

# **Slip of the Mind**



**by**

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I was sifting through the racks of clothes at Macy's when a round woman approached me and asked, "Excuse me, could you help me find this sweater in a double XL?"

"Did you check behind the stack of sweaters? Sometimes they hide back there." I said.

"I did. Could you check the back, maybe you all have some more?" she dangled the fuzzy brown sweater in front of me. I wanted to advise the woman she'd look like a ripe kiwi if she squeezed into one.

"I sure can." I took the sweater and walked off.

I passed through our bed and bath section. The aisle of mega-magnified mirrors was hard to stay away from, looking into the LED lights was like staring straight up at the sun. As I looked into the light I saw my skin was like paper, creased, flaked, and colorless. My worry-lines made a map of my face that I didn't care to follow. My hair fell by my sunken cheeks and looked as soft as a new broom. Was 65 the new 85? When had I gotten so damn old?

I peeled my eyes from the LED lights and squinted beyond the floating blur spots at a Back-to-School display. Was it already that time of year? I could've sworn it was just Easter. A mistake had obviously been made, so I went to take down the mannequins and redress them in pastels when my manager walked up behind me.

"Jeanne, you need to leave." She said, in her nasal voice.

"Why? Is it time for my break?" I put the bare bodied boy down.

"We've been over this, you don't work here anymore. You can't keep coming in here like this." She bent at the knees and picked up the brown sweater off the ground. Shoot, that woman was still waiting.

"I most certainly do work here. I've been here for way longer than you have, missy." I said, louder than I meant to, and snatched the sweater back. A few customers had crowded around us to watch, and a little girl pointed a sticky finger at the naked mannequin.

"We let you go a few months ago. I'm sorry, but you have to leave. And give me that badge. Wait, how do you even have that?" She signaled with her eyebrows at my chest.

I looked down at the badge pinned to my shirt with the name ‘Stacy’ on it. I must have gotten it switched with someone else’s.

“Forget it! Just give me the badge, and leave.” She held her hand out.

“I will most certainly be speaking with HR about this!” I yanked the badge from my shirt, ripping a hole, and clapped it into her hand. I stormed off with the hideous brown sweater, setting off the store’s security alarm.

I walked across the parking lot back to my car. My purse was in the passenger’s seat. I shoved my hand through receipts and ketchup packets, pulled out my phone and dialed my sister Gale. If anyone could cheer me up, it would be her.

She answered right away.

“Hi Gale, it's Jeanne.” I cupped my hand over my mouth to speak.

“I know, Jeannie. How are you? What’s wrong?”

“They just kicked me out of Macy’s! Can you believe that crap?”

“Jeanne,” she sighed and a gush of sound attacked my ear, “they let you go a few months ago.”

“What! No, no way. I am a *great* employee, I’m always on time, and always have a smile on my face. Do you know how many times I’ve had a customer get snappy with me and I had to bite my tongue? Imagine *me*, of all people—” I raised my eyebrows.

“I know, I know. Listen, I’m with Mia right now, but if you drive to your house, I can meet you there. Are you okay to drive?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” I adjusted the rearview mirror and waited until the pine air freshener stopped swinging to pull out.

I was sitting in the leather recliner, staring out the front bay window when Gale pulled up. She came inside with empty cardboard boxes and a grocery bag. She had on capris and a Ralph Lauren floral print blouse that clung too tightly to her sides.

“Don’t you think that shirt’s a little tight?” I asked.

“Um,” she looked down at the misshapen flowers. “I brought you some boxes for the move. I also figured you wouldn’t feel like cooking dinner so I got you a rotisserie chicken.”

“Those chickens are always so damn greasy, don’t you think?”

“Aren’t you hot in here? It’s about a hundred degrees outside.” Gale fanned herself with her hand.

I guess it was rather stuffy. I stayed seated and Gale poured us both a glass of water.

She swiped some empty Diet Cola cans off the couch and sat in their place across from my reclining chair. “So when do you think you’ll start packing up your things?” she asked.

“My things?” I looked around at the mounds of wrinkled clothes on the floor, mismatching Tupperware piled on the coffee table, and dirty tissues peeking out from under the couch. I guess I should tidy up some. There was a silence, so I defaulted to asking how my niece Mia was doing. Gale could go on *forever* about Mia.

“She’s great, her boss likes her and she’s doing great.” A much shorter response than I expected.

“And Marty?” I sipped the lukewarm water. It was metallic.

“He passed away a few months ago.” She said, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, my.” I thought she would’ve been more distressed about losing her husband. I don’t even remember being invited to the funeral.

“I’m worried about you.” She scooted to the edge of the couch and some more cans fell.

“You don’t have to worry about me, I’m fine all on my own, thank you very much.” I tried to sit up straighter but my shoulders resisted.

“Jeannie, hun, do you remember what happened earlier today?”

I took another sip of water. Metal.

“Your run-in at Macy’s?”

“I was here all day, I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I forgot why Gale was even here, had I called her to come over?

Gale pushed her fists into the couch, thrusting upward. “Care for some chicken?” Ah, that’s right. She was here to bring me dinner. I watched her carve some white meat and skin onto a plate and told me she had to get going.

I dozed off in my reclining chair and when I woke up, I didn’t know if it was night or day. My skin felt like dried glue around my nostrils. I was sweating profusely. The TV was on full blast: *Now in her 60’s, her skin looks better than ever. What’s her secret? Introducing Christie Brinkley authentic skincare. The only skin care system proven to reverse and prevent the top five signs of aging.* I looked at my arms and traced the liver spots down to my crooked knuckles and bulging veins, when had I gotten so damn old?

I must have fallen asleep again because a while later I was woken up by the house phone.

“Hi there, this is Ken Jones, your real estate agent.” His voice was high pitched, and he enunciated his t’s. Probably a homosexual.

“I’m sorry, you have the wrong number.” I didn’t have a real estate agent.

“Actually, we’ve spoken before. I was hired by your ex-husband, Ed, to sell your house.”

“Sell my...what? I’m not selling this house. This is my house.”

“Now, Mrs. Davis...” he continued like a condescending schoolteacher, “you tend to, well, forget things. Ed told me to remind you to look on the fridge for the paperwork from last time.”

I reluctantly shuffled into the kitchen. Sure enough, on the fridge stuck under a Niagara Falls magnet was the paperwork. I mouthed the words, ‘Sale of Marital Residence Included in Divorce Decree.’ Wasn’t a decree something kings did in Medieval times?

He broke the long silence, “Can I swing by later to go over this again in person maybe?”

Sometime later, Ken Jones dropped by.

He had flawlessly groomed eyebrows, not a hair was out of line, and a slim-fit navy blue suit. Ah yes, the homosexual real estate agent. “Hello Mrs. Davis, my name is Ken Jones, we spoke earlier on the phone?”

I let him into the kitchen and became acutely aware of how cluttered the house was. I inhaled must and mold. A rotisserie chicken was on the counter and gnats buzzed in and out of the greasy container, it must have been there for days.

“I’m sorry about the mess, work has me so busy sometimes.” I rested my hands on my hips.

Ken looked around the corner at the toppling Tupperware in the next room. “I think it would be best to set up a meeting with Ed, to further discuss the logistics of selling *this*.” He leaned back on his heels like if he had stepped in dog crap.

“Selling? A meeting? With Ed? Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t...” I took a step back and felt small and irrationally angry. I completely forgot the last time I had seen Ed in person.

I remembered the day Ed and I met, I was working at a Dairy Queen and he came in twice a day for a mint Blizzard. He swore he blew through his savings just to come in and talk to me. Then, I remembered the day he asked me to marry him. It was Valentine’s Day, and I was upset that he had picked that night to do it. The next forty-one years were some of the best—and worst—days of my life. I remembered the moment the doctor broke the news that I was infertile. The one thing that a woman was best at doing, and I couldn’t do it. I remembered the silence that came after that, the deafening lull that echoed through our empty, childless home. After that our

marriage was functional, but it had lost its meaning. We had always done alright for ourselves, he was a car salesman, which I never did like, and I had made Stay-at-Home-Wife my career. In my fifties, though, I took up a part-time job at Macy's to keep busy. I remembered our mundane schedules, the repetitiveness of marriage is enough to drive anyone insane. Then, I remembered the nights he'd get home after ten o'clock, with Estee Lauder Eau de Parfum lingering on his neck. That scent I knew well, I had had to offer sample sprays of it every morning on the sales floor. I remembered the night I finally saw it with my own eyes, another woman's hands down my Ed's pants in my own living room.

"I know you haven't been in contact, or seen him since your last meeting with the lawyers," I didn't recall having a lawyer, we weren't the kind of people who *had* lawyers, "but," he continued, "it has come to our attention that you are unable to care for a house of this size on your own."

"Un...able...?" I whispered, "This is my house, this is my house." I grabbed onto the fridge handle. My bones felt unbearably heavy and my mouth fell open, gulping in more musty air.

"I realize how difficult this all must be for you, but if you recall," he took out a stack of papers from his briefcase, "the agreement was that you find your footing after the divorce, and then you all would sell the house and split the profit from the sale. Granted," he continued with his teeth shut, "Ed was the one who paid the mortgage and increased the equity in doing so, so the division wouldn't exactly be—"

"And when would this meeting be?" I snatched the papers from his hand. Sale of Marital Residence Included in Divorce Decree. Wasn't a decree something kings did in Medieval times?

"Umm, the sooner the better, we need to get the ball rolling. So I'd say, in two weeks? Just so you have enough time to...spruce up." He wiped a drop of sweat from his unblemished brow with his pinky in the air.

"In two weeks? Two weeks. What's today?" I went up to the NRA calendar stuck to the fridge. I remembered for years they sent us magazines and crap every single week until I finally called and gave them a piece of my mind.

“Today is the 11<sup>th</sup>.” He glanced down at a watch that was far too big for his wrist. “So two weeks would be Wednesday the 25<sup>th</sup>.”

“Wednesday the 25<sup>th</sup>, Ed on Wednesday the 25<sup>th</sup>.” I mouthed.

As soon as Ken Jones left, I got a trash bag out. I scooped up soggy tissues, bleached-blond hair wads, and plucked fingernail clippings out of the maroon shag rug. I called Gale to let her know what was going on, I was sure she’d be happy to hear I was cleaning my house.

Gale answered right away.

“Hi Gale, it’s Jeanne.” I cupped my hand over my mouth.

“Is everything okay?”

“I’m cleaning my house, I realized what a pigsty it was.” I laughed.

“That’s good to hear, real good.” She was disinterested, as usual.

“Anyways, I got a visit from Ken Jones, the real estate agent,” I held up his business card. “Apparently—and this is going to shock you—Ed and I are selling the house! Can you believe that cockamamie?”

“Well,” she swallowed, “I know you all had agreed on that earlier this year.”

“Wait, you knew about this?”

“Yes, we’ve known since April.” She spoke slowly.

“So you knew before I did?” I clenched my fist.

“You’ve known about it too, Jeannie. I guess you just forgot.” Gale lowered her voice.

“Well if I did forget, and I doubt I could forget I was selling my own home, don’t you think it would’ve been nice to *remind* your own goddamned sister she was selling her house?” I slammed my fist on the counter.

“Listen,” she elongated the ‘n’, “We didn’t want you to worry. Ed told me he was going to reach out to you. I guess his way of reaching out was sending the agent over.”



“You’ve been talking to Ed?”

“He just wants to know how you’re doing. He’s worried about you.”

“So it was *you* that told them I’m unable to care for my home, wasn’t it? Have you been talking to his whore too?” I swatted the chicken carcass off the counter and watched the grease crawl through the grout between the tiles.

“Stop it! Jeanne, stop it! I’m sorry, I really am, but your memory has gotten worse and worse, and pretty soon you won’t be able to live on your own. Don’t you get that?”

“So much for being by my side. You’re a miserable excuse for a sister.” I let the phone fall from my hand.

I sat back in the reclining chair for what felt like a few days. When I woke, it took me a few tries to stand up. I patted my crotch and it was soaked. I looked back at the cushion and it shined with urine. I was disgusted that I had made such a mess in my chair. I saw the house phone on the kitchen floor along with a reeking chicken carcass and Ken Jones’s business card. Ah, that reminded me, I have a meeting with Ed. I picked up the phone and dialed my sister Gale.

“Hi Gale, it’s Jeanne.” I cupped my hand over my mouth and got a whiff of chicken grease and pee.

“I know.”

“I got a visit from Ken Jones, the real estate agent,” I picked up the business card. “Apparently—and this is going to shock you—Ed and I are selling the house! Can you believe that cockamamie?”

“I know, you called me yesterday about this.”

“Oh, I did? Huh. I guess I did.”

“You also said some horrible things.”

“Well, I don’t remember why I would say such things. You do have the tendency to be oversensitive. But, I am sorry you were upset by me.”

“Thanks.”

“How about I bake you a cake? You can come over and we’ll make up over my famous carrot cake.” After a pause, I continued, “Could you come over tomorrow night? I’ll have the place all cleaned up and a moist carrot cake waiting for ya.”

I remembered when Gale and I were kids, we’d beg our momma to let us wear her aprons and heels. We would scurry around the kitchen banging on pots and pans pretending to bake up a storm. Then our older brother Bobby would come in and pull our ponytails until we’d chase him around in our big girl shoes. We were always close, and we were always baking. When Bobby died in a car accident, baking was all Gale and I could do to keep our minds off him. We’d fill our kitchen with pies and cakes then stare at them until they went stale.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Oh, c’mon. Just like old times.”

She sighed, “I’ll be over tomorrow.” She hung up before I could say more.

I set the oven to preheat and combined brown sugar, flour, cinnamon and walnuts in a mixing bowl. Then I remembered, I didn’t have any eggs, so I left to the grocery store.

At the grocery store, I noticed the Back-to-School specials plastered everywhere. I could’ve sworn it was just Easter. I picked up a rotisserie chicken, for some reason I was craving it. Then I got some butter, I know I always need butter.

When I got back to the house it was horribly hot inside, and I noticed a mixing bowl full of sugar and a cake tin. The cake! Then I remembered, I didn’t have any eggs. So I left to the grocery store. At the grocery store, I picked up some potato salad and a pack of butter, because I know I always need butter.

When I got back to the house the air was heavy. I saw a mixing bowl and a cake tin by the stove, then I remembered I was baking a cake. I went to the fridge and got out eggs, butter, and vanilla extract. I mixed in the wet with the dry ingredients and poured the batter into a cake tin. I put the tin on the top rack of the oven and returned to the reclining chair to wait. My eyelids got heavier and harder to hold open, I rested my face on my shoulder let sleep take me over.

“IS ANYONE INSIDE? CAN YOU HEAR ME? IS ANYONE INSIDE?”

I peeled open my eyes and they were assaulted with smoke. I hacked up dry spit as I tried to respond to the desperate calls. I felt the unbearable heat coming from the kitchen. I fell to my knees and crawled around with my hand out in front of me, reaching for a way out.

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I woke up in a reclining chair, and The Price’s Right was on the TV in front of me. I traced my breathing tube down to my blistered palms and brittle nails. When had I gotten so damn old?

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Davis,” a man walked into the room with a tray of food.

“Are you Ken James, my real estate agent?” He had really let his eyebrows go.

“No ma’am, I’m just here to bring you your lunch.” He placed a sandwich, applesauce, and a slice of carrot cake down on the side table.

“Well apparently—and this is going to shock you—Ed and I are selling the house! Can you believe that cockamamie?”

“Crazy stuff, huh?” he smiled and closed the door behind him.