

Dis grace ful

An illustration on a teal background. A glass of pink liquid with a lime wedge is tipped over, spilling the liquid onto a red surface below. A string of white beads with a gold cross hangs from the right side of the text.

Sometimes bad decisions
are the best ones you can make

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1

shiny happy

This morning started the same way most weekday mornings have started for as long as I can remember, which makes it sound boring, but there's something to be said for predictability. It was an early winter Tuesday, which meant thirty chilly laps in the Icebergs pool, followed immediately by a 7 am yoga class on the deck to warm up, while Daniel worked out whatever demons he needed to work out on a nearby squash court.

I know it's odd talking about demons when my husband is *you know who* – but anybody who plays any kind of racquet sport will tell you it's saved them a mint in therapy. Besides, being responsible for the moral compass of an entire congregation is not without its stresses.

I'd sealed my yoga practice with my hands to prayer and a deep exhale, face upturned to the sun as the instructor brought the class to a close. Rolling my mat up, I'd glanced to my left. Lucinda hadn't even broken a sweat, but I guess that's to be expected when you're barely forty.

'How are you as fresh as a daisy after that many downward dogs when I look like a tomato?'

Lucinda had stood, deftly wrapping her hair into a topknot. 'Stop it. You always look immaculate.' We'd fallen into step, heading

for the exit. ‘Speaking of immaculate, are you wearing something fabulous tonight? I can’t believe the concert’s being televised. Are you nervous?’

‘I’m not the one who has to deliver a sermon to potentially hundreds of thousands of people.’ I’d shrugged. ‘I’ve been too busy with the conference program to think about clothes, to be honest.’ *That’s a lie.* ‘Nobody’ll be looking at me anyway.’ *Also a lie.* ‘I’m focused on making sure everything runs smoothly for Daniel – no hiccups.’ I must have seemed worried because she’d peered at me, squeezing my arm.

‘If it runs anything like this week has, I’ve no doubt it’ll be perfect, Grace. You two are like a well-oiled machine. It’s been months since any of us have spent any real time with you.’

‘I know.’ I’d shaken out the tension knotting my shoulders. So much for yoga relaxing you. ‘I’m so out of the loop. Sorry I haven’t been around.’

Lucinda had touched my arm. ‘Don’t be silly. You’re a literal rock any other time of year. I don’t know what we’d all do without you.’ Then she’d laughed. ‘Now, let me see, what earth-shatteringly important things have you missed? Tom got his promotion – which is just as well. Celia’s pregnant again . . .’

I’d pressed a hand to my chest. ‘Praise the Lord. Another miracle baby.’

‘I’d pray for a nanny if I were her. Four kids?’ Then she’d gasped, ‘Ooh, you know Peter and Monica’s boy – Felix? In trouble at St. Benedict’s again. Bullying this time.’ She’d shot me a knowing look. ‘Of course, they’re denying it.’

‘Where there’s smoke—’ I’d felt guilty for gossiping; it wasn’t exactly charitable. But I’ve been living and breathing our annual church conference for the better part of five months, with this year’s

the biggest it's ever been, so it was nice to know what was going on with my friends, even if it was second-hand.

'Before I forget, dinner on Sunday is at Todd and Glenda's, not Sam and Tara's, because the plumbing in their kitchen is broken. The garbage disposal is giving off a God-awful smell.' She'd wrinkled her nose. 'Excuse the blasphemy. Anyway—' Before Lucinda could continue, a sweaty face had appeared in my eyeline.

'Happy birthday, Grace.' Ben – a class regular with acne-pocked skin and dreadlocks – beamed at me. He was also shirtless and somewhat pungent. *Behold a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.'*

'Thanks, Ben, you're so sweet—'

'You don't look a day over twenty-five.'

'—and going straight to hell for lying. How's your sister doing? Did you manage to get her in to see Dr Wallace?'

Ben had nodded. 'Dropped your name and *boom* – she had an appointment straight away. She said to say thank you.'

'See . . . a saint,' Lucinda had said, once he was out of earshot. 'You're basically Mother Theresa. I don't know how you do it.'

'Oh, you know, mostly prayer, a lot of faith, and a little caffeine.' Lucinda had raised her eyebrows. 'What am I saying? I'm forty-nine, it's mostly caffeine. But don't tell Daniel I said that.'

She'd made a quick 'my lips are sealed' motion. 'Chris and I will see you both afterwards. There's that wine bar, Veritas, opposite the arena. You deserve to celebrate.' Her expression had shifted – a change so tiny I might have imagined it. 'I hope Daniel appreciates everything you do. He'd better be spoiling you.' Then it was gone. She'd air-kissed my cheeks before peeling off with a breezy, 'Happy birthday, darling.'

I'd blinked at her retreating back, an unexpected lump constricting my throat.

'Shiny Happy People' burbled from the car stereo as I manoeuvred Daniel's Range Rover through traffic, nursing a long black for Daniel and a latte for myself. We always carpool after working out – it's our bit for the environment. Daniel gets picked up from the house before I'm awake by whoever he's playing squash with, and I collect him once I've finished yoga. It's a well-worn routine and the drive gives me a chance to catch up on calls.

'Siri – call Minette.' The phone rang for a second before a harried voice shouted over an alarming amount of noise. It sounded like an engine revving.

'Stars Fold Ministry, God is watching!'

'Minette, it's Grace.'

'Hi, Mrs Miller. Sorry for yelling. I'm down at the loading dock. Everything okay?'

'You tell me.' I'd winced at a metallic screeching sound.

'All good. Bump-in's underway, soundcheck's at two. Mr Miller sent the updated run sheet through overnight.' Minette had hollered again, 'Whoa! You can't do that. It's bloody sacrilegious, mate.' She'd returned to the phone, 'Sorry. Lucky I'm here or the neon Jesus'd be crucified with cable ties.'

I'd fought the urge to ask for details, having made the decision months ago to leave most of the concert logistics to Daniel and Minette and focus on the conference. Short of cloning myself, managing everything would have been impossible, but the lack of control made me twitch. 'What about Pastor Evans?'

‘All settled into his hotel. Sasha’s set to go live on TikTok once everything’s underway.’

‘Who?’

‘Sasha *Mason*,’ she emphasised. I had no clue who she was talking about. ‘The influencer? Almost a million followers?’ Minette had sounded exasperated. ‘She’s performing with the choir . . .’

‘Oh, right.’ The name sounded vaguely familiar. Apparently my patchy memory comes as a package deal with the hot flashes. I’d hoped medication would fix both problems but clearly not. At least I was no longer permanently on fire – small mercies I supposed. I just needed to do something about the intermittent rage. ‘Sorry. I do remember Daniel mentioning her, now that I think about it.’

‘Everything’s under control, don’t worry.’ Her tone was annoyingly placating. A stab of irritation had poked me in the back.

‘You know what they say, Minette,’ I’d snapped. ‘Even the laziest king flees wildly in the face of a double check.’ Now Minette was the one baffled. *Yep. Definitely needed to sort out the whole rage thing.* ‘Look, Daniel will be there after nine. Now the conference has wrapped up, I’m back at the school today . . . but I’ll check in later. The slightest hitch, you call me.’

‘I’m sure we’ll be fine. And Mrs Miller? Happy birth—’

I’d hung up, cutting her off as I pulled up outside the sports centre. Daniel was in his usual spot, juggling a racquet. He’d thrown the door open and folded himself into the car as I’d leaned in, holding out his coffee.

‘Good game, darling?’

Usually Daniel gifts me a sweaty kiss on the cheek and I make a show of wiping my face in disgust. But this morning he’d simply taken his coffee, barely looking up, and started scrolling on his phone.

‘Aren’t you forgetting something?’ I’d probed.

‘No.’ Daniel had glanced at the back seat. ‘I’ve got everything.’ He went back to his phone. ‘Did Minette get the new run sheet?’

‘Sure did.’ I’d hidden my disappointment and pulled away from the kerb.

We wound our way in silence through the traffic towards Vaucluse. Something was definitely up. The morning drive home is usually our scheduled chat time, before the day takes over. It always follows the same pattern. First, Abbey. She calls us regularly to catch us up; her father more than me. I try not to take it personally. Daniel fills me in so it’s not like I’m missing out on anything. She’s a grown woman and she’s busy. I understand what that’s like. It’s fine, really.

Our social circle comes next. All our friends are couples and belong to the church, which makes it easy to keep up with any news. Stars Fold Ministry business typically takes up the rest of the drive – fundraising, hospice visits, the youth group, anything needed for upcoming services. See what I mean – predictable.

I’m not complaining. Our life needs to be organised – regimented, even. It’s a lot of work supporting Daniel’s vision. *Our* vision, I should say. It’s not as though I merely stand by his side looking pretty. Truth be told, if it wasn’t for me – especially in the early years – doing all the admin, taking care of fundraising, staying home with Abbey while Daniel was away on pilgrimages, I doubt we’d be where we are.

Things have sky-rocketed beyond expectation recently, especially with the church’s profile exploding thanks to one of our youth group kids, Jonah, winning *The Voice* last year. It continually astounds me that the tiny community church we founded twenty years ago has grown so much, although I cringe when people call it a ‘mega-church’. It sounds so . . . *American*.

I sometimes wonder whether the kids who bullied me in school have seen our faces plastered on the sides of buses trundling around the city. *Not such a loser now, am I?* I check myself. *Have some humility, Grace. Practise forgiveness.*

Still, I really hope they've seen them.

I'm under no illusion that Daniel is the real shining light, especially to our congregation. He's their pastor after all. But you know what they say: 'Behind every great man—', etc. Although I sometimes wonder whether the second half of that proverb should be '—is a woman who needs to get her own life'.

I'd glanced down at my knuckles. They were white. Loosening my grip, I'd forced my shoulders down. 'I didn't hear you leave this morning.' Daniel hadn't looked up from his phone. Another minute ticked past. 'Do you want to go over tonight's sermon?'

'No.' He'd looked up briefly. 'It's under control.'

'But we always—'

'It's fine, Grace. I've got it.'

I hadn't known what to do with that – apart from wonder what I'd done wrong. It had to be something because – preoccupation aside – Daniel is nothing if not exceptional with dates.

By the time we arrive home, I've run through every possible explanation for why my husband of nearly thirty years hasn't wished me a happy birthday. We drive through a pair of wrought iron gates and pull up outside the house – a seamless union of original art deco sandstone and more recent glass-panelled extensions, all clean lines and hard, glossy surfaces.

As I close the front door, the tiled entrance rings with the sound of Daniel's footsteps on the timber staircase as he takes the stairs

two at a time like a fifteen-year-old basketballer instead of the silver-haired fifty-two-year-old he is. I place my bag down, kick off my sandals, and hang the keys on their usual hook. He's like a tornado lately and I have no idea where he gets his energy. My knees hurt just watching him.

Dexter waddles excitedly out of the kitchen, claws skittering. He bumps against my legs and rolls on his back, tongue lolling. Dexter is nine and – considering that's sixty-three in dog years and golden retrievers are cursed with joint problems – I have more in common with my dog than my husband.

'Meet you down here in twenty for breakfast, then I'll drop you to the school.' Daniel strips off his t-shirt before I have a chance to answer, head down and thumbing his phone as he strides into his bathroom and closes the door.

I scratch Dexter's belly then climb the stairs like a forty-nine-year-old woman who's just taken an intense yoga class and needs a lie down. At the top of the stairs, I turn the opposite way to Daniel and head towards what used to be our room, until Abbey moved out and it became only mine. Daniel chose to move into Abbey's room on account of his snoring, or more specifically my complaining about his snoring, which sounds like a pterodactyl having an asthma attack. I like to think God guided his disciple into a separate room because, if he hadn't, I might have stabbed Daniel in his sleep by now, and then where would we be?

It's not like our sex life has suffered. Mainly because we don't have one. Sex has never been the driver of our relationship and things petered out completely years ago. I'm not one of those women who need passionate lovemaking to know my relationship is solid. Our marriage is built on a foundation of mutual respect,

shared goals and parenting our daughter. The important things. It's not perfect, but what marriage is?

I close the door, slip out of my tracksuit and pad into the bathroom. The air still holds a chill, and the tiles are frigid underfoot. My skin erupts in goosebumps. Regardless, I swivel the tap to the left until icy needles shoot from the showerhead, making me gasp. I read once that a cold shower improves circulation and skin elasticity, and you'd have to think every bit helps once you reach a certain age. Between this and the ocean laps, I should be positively prepubescent.

I towel off and line up what Daniel calls my 'cauldron'; A complex collection of serums and creams – patented repair this, vitamin C that, AHAs, some French moisturiser with algae that's approximately the price of a flat screen TV, and enough retinol to skin a cat – all of which *has* to be applied in a very particular order, some in the morning, some at night, but every day without fail. Otherwise, my skin will apparently dry up like some kind of decrepit lizard and peel right off.

Then there's the army of tablets tasked with trying to keep this body working the way it's supposed to. Omega 3, vitamin B complex, evening primrose oil, glucosamine and turmeric for my joints, and magnesium to help the muscle cramps. And let's not forget the HRT. It's a wonder I don't rattle when I walk.

I smooth moisturiser across my cheeks, unable to resist pulling the skin back in front of my ears. The corners of my mouth lift – only a fraction, but enough that I'm dissatisfied when I let go. It's ridiculous, I know, but it's part of the deal. We are the faces of Stars Fold Ministry. It comes with expectations – constantly *on*, constantly smiling – and more than a little effort. Daniel says people look to us for hope, as proof that a life lived with God brings you joy. Which is

a lot of pressure because, to be honest, this face does not look joyful when left to its own devices. Unfortunately, that's not something Botox can fix.

I straighten a photograph of Abbey on the dresser. It was taken on her eleventh birthday, at the skating rink in Penrith. She'd been obsessed with rollerskating for months and had insisted on a roller disco party, despite my safety concerns and doubts I'd be able to convince the other St. Agnes' parents to trek all the way to the Western suburbs for a Woolworths mud cake, 80s music and the prospect of bruises. I told Abbey it was about the driving distance but really it was because I found it hard to go back there. Too many memories I wanted to avoid.

Trying to convince her a pool party would be just as much fun didn't work. Abbey was desperate to see her cousins and I knew there was no way Liz would bring the boys over this way. She always said Vaucluse 'smelled like money and bullshit'. In the end, I refused to be drawn into the inevitable drama of passive-aggressive hurt feelings and thinly veiled accusations of snobbery from my family if I said no. It was easier to agree and bite my tongue.

In the photo, her blonde hair is tied into a side ponytail and she's wearing a pink t-shirt with bumblebee leggings. She's mid-skate, glitter gel sparkling on her flushed cheeks, her grin marred by two missing teeth. It was a happy moment, but I also remember the tears that book-ended the day.

As we got ready to leave for the rink, Abbey had asked if she looked pretty. I'd given my usual answer, the one I thought led to self-assurance and a grounded perspective. I told her there were things far more valuable than being pretty. Mainly that she was clever and kind and funny.

Abbey had promptly burst into tears. It took us a while to coax what was wrong out of her, but finally she'd whispered, 'You say that every time.'

'Because it's true, sweetheart.'

Abbey had scrubbed at her face, spreading glitter up her arms. 'It's because I'm ugly, isn't it?'

'What?' I'd reeled back, alarmed. 'No. Abbey, you're not ugly. Don't be silly. Where is this coming from?'

'You never tell me I'm pretty.'

I'd exchanged a worried look with Daniel, and he'd stood up.

'I might leave you girls to it.' He'd kissed Abbey's head. 'You are the prettiest girl in the entire world.' She'd looked up at him gratefully as he left the room and I squashed a flicker of annoyance. I'd turned Abbey to me and cupped her chin, gently forcing her to look at me. How could I have been so stupid?

'You're so much more than just pretty, honey.' Her forehead crinkled as she searched my face, looking for a scrap of validation that shouldn't matter, but clearly did.

'If it's not important, why do you try so hard to look nice all the time?'

I didn't have an answer.

Later that day, after too many party pies, a frenetic game of Red Rover and 'Stupid Girls' by P!nk on repeat, there were more tears. This time due to a physical fracture instead of an emotional one. As the doctor set Abbey's wrist at the hospital, the day's guilt was cemented into my own bones.

Abbey's twenty-eight now and a solicitor. The years in between have slipped through my fingers. One minute Abbey was mucking around with Play-Doh, the next she was mooning over boys; now she's expertly juggling a heavy case load and a somewhat robotic

fiancé named Tobias, who under no circumstances should we *ever* call Toby.

She says she's happy and perhaps she is. I don't think she'd tell me if she wasn't. I should be proud. She's worked hard and accomplished so much. But I can't help thinking I dropped the ball somehow.

There's no time to blow out the mess yoga has made of my hair, so I scrape it back into a tight bun. I stare at myself in the mirror. *Forty-nine*. How did that happen?

'Alexa, play "Morning Affirmations".'

'Now playing "Morning Affirmations".'

I count vitamins into handfuls as ethereal music and a disembodied voice fill the room. I wash the first lot down, gagging slightly.

'I am grateful for the blessings in my life.'

'I am grateful for the blessings in my life.' I repeat the mantras with as much conviction as I can through mouthfuls of coated capsules. 'God provides everything I need.' Another mouthful. 'I am aligned with my higher purpose.'

'I am worthy and I am loved.'

My conviction wanes. 'I am worthy and I am loved.'

'My life is a complete success.'

'My life is a complete . . .' I look down at my wedding ring as I lift it from the soap dish and slide it on, 'success'. I twist it absently, unable to fight the gnawing sensation in my stomach. Then something inside me snaps. I fix my reflection with a hard look. *Get it together, Grace. You're being ridiculous. God has more than looked after you. You have everything you ever wanted. You chose this, so suck it up.*

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. When I open them, I force a smile until it almost reaches my eyes. *Okay, Grace – reset. Nothing is wrong, you're imagining things. It's probably your silly hormones.*

I keep the internal pep talk going. Maybe Daniel's planning something for my birthday and wants me to *think* he's forgotten. He's probably downstairs right this second making me a birthday breakfast.

Smile plastered on, I push aside the plastic-wrapped dress hanging ready for tonight and duck into the walk-in, dressing quickly. Black pants, a grey t-shirt and ballet flats – I always dress down on the days I'm at the school. I never know what kind of mess I'm going to get into and it's best to be prepared. Pausing at the door, I square my shoulders and take another deep breath, willing myself to believe that it's going to be a blessed day.

I trot eagerly down the stairs and find Daniel waiting in the entrance way, jingling the car keys. He's edgy, and I can't put my finger on whether it's nerves or excitement. I stop on the bottom step and eye him cautiously. 'I thought we were having breakfast before we left?'

'I said "meet you down here in twenty", Grace. That was nearly forty minutes ago. I honestly don't know why getting ready takes you so long. It's not like you need to do much; you always look great.' I stare at him, caught off guard by the unexpected compliment, and he blinks as though equally surprised. 'Besides, I've already eaten.'

'Oh.'

'There's still some bacon left if you're hungry. But you'll have to grab it to go, I need to be at the conference centre by 9.30 and if I'm dropping you at the school first—'

I consider the bacon, then remember someone telling me once that TV cameras add five kilos. 'No, that's fine. We can—'

'Okay, great. Let's go.'