



# In Tuna and Time

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Jennifer picked at the tuna steak, her fork splitting apart the white, fleshy layers.

“You don’t like it,” Ben said.

She shrugged.

“It’s okay.”

He kept watching her, watching the way she judged the meal with her eyes, inspecting every trivial detail. He never cooked fish before. He never even used to cook at all—Jen used to—but for the past few months he’d started dinner every time they’d eaten at home.

“Too fat?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“That doesn’t matter. My mom always said ‘the more fat, the more flavor.’” She gave a sort of sad, wry smile, like there was some ironic joke inside her mind that no one else knew about.

“Because that tells me so much.” He leaned back in his chair bitterly, arms folded across his stomach.

Jennifer rolled her eyes. “Stop being such a baby. Really. It’s fine, okay?”

“Seriously, Jen?” he sighed, irritated. She watched him, only slightly puzzled. “You always say everything’s fine. Even when it isn’t.” He took a bite of the tuna steak, held back a face, and set his fork back down. “*Clearly.*”

Jen dropped her fork so it clamored noisily on the plate. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

He looked at her. “Do you really need to ask that?”

She raised her eyebrows, giving him a look as if to say “yes”.

“You’re never open with me anymore. You come home, go to your room, lock the door, and I don’t see you until I make dinner. Which you never eat.” He held up the plate with one hand. “Tell me. Is—this—good. Be completely honest, Jen. I know it’s hard for you. Especially since you’re, you know, not really used to talking to me. I expect it kills you just to sit down with me at the same table.”

Her mouth dropped open and her brow slanted downward.

“Nothing to say?” he asked. “Why am I not surprised.”

There was an uncomfortable pause. Ben looked down at his plate as if he considered eating again.

“I—I can’t believe you,” she finally stammered. “You’re upset with me because I like a little distance?”

“Ha. A *little* distance?”

“Well, god Ben. I’m sorry I actually have work-related things that I have to do. Sorry I don’t have time to indulge all the time. God forbid I make sure our world keeps spinning.”

“That’s the thing. Our world *isn’t* spinning. Not anymore.”

“We’re fine! I’m fine, you’re fine, the damn fish is fine! You make a hell of a dinner, Ben. Good job. Is that what you want to hear? It’s fine.”

“Then why do I have to initiate everything all time?”

“Because—”

She stopped. Ben stared at her. Her small mouth closed, soft lips pressing together. Ben finally blinked.

“Because?” he asked.

Jennifer picked up her fork again with one hand and took a bite of the fish. Ben watched her jaw work, her face contort as she worked the small bite she had taken. She elongated her neck to let the food pass through and took a small sip of water. She glanced over to Ben.

“It’s dry.”

Ben watched the hot water flow over his hands as he rinsed a plate off, suds funneling rapidly down the metallic sink. He offered to do the dishes. The couple had finished the rest of the meal in a mutual silence, and Jen had gotten up to clean up. Ben told her to go back to work. He would take care of it. She complied, uttering a small ‘thanks’ before returning to her room, the door closing just as easily as ever.

He stared at the plate, watching the small droplets *drip drip* off. There. He set it on a spread out towel, soaking through the checkered pattern. Next dish. *Scrub scrub swirl*. He washed them all in the same fashion, in the same predetermined configuration: two circles on the inside, once around the rim, and a quick swipe on the outside—like he used to when he washed dishes for the local restaurant back in high school. When he was making five bucks an hour and love was a shared feeling.

Ben sighed.

He leaned the new plate against the one he had just cleaned, propping his arms on the sink and looking at his reflection in the window in front of him.

It started to fog up and he turned off the water.

Jen stared at the screen in front of her. No, that wasn't quite right. Delete. Delete. Delete. She read over the words again.

*But he didn't know how she felt. No one did. But didn't they deserve to know? At least he did, right? No, the girl thought. But maybe she was just being selfish...*

Her long fingers gripped her hair. They would look so much more natural at a piano than a typewriter. But they didn't fit there. Right now they fit in her hair, close to her brain, as if tugging at the strands would pull up some thoughts from her head. Maybe something worth writing about.

Jen took the mouse and highlighted the words in front of her. She hit the backspace button. Then the x in the corner of the screen. Did she want to save this document?

No.

It was one o' clock in the morning. Past midnight. Ben stared at the burning red numbers. One o' clock. How lonely one o' clock looked. Twelve sounded busy enough, two at least had another number in addition to the original one.

He rolled onto his back, eyes boring into the ceiling. Sometimes the paint on the bedroom ceiling looked like there were multi-colored vortexes floating down from above. Maybe one day he would be sucked up in one of these vortexes. Maybe he didn't get enough sleep. He glanced over to the pillow beside him.

Ben got out of bed.

The television spoke softly, like a hypnotist might to a patient. Ben walked just as softly as the television talked, careful not to disturb the veil of quiet. He cleared his throat.

"You coming to bed?" he asked. "Honey."

Jen stirred from her side. She was watching a movie. Maybe *The Notebook*. Maybe not.

"Hmm?"

"You coming to bed," he said again.

"Oh." Jen turned her attention back to the screen. The woman in the movie was in the arms of an army officer, spreading kisses all over his face. "Maybe in a little."

Ben didn't respond. He started paying more attention to the screen. The officer had knelt down on the ground. There was a ring in his hand.

"Life's not like a movie," he observed.

"No..." Jen agreed. "No, it's not." She turned her attention back to the screen.

"Did you think of that before you married me?" he asked.

She looked back at him, broken-in pajamas hanging carelessly onto her body. She wore a simple t-shirt and saggy sweatpants like a supermodel might.

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“Of course I did.”

Ben’s mouth made as if to open, but remained pressed into a line.

“I knew—know—that relationships aren’t perfect. Things change. Nothing ever stays the same,” she said.

Ben frowned.

“Maybe for you.”

He looked away from her. Sometimes Jen looked at him as if she could probe into his mind.

“Ben...” she trailed off, as though finding it difficult to pull together the correct words. “I still love you.”

He shook his head.

“I’m not asking—”

“No. I want you to know that. I really care about you. Really. I cared about you when I married you, and I care about you now. But things are different. *You* are different. We’re not the same people.”

“I was gone for nine months, Jen. Not nine years.”

“Still.”

“I *want* us to be the same.”

“But we’re not. You can’t just force something that’s not there.”

“Not there?”

Silence. The couple on the television screen was running up a long dirt driveway together, the officer scooping up his new wife and hugging her to his body when they reached the porch.

“That’s not what I meant—not exactly.”

Ben rubbed at his eyes. “Then please explain to me. I’m trying to understand here.”

“It’s not that we’re completely different. I just don’t feel as close, I guess. We’ve changed. Time does that. Nine months might not seem like long, but those small changes that happen every day build up.” She paused. “If you had stayed here, we would’ve gone through them together. But—you left.”

“It’s not like I wanted to.”

“But you *did*. You signed up for this.”

He threw up his arms. “I had no *choice!*”

“Yes you did! You *chose* to leave me.” She became more emotional. “*Leave me! Do*

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you even know how much that hurt, Ben?”

“Jennifer, I couldn’t help it.” His eyes were begging, creases forming on his forehead. “How was I supposed to know they’d send me partway across the world?”

She made an odd, exasperated sound. “I don’t know. Maybe when you signed up. Five years ago. Remember that?”

“You said you were okay with it,” he argued, blood beginning to throb uncomfortably in his veins.

“I didn’t know then.” There was an unusual desperation in her voice, like she was barely clinging onto something. “I didn’t know—”

“You said YES when I asked you to marry me. You said YES when that fucking priest asked you *until death do you part*. Didn’t you know what you signed up for?”

“Ben...”

Were those tears in her eyes? She looked at him with this *emotion*. Ben could never quite figure out exactly what it was. He kept his gaze on her, determined not to look away. She would not break him. *Not...*

She started again, shaky now. “Be—”

“—Jennifer, please.” He was the one pleading, now. “Just...stop.” He shook his head. Jen sat on the couch, sniffing in and tugging at her discolored white shirt.

“You left me. I was heartbroken—I know you ‘couldn’t help it’,” she added when Ben tried to interrupt, “—but I focused all my energy into my work. I guess I— I just have different priorities now.”

The corners of Ben’s mouth tugged downward. He nodded his head slowly, reluctantly, thoughtfully.

The credits started rolling onto the screen.

“So you’re not coming to bed then?” he asked.

Jennifer lifted her gaze, eyes a set of sad, searching orbs. She choked back a sob and pulled relentlessly at her night shirt. Salty liquid fell from her face.

“Are you?”

A small sniff.

“...Jen?”

The look on her face gave away the answer before she even shook her head.

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married her husband in the summer of 2011, she has continued to write under her name of birth.

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