy things here and that’s where ya two wanna go first?”

“Oh quit giving them such a hard time,” Mary nudged her husband. “He’s probably been thinking of all the things he could say while you two were in there...”

“In and out, Dad, promise!” Joyce already panned her eyes for a map or nearby store. Somewhere above the many passing heads or through the weaving crowds. They’d managed to hit another busy attraction for the second day in a row.

Funny how coincidences worked like that, as Joyce could feel someone’s hand slip into hers.

I swear, thinking how the zoo went, this is like reverse psychology... She nearly rolled her eyes over how amusing it was and loved it all the same.

They did find a map and glanced over it, trying to find someplace that sold clothes.

“Oh, perfect. Look,” Joyce pointed to it on the screen, “they have a Capital Star here?”

“Like the brand name?” Emily asked, following her finger. That was a lucrative brand...in part to its limited sales at a high price. Wealthy people’s kind of shopping. “I didn’t even think they had in-person stores...”

“I saw one of them once when I was on a business trip...” Joyce pondered. “But that should do the trick. Let’s hop to it.”

“Guess we’ll finally get to see how our daughter shops for clothes,” Mary confided in Frank with a chuckle.

“...Mmm...” Frank agreed, scratching his chin. “They even have a kitchenware kind of store here...” he continued to gloss over the map.

“Okay, fine, you can go,” Joyce beckoned.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Frank asked.

“I know clothes aren’t your thing. Especially price tags?”

“No, what do you mean? It’s alright, I’ll tag along,” Frank shrugged.

“Take your chances while you get them, hon!” Mary urged. “Maybe we can find you something while they’re getting their stuff?”

“Not at those prices!” Frank outraged, leading to their laughter.

“See? Point exactly. Get going, have fun. We’ll find you after.”

“If you’re sure...” Frank started to say.

“We are,” Mary confirmed. “You’re already moving, so get going!”

He wasn’t making a dash, but he walked in a way that couldn’t mask the excitement. Unfortunately, Emily was kind of sad to see him go. Not only did he make great company, but...

“Looks like it’s just us three!” Mary exclaimed, putting her hands together.

“Hey Joyce,” Emily murmured, squeezing her hand.

“Hm? What’s up?”

“Why not somewhere, uhm...cheaper?”

“Mmm...well, I haven’t been to one in a bit, so I’m curious about their new collections.” And just what might there be for Emily? The thought incited pleasure across her face. Then she toned down the expressions a bit. “Remember, my treat today?”

“It’s always your treat...” Emily blew hot air. She looked a bit more bashful. “Thank you...”

It was enough reason for Joyce to walk onwards with a pleasant feeling in her chest. After all, being able to do for Emily was all she wanted. That and so much love in return, all of which she got.

Emily managed to stop them in their tracks. “Uh, actually,” she fished her hand into a pocket, extracting a buzzing phone from it. “I think someone’s calling me... Is it alright if I go back to the bathroom real quick just to answer? It’s kinda noisy out here.”

Joyce looked back, seeing the bathroom doors were still within view. “Okay, we’ll be waiting right by the map sign.” Letting go of Emily’s hand was tough, but she had to relinquish both her unnecessary fears as a lover and a mother.

After taking her time to see she did in fact make it, Joyce could convince herself that it was okay to give her mom the lion's share of attention now.

"It'll be nice to get some new clothes," Joyce sighed.

"I'm sure it will be," Mary nodded. A wardrobe malfunction's never any good... Speaking of which, Emily's cleanup wasn't any worse, was it?

"No? Why would it be?"

"Well..." Mary seemed hushed, looking for the privacy a conversation like theirs could have among a sea of strangers, said in a lower voice, "she's in a diaper after all, isn't she?"

"A...--Mom!" Were they already back to this? "*No*, she isn't." and why was Joyce even humoring the question? "Why would she even be?"

"There's been a lot of excitement and stress lately, so I figured it wasn't impossible..."

"Well she isn't. Don't ask her about it, either. It's private..." she forcibly closed herself off. Only now she realized that being in a public space came first rather than second to chewing her mom out.

"I just want to make sure today goes well for everyone, that's all..." Mary said. Joyce could hardly imagine the woman's intentions ever working as intended. But, she didn't disagree with her mother's sentiment. Everyone in their own way was trying to make today a good one. Well, almost everyone, as the empty outline of Frank's figure stood beside them.

They didn't speak until Emily came back, but the longer the silence persisted the more impatient Joyce started to look. She kept eyeing the bathroom where Emily went, but a troubling thought plagued her mind. A conundrum she couldn't seem to detach herself from.

How *would* Emily look in a diaper right now? Such an elated fantasy made the woman's eyes sparkle.

"Joyce? Are you alright?" Mary asked with an uncertain look.

"Hu--huh?" Joyce snapped out of her dreaming. "It...it's nothing." She shrugged it off with an almost flustered look.

Where's Emily?

Some time later, approximately 33 hours later, after a peculiar shopping trip, delicious meals and constant back-and-forths: Frank, Mary, Joyce, and Emily were somehow able to finish their time together without any further apparent upset. Much like the chaos which ensued for the past day and a half, the time the Summers' husband and wife spent with Joyce and Emily had come to an end. Hence the time now reading 8:30PM on a Monday evening as, well...a small bit more of chaos was taking place.

"Hon? Have you seen my toothbrush?" Frank called from the bathroom. He could be heard rummaging through the few odds and ends laid on the counter.

"Already packed them for us!" Mary answered back with just as much volume while she handled her end of preparing.

Meanwhile, Joyce is sitting on the large and spacious sofa, poised upright as she tensely taps her foot on the floor, one leg crossed over the other. Every so often she leans her head back, likely hoping to see a mother and father arriving with fully packed suitcases in tow. Unfortunately she's had yet to see this.

"Unbelievable..." Joyce muttered under her breath, trying to trace the gymnastics of today in her brain, trying to occupy herself with a thought exercise of how it came to this. But she cut herself short, calling down the hall, "Mom! Dad? Are you two almost ready? Your flight is at 10 and it's going to take us at least twenty minutes to get to the airport!" She glanced at the clock again. "Not including traffic!" She waited for a response, but only reprieved her short-burned patience by groaning aloud.

Rubbing her temples she continued to whisper agitated and annoyed pieces to herself. "I swear, if they don't make it to their flight on time I'm sticking them in a hotel... Like hell they're coming back here...!" No offense to Frank, really. Not so much Mary either, although she was certainly the one in the hot seat.

Today and late night yesterday, the day they went to the shopping center were filled with reminders of increasing frequency for the married couple to start getting ready to go home. Maybe pack a few things here or there; put away old clothes or keep their toiletries nearby. But somehow, magically, there "was no time for it," as spoken by Joyce's headstrong mother. Mary for the final day had been insistent on doing as many things as possible. Shopping, a movie (Not

a horror one), lunch at a restaurant, dinner at a restaurant, which only ended just about an hour ago.

Mary always has a special way of being a thorn in Joyce's side, but a lackadaisical approach to keeping appointments is what bothered Joyce the most, and has always been a peeve of hers. It's no secret that Joyce is a busy woman and she understands the importance of time and what little of it there is in a single day. She well understands being late for a good reason (such as making time to spend with Emily), but not a one could be found in these circumstances.

She was just about to call for her parents again, only until a delicate finger pointed itself into her vulnerable cheek. Turning her head to the source, Joyce couldn't help but feel her steeled will and firing cylinders be calmed at least somewhat by the sight of her loving antagonist.

"Are you really that upset?" Emily asked, crawling across the cushions over to Joyce.

"Yes...!" Joyce openly vented. "Well...! Ugh...for now, I am..." As silly as it seems, the question that appeared to have an obvious answer actually gave Joyce a moment of valuable pause. "I just...I told them they should start focusing on packing, but my mom hasn't stopped between yesterday and today!"

"W-well..." Emily supposed while poking her fingers together. "Maybe she was just excited to see you, so she wanted to do as much as possible...?"

Probably more so to see you, Joyce silently thought to herself as she looked at Emily fondly, without a doubt in her mind. She wasn't completely wrong. "God forbid if this is her way of trying to figure an excuse of why they should get to stay here another night..."

"You..." Emily was about to laugh at Joyce's ridiculous notion, but then gravely reflected on all her interactions with Mary thus far. "Y-...you're kidding, right?"

Joyce rubbed her eyes while they fell back on Emily, a bit surprised to see her concerned look. The smaller girl's wariness was met with a warm smile however. "Yes, I am. My mom is...unique, in a lot of ways, but I think even for her that crosses a line of courtesy and decency..." Granted, it's a twisted mindset to think keeping someone's diapers a secret falls second to intentionally being late.

"What time should we be leaving for the airport?" Emily asked, resting her head on Joyce's thigh.

“Thirty minutes ago?” Joyce said, carrying a tone of disbelief that could hopefully rub off on Emily. She sighed. “Maybe if I let Mom pack you up and take you with her that’d convince her to move a bit faster...?”

“Hey...!” Emily whined, reaching her grabby hands up at Joyce, who deftly disarmed her by clutching her wrists and leaning her head down for a kiss on the lips.

“Kidding~” Joyce said with a snicker. “As if I’d ever let someone else have my little treasure.” She said fondly, stroking a hair on the girl’s head. But Joyce then shifted her expression to a curious one. “And what’s all this talk about ‘we’? I was planning to take them to the airport on my own?”

“Huh?” Emily replied, just as confused. “Who’s gonna keep you company on the way back though?”

“I can handle myself.” Joyce blew a cool chill on Emily’s forehead, inspiring confidence.

“Don’t want me, that it?” Emily teased, sticking her tongue out.

“Always and forever the absolute opposite, actually,” She stuck her tongue out in retaliation. “But no; what I’m concerned about is giving you a fair chance to sleep. You didn’t go in for work today, after all. Didn’t you say Sunday was the latest you’d hear from them? You’re probably gonna be on call at any point by now...”

Emily didn’t offer much of a response as she stewed there for a bit longer. Not too much longer, thankfully, as Frank and Mary finally did come with their belongings right beside them into the main room.

“I know, I know,” Frank already started before Joyce could speak. “I humbly and wholly agree with your issues and complaints.” He paused for dramatic effect. “I blame Mom, too.”

“Wha--?!” Mary shouted in surprise, but was quickly and curtly cut by a forced smile and usher from Joyce.

“Great! Let’s go before we have to stick you on a bus instead of a plane!” Joyce moved them along to the mudroom. Emily watched for a moment as they stepped into the shoe area.

“Emily?”

Emily blinked, looking forward, realizing she was watching Joyce's face.

"Are you coming? If so, we really gotta get a move on!" Reserved just for Emily, she kept that same tone of urgency she felt for the moment, but made sure to generously coat it in the sweetness and patience she felt for Emily, and Emily alone.

"Oh, I think I may have forgotten to pack my--" Mary started to say, but Joyce's expression of love and affection snapped back to one of order and authority.

"Forget it! Tell me about it later; I'll ship it or buy you a new one!" Joyce cut her off.

"Y-yeah, I'll go." Emily said back, a little surprised by how Joyce could manage to keep her mom on a leash. Maybe Joyce really could withstand her if she tried...

Walking around the couch and following the trio into the small space, she was just about to start looking for her shoes when they were already set aside for her.

"Frank, do we really need to go back for that thing of yours? We haven't seen Joyce in so long, and now we finally got to--" Mary started to say, having second thoughts, yet was interjected by her husband.

"Hon, we see Joyce plenty, and the holidays are right around the corner. We gotta give them some cooldown time before we start suffocating them all over again."

"Dad..." Joyce rolled her eyes, trying not to be made out as the villain, although she didn't totally disagree with the metaphor...

"Wait!" Mary suddenly piped up. Everyone turned their heads. "We never did anything for Emily's birthday!" The disappointment in her voice was akin to kicking a puppy.

"Uhm, that's okay," Emily meekly replied.

"We'll just have to make a rain check," Joyce reasoned, saying just about anything at this point to get her mom out the door. So caught in the moment, Joyce even turned her head to Emily's feet for a moment, wondering if the laces had been tied yet. As quick as the doting thought came though she dashed it aside, trying to focus.

"Sorry we didn't make good on the promise, Em," Frank said to Emily, even offering his own apologies, although not as dramatic.

Emily giggled awkwardly, trying to wave it off. “R-really, it’s not that big a deal, haha. I already got to have a great birthday with Joyce?” It was enough to make Frank smile, but Mary seemed no further convinced, as much like Joyce, or vice versa, she seemed to hold herself to a high standard.

Joyce held out her hands for Emily and lifted her back onto her feet once she was ready to go.

All it took was another check of the time to have Joyce moving the group along. “Okay, no more idle chat. You’re gonna be sitting on the wing of the plane at this rate!”

All four moved out of the apartment and into the hall, down the elevator and finally in the garage. Somehow fortune seemed to have favored them that night, whether it be for Joyce and Emily’s sanity or Frank and Mary’s convenience, but their ride to the airport wasn’t as long as you’d might expect.

Reaching the dropoff lane they slowed down in front of the terminal entrance. Frank and Mary were quick out the door, and Joyce and Emily soon followed after. Naturally Emily wanted to give her goodbyes, and to be honest, more so for Frank, but Mary meant well in her own way...

“Okay, those are your suitcases in the back...” Joyce spoke slowly as she made a mental note. There was nothing else other than to see them off. “Okay,” she turned her attention back to her parents. “We’ll go find a place to park then make sure you get on your flight and take off...”

“Oh, hon,” Frank waved her off. “Don’t worry about us old seniors. You two have work in the morning, don’t you?”

“Well you two come first, obviously...” Joyce started to reason, but Mary even chimed in.

“We know you can move your schedule around, but we don’t want to force the same thing on Emily?”

Joyce grew quiet, feeling a bit ashamed for not considering that. Even more to consider, just how might Emily take it? Now she might think she was the reason Joyce didn’t get to stay to see her parents off...

“You’re right,” Joyce said, dialing it back. “Truthfully, I’m tired as it is...” Sighing a breath of relief. “You two are really exhausting, you know that?”

“Guilty as charged.” Frank chuckled. “Alright, come on now, you know the drill,” he said with open arms.

“Awh, it was great seeing you, dad!” Joyce said as she wrapped her arms around Frank.

Emily watched from the side with a smile, but was quickly included by the smothering of Mary.

“Emmy, it was so-so-so-so wonderful finally being able to meet you!” Mary endlessly fawned with words of praise and compliments. “I’m so sorry we didn’t get to celebrate your birthday, and I’m so sorry we didn’t get to do more. I know we had our hiccups, but I hope you had as much fun meeting me as I did, you!”

While Emily’s first instinct may not have been to hug her, she wouldn’t need to solve that indecisiveness due to her arms being pinned to her sides by Mary’s smothering hug.

“It..was nice meeting you too, Mary...!” Emily squeaked through the snug embrace she was trapped in. Things were moving too fast for Emily to remember the massive embarrassments she’d suffered in front of Mary, so she was able to keep face for their goodbyes.

Mary finally let her go, swapping to having her hands on Emily’s shoulders. “You’ll be coming for Thanksgiving, right? Christmas, too?”

“Mom, she has her own family,” Joyce butt in, long since done hugging her dad and remaining a spectator.

“W-well...” Mary started, but felt the momentum of her emotions tripping over realistic expectations. “We’ll figure something out.” She sufficed.

“Cross that bridge when we get to it.” Joyce dismissed it, stepping in to hug her mom, leaving Emily and Frank to the side now.

Emily looked at Frank, who gave a warm smile. Stepping in, he surprised Emily by instead of giving a hug, holding out a fist.

He shrugged at his own gesture. “Figured my wife hugged you enough for the two of us?”

Instinctively, Emily bit her lower lip, bursting into a laugh as she returned the “totally radical” gesture. Both seemed to find it equally as weird though, because it ended in a hug as well.

“You’re really funny, Frank! I think Joyce is gonna kill me if I start sounding like you!”

“Not to worry,” Frank assured, leaning in for a whisper. “I’ll teach you the rest of my secrets the next holiday we see each other.”

Emily reared back out, stifling a giggle at the gaze of a suspicious girlfriend. Joyce could only raise a brow, panning her eyes between Frank and Emily.

“Forget it,” she sighed. “Better I don’t even know... More importantly, go get on your flight now!” Joyce shooed them. “Love you guys, talk to you soon!”

The parents waved their hands as they wheeled their suitcases off, both Emily and Joyce doing the same to them. Once they reached through the double doors and started to phase into check-in, they were out of sight.

Both Emily and Joyce stood side by side for a few moments longer, watching the same way Joyce’s parents left. It was as if they were waiting for the other to make a move. Their little unspoken test of endurance though was ended by the shivers of Emily.

“Finally free!” Joyce practically shouted, taking Emily by the hand and stuffing her in the passenger seat. She scurried around the front as fast as her boots would let her and was not long after behind the wheel.

“One word, to summarize this whole ‘adventure’?” Joyce asked, turning her head over.

“Chaos.” Emily replied, without a second thought.

“Quite certainly Pandora’s Box.” Joyce nodded, putting the car into drive. After being on the road for a few more minutes, she did speak again, only a bit more serious now. “...Would you be willing to meet them again?”

“Of course I would...” Emily answered again without much consideration, although she exhaled by the end of her answer. “Frank was awesome, and so was Mary. Just...”

“I know, there’s no need to explain. I know I must be sounding like a broken record by now, but she means well. Not that it’s any excuse...” And Joyce could most certainly imagine her future phone calls with her mom being just as non-discrete.

“Do you always see them for Thanksgiving and Christmas?” Emily asked.

Joyce nodded. “Every year. Maybe one Thanksgiving I was a day late to because of work, though... I was there the day of, but not the day before. For both Christmas and Thanksgiving we usually have a pre-day before the actual thing.”

Emily gave a short moment of awe as she respected her dedication. “That’s really cool. I’m usually home for the holidays, too, but usually for the day of, and maybe one or two after to spend with my mom and dad... Oh, and also, Frank told me you guys always have like fourteen people?”

“Mm...” Joyce paused to comment while she tried to run the numbers. “Uhm...that sounds about right. Yeah, it’s a good number. How big are yours?”

“Maybe six at the most!” Emily laughed. “Usually it’s my mom, dad, me, my dad’s parents, and sometimes my cousin if she’s around.”

There was more silence after that, back to that same awkwardness from before; waiting for the other to break the silence. With her hands on the wheel, Joyce was idly pressing her thumbs into each other.

“...I know you’re probably going to be busy like me during the holidays...but maybe we could celebrate together, somehow?”

Emily giggled in response, a little bit bashful. “I...” she scratched her cheek. “I sort of thought we were gonna do that already...”

“O-of course!” Joyce stammered, quick to emphasize. “I just didn’t want to assume...I know you have your obligations, too...”

“Well, I do want to see my parents, but I’m sure we can figure something out.”

“I just can’t wait to get home!” Joyce could feel herself growing more giddy by the minute. It honestly felt like a monumental step to even feel this way. She wasn’t going back to just a husk where she holed up until it was time for work. She could see Emily just in the corner of her eye, and it only stirred warmer feelings. It was a home, and she had someone so wonderful to share it with.

“Ugh, being able to have the house to ourselves again almost makes me want to take another day off...” Joyce mused. It was only a couple of days, but any amount of time Joyce has to throttle

herself already feels like an eternity. Nothing needed to happen tonight, because just being able to be alone with each other was enough.

“Home again, home again! Jiggity--!” Emily started to shout with glee, right before a hand muffled her cheers.

“Yep, you’re definitely gonna need some dad detox.” Joyce said as she continued to restrain Emily’s speech while sitting down on the floor. She was quick to let go though once she felt something wet and odd on her hand where Emily’s mouth was. “Ew! Did you just lick my hand? You little munchkin!” Joyce waved her hand away, trying to dry it.

Emily snickered over her devious acts. “Girl’s gotta have her own defense measures!”

“Yes, well, maybe after a bit more thought, you licking my hand isn’t the worst I’ve had to deal with you...” She then noticed her words seemed to have carried an unintended effect, as Emily grew quiet. She reaffirmed with a hug and a kiss. She nuzzled her cheek against Emily’s, speaking in a tender voice. “That being said, I wouldn’t want any less from you.” She created a long pause by kissing her cheek. “Sorry if my words came out a bit off...”

“No, I know,” Emily nodded, hanging her hands off of Joyce’s wrists. “That stuff is always gonna be sort of embarrassing, though...”

“Well, then I guess I’ll always need to be reminding you of how amazing you are!” Joyce finally let go of Emily, standing up once her own shoes were off.

“It was really cool getting to meet your parents,” for the most part, minus the moments that involved Mary at her...strongest? “But is it weird if I say that it’s...kinda nice to be alone now?”

Joyce stifled a laugh, making Emily feel flustered.

“What...?” Emily whined with embarrassment.

“It’s nothing. Well, it is something, but nothing that you said wrong.” She smiled brightly. “I feel the exact same way, and it’s why I’m so happy to hear you think the same. Guests are fun, but it’s natural to want our home back to ourselves. *Our* home.” She emphasized again to Emily with tender affection.

Whether Emily could fully accept it or not, Joyce truly did figure this place to be her own home as much as Emily's. Her name was on no paperwork and she certainly made no financial contributions. But even still, to Joyce, she was one of the very pillars that made this place worthwhile. Before Emily, getting this place was maybe continuing a habit of maintaining a high standard of living, along with other reasons.

“Oh! And uhm, is it alright if I move my stuff out of your room tomorrow? I kinda just want to go to bed...” Emily asked, already stretching.

“Hm?” Joyce raised an eyebrow. “I don't mind you keeping clothes in there,” she chuckled. “Wouldn't it be weird having to go across the hall every time you want to get dressed?”

“What do you mean?” Emily looked confused. “I...it's okay to call it my room, right?” She reservedly asked, referring to the room she'd been sleeping in before Frank and Mary commandeered it.

“Well, no, I wouldn't be.” Joyce said quite plainly, surprising Emily a little. Emily had asked, but of course she was expecting a different answer. “That's the guest room. Unless you really didn't like sleeping with me?” She asked as if feigning offense, but was amused to see Emily catching up to her own assumptions. “Though, my own girlfriend not wanting to share a bed with me...” She pretended to ramble as Emily cut her off.

“W-wait, you meant I was permanently moving into your room? Is...is that okay?” Obviously Emily had no objections to it, but somehow in her own twisted logic, despite being tenderly cared for and intimately handled by Joyce, she somehow thought this was an intrusion of space. Objectively, it was, but their context thus far was more than enough to make it seem trivial.

Joyce rolled her eyes. “Of course it's okay! I won't force you, so if you really want your own space, naturally I'll respect that. But yes, bringing you into my bed while my parents were here was to me a bit more of a permanent transition...”

“So...we'd be sleeping together? Every night?” Emily asked.

Joyce was putting on a wonderful poker face. Honestly, she couldn't believe how much Emily was sounding like an innocent schoolgirl. Obviously she's been with at least one other guy, so she's no stranger to the inner workings of a relationship. In Emily's head though, the prospect of being so in love with another woman that also acts as her caregiver seems to have muddied the waters for her.

But before Joyce could offer a response, a quivering smirk started to form on Emily's face as she shifted her gaze away somewhat. Clearly the thought was exciting to her.

"Ideally," Joyce gave a small laugh, "yes. Besides, you'll get to have another small sample tonight anyways. I still need to wash the bedding in the other room, so you're gonna have to be my little spoon again, tonight."

After a brief moment of trying to hide her own excited look Emily started drifting her eyes to the kitchen.

"What?" Joyce noticed her staring.

"Kinda want ice cream..."

"Definite no." Joyce was curt to shut the idea down.

"Huh?" Emily giggled. "Why not?"

"Because we *both* need to sleep." Joyce let out a small sigh. "Still nothing from work yet?"

Earlier on the couch Emily didn't seem to have a chance to speak on it because Joyce's parents came out, but now...

"Uhm...I maybe got something?" Emily said. "I'm gonna go wash up before bed..." She quickly excused herself.

"Great, I'll wash up, too." Joyce said, following along.

And so they did, with more strangeness between the two, expressed in the form of silence. Joyce had been thinking of something to say, but she didn't actually. Instead she spent the whole time observing, starting to seem concerned.

With a toothbrush in her mouth she started to say, "Emil--..." But the girl was already on her way out of the bathroom. It was likely she heard Joyce, but she didn't come back.

In the bedroom Emily was turned with her back to the door, still getting her pajamas on. Joyce started to do the same.

They both got into bed but Joyce hadn't shut off the lights like she normally did. Instead she reached her arms over, sliding Emily across and close to her bosom.

“Okay, come on. No more games.” Joyce spoke calmly, stroking her back. “What’s up?”

“Wh...what?” Emily looked up at her, seemingly confused.

Joyce then looked a bit hurt.

“Please, I’d never accuse you of lying, and I know you’re not now. But I know something’s up.”

“It’s...” Emily inhaled through her nose, letting out a shaky breath, followed by a snuffle. It was all silent for a few moments. “W-was it that obvious...?”

Joyce could only give her sympathy, hugging her a bit tighter. “It’s my job to notice these things. Come on, you can talk to me; you know that already. What’s wrong?”

As Emily trembled, Joyce continued to soothe her in a warm embrace.

“Is it about work?” Joyce calmly asked.

Emily hiccuped, and Joyce could feel her clutch tighter as she buried her head into her chest. Up until now she’d been putting on a front, but with nowhere else to go, she crumbled so easily under what little confrontation there was. It was only the partial truth though, as maybe some part of Emily did want to confide in Joyce.

“I...I wanted to talk about it, but I just didn’t...” She rubbed her teary eyes. “I didn’t know how...!”

“How long have you known?” Joyce rubbed her back..

“Since yesterday morning... At the department store...” It was when she excused herself to answer a call in the bathroom. It hadn’t fully hit her then, but it sure was starting to now.

While Emily couldn’t see it, Joyce furrowed her brow, remorseful in her own right. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice any sooner until now...”

“What?” Emily craned her neck to look up at her. “I never even said anything...how could you be expected to know?”

“I just don’t like the idea of you having to face stuff on your own...” Joyce explained briefly. “You’re an adult, obviously, and I know you’re more than capable, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to always be supporting you.”

Emily hugged her for a bit longer before continuing to speak. She braced herself, but putting the thoughts into words put a sick feeling in her stomach.

“I’m...I’m not going back to work...” It felt like a bombshell.

Joyce nodded with complete understanding. “It’s okay, you’re gonna be just fine. You have my support, two-hundred percent of the way.”

“Did...did you know?” Emily quietly asked, in reference to foreseeing her sudden unemployment.

Joyce paused to choose her words carefully while stroking her hair. She didn’t want Emily to think she expected disaster, as if she were waiting for it to happen. “I didn’t know anything. I didn’t have any expectations for either of us. All I planned for was being there for you. And, well? Here I am!” She chuckled a little. “You’re my rock, and I’m yours. Lean on me.”

Emily sobbed as she lay there, facing her reality head on.

“It was my first job away from home...! I...I applied out of state then came out here to work...” Forty hours a week, full time employment, benefits; all of it was gone. It’d be one thing to be laid off from some mundane position that didn’t feel like a gaping hole in your work career, but it’s another to lose your lifeline in a strange place far from home with few steady connections.

Joyce nodded her head, continuing to make noises that made it clear she was listening attentively.

“They said they were closing my department indefinitely...” She sniffled. “I can pick up whatever I left at the office tomorrow...”

“Was it all at least on good terms? They can still be used as a reference, right?”

“Yeah, I think so...” Emily sadly spoke. The idea of trying to find a new job was daunting. As said, this was her first away from home. She’d have to start searching the web, find something related to her skills, update her resume...

“I want you to know how proud of you I am,” Joyce said to Emily, holding her close.

“What is there to be proud of...?” Emily sniffled. “All I did was lose my job...!”

“Of no fault of your own?” Joyce reminded her. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Emily. It’s unfortunately just bad luck...” She hated leaving it to superstition. There were obvious reasons for why things were the way they were, but of course Joyce wasn’t in a position to see those reasons, nor did she think that’s what Emily needed to hear.

“It’s just...” she sniffled. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do...!”

“You,” Joyce gently hushed her. “You are going to get a well-deserved rest, and as am I. Then tomorrow we’re gonna wake up, go to your office, get what you need, then get you home so you can destress.”

“No...I can’t do that to you.” Emily moped, wiping her tears. “You already didn’t work today because of your parents.” If her own troubles weren’t enough, the guilt of causing the same for Joyce was worse.

“What do you mean?” Joyce asked with a sense of emotional hurt. “You’re not doing anything to me; I’m just worried about you...”

“Thank you...but tomorrow I’ll go on my own. But, uhm...”

Joyce placed a finger to her lips, with a tender smile. “Already taken care of. I told Charles he should be on standby since yesterday.”

“Th...thank you...”

The room fell quiet once again as they laid there, apart from Emily’s tears. Although, she was trying to make an earnest effort in shushing herself.

“You know it’s okay to let it all out, right?” Joyce smiled. “If you have any more you want to get out of your system, that’s perfectly alright.”

Emily didn’t give much for words other than the squint of her eyes as they started to water again. It quickly became a muffled sob as she was once more tight in Joyce’s arms. All the while her

rock looked down at her so fondly, but of course with troves of care and concern backing her every affection.

“And here...” Joyce leaned in, pressing her lips on Emily’s forehead. “One magic charm for a good night’s sleep. On the house!”

The odd transition was enough to stun Emily’s tears for a moment, enough that she giggled a small bit before going back to her tears.

Joyce did look up at the ceiling with a slight bit of uncertainty.

For now, I suppose we may have to consider what a new normal looks like for us...