

25 - Home Again, Home Again

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They stood in a square formation, one pair parallel to the other. Two with awkward expressions, and the other with surprised. One of the four however was covered in a bit more dirt than the others...

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Frank finally broke the silence between the four. “But I think someone did have *too* much fun...”

The next response was Emily spurring a giggle from her mouth, even though she wasn't too pleased with herself either. Mary simply watched with a raised brow, and by chance Joyce happened to catch her eye a few times.

“Petting zoo?”

Joyce was starting to look a little bashful. “Uh-huh...” In retrospect, this probably wasn't going to look good in front of her mom.

“Were the piglets fun to pet, at least?”

“Pig...? Oh! Yeah, they were a little hyper though.” Emily had quickly forgotten Joyce's white lie, and by this point her cover-up was so weak, it was wasted energy to even try.

“Emily,” Mary looked as if she were holding back a smirk. “I...think you maybe played a little too hard with the animals...”

“They're the ones that played with me!” Apparently being an animal herself is where she drew the line. “Joyce gave me a bunch of food to feed them, but then they knocked me over and ate it all.” Ridiculous, she knew, which is why she was trying to choke down a laugh.

“So *you* instigated this?” Mary accused, looking right at her daughter. Everyone was still in a good mood, but there was nothing like lighthearted tension to keep the party afoot.

“I didn’t plan for her to get knocked over! It’s not like I *wanted* her to get dirty!” Just for good measure she tried to play with a few spots on Emily’s dress again, hoping she could get a small bit of dirt out of it.

Frank came over to brush some leftover dirt off of Emily’s hair. “Hmm. Well, while Emily gets cleaned off back at the house, how about we brainstorm what we’ll do for dinner then?”

“I think I could go for takeout.” Joyce stretched her arms. “Just a thought, though!” Whenever her parents were around, it especially made her want to be lax with her food choices. High dining had already become less frequent now that Emily was in the picture, so the occasional visit from her parents only added to that.

“Takeout doesn’t sound bad?” Frank looked to his wife with a shrug.

“That should be fine. That way Emily can work at her own pace in the bathroom,” Mary agreed, but Emily started to feel a little guilty now that her needs were being taken into account. Still, takeout did sound good...

“I think a sub or pizza sounds good right now,” Emily volunteered.

“Dirty girls don’t get to make suggestions,” surprisingly, Mary huffed.

“Huh? Why not?” Emily fired back with a slight whine. “It’s Joyce’s fault!” Without hesitation she threw her partner under the bus, forcing her to stop giggling about Emily’s teasing and focus on her own.

Now it was Joyce’s turn for the defensive. “Maybe I bought the food, but you were the one that was feeding them!”

“Yeah, but I didn’t buy a whole mountain of it!” It was probably at least four times smaller than her hands made it out to be, but Emily shaped a gargantuan area with her hands to symbolize the mass of goat pellets.

“Alright, kiddos, come on, off to the car.” Frank moved them along as they continued their joking, secretly half-serious banter.

“Still, Emily,” Frank did manage to sneak an attack in. “You don’t strike me as the type that’d stop a cute animal from trying to smother you.”

“No I wouldn’t! What happened was because there was a lot of them! *You* try being my size and fighting off a swarm of tiny goats!” She was so caught in the moment that she had abandoned the pig story altogether. No one called her out on it.

“Whoa,” Frank put his hands up in defense. “Joyce, reign her in, I think I went too far!”

Emily grinned to herself, almost considering whether to jokingly growl or not. She’d never be able to reach a decision though, because with a quick yelp escaping her she was swept off her feet and into the air.

“Ah! Wait, Joyce? What are you doing?” Like their nightly routine, she was suspended in her caretaker’s arms. It wasn’t an infant type of carry, but a princess one.

Joyce looked confused. “You heard my dad, didn’t you?” She looked to Frank, sounding a bit concerned. “Dad, I think we grabbed one of the monkeys instead of Emily. We better go return this one.”

“Put me down already!” Emily whined with a laugh, trying to speak reason into the father and daughter who were sharing a laugh amongst themselves. Usually she’d be concerned about the undertones to this, but finally she was able to make a distinction between what was intimate and otherwise plain fun.

“I don’t suppose you could just keep her?” Mary chimed in. “She looks like Emily enough?”

“Hmm...” Requiring further inspection, Joyce rubbed noses with the girl. “I suppose you’re right, but she does need to be cleaned. I’ve washed our neighbor’s dog a few times before?” She grinned, with a smile only Emily seemed to pick up on. “How hard can it be?”

Still midway in her princess carry, Emily leaned her head past Joyce to Mary and Frank, quietly mouthing ‘save me!’. Their sudden outburst of laughter had Joyce confused when she turned back. “What did you say?” She looked down at Emily, who was busy playing innocent.

“Alright Emily, ride’s over.” Joyce set her back on her feet, now that they were gathered around the car and in the parking lot. There was an orange glow of sunlight looming over the wall of trees on the outer edge of the parking lot.

“So gang, what do we think?” Frank surveyed. “Was the zoo a good choice?”

“I thought it was fun!” Joyce proudly spoke.

“Me too.” Emily agreed.

“It was nice seeing all the different animals. And certainly had its ups and downs for some...”

“Then I suppose it’s a good job on Emily’s part. Thanks for keeping us busy today!” Suddenly the attention was flipped onto Emily, and with so much praise and little place to put it, she shuffled awkwardly.

“Um...no problem.”

They started getting into the car, but Emily was somewhat reluctant. “Joyce?” She gave herself another glance. “Is it really okay for me to?”

The scenario was already playing through Joyce’s head. She’d insist it would be okay for Emily to sit in the car, dirty as she was, but of course, she’d still be beside herself as she tried to sit on the seat as little as possible, taking a solid ten minutes to find out that it didn’t matter whether you started from point A, C, D, E, or F, because regardless, you’re always going to land on B.

Emily was doing just that, hoping to find a way that her dress would be as little involved as possible. Joyce appeared right behind her though as she placed a hand on her shoulder and firmly guided her into the seat.

“But the seat’s gonna get dirty!”

“It’s not like we can help it, silly. Let’s call it a reminder to bring a towel in the future?”

Emily could feel the digits to her imaginary debt increasing, as each particle of dirt rub deeper into the leather seating. She looked visibly uncomfortable.

“Should I ask my mom if you can ride in her lap?” Quietly, she whispered into Emily’s ear. How couldn’t she smile with a startled reaction like that?

She was still stiff as a board, but it was progress, somewhat.

“Don’t forget your seatbelt! And thanks for going down easy; I was almost afraid the zookeepers would think we really were stealing one of their monkeys!”

Emily narrowed her eyes and started to say, “You and your jokes are really starting to drive me banana-!” and before she could finish her line, her listener had swapped from an actual person to a car door. A window, to be specific, with Joyce behind it sticking her tongue out, then walking back around to her door. Emily kept her grumbling to a minimum. This was probably because of her cuddling threat...

“I guess not even a little dirt gets in the way of her habits,” Mary chuckled, catching a glimpse of the slumbering Emily beside her. Even with jitters, all it took was the hypnotic sensations of a moving vehicle to talk her down.

“I guess that’s her one kryptonite,” Joyce chuckled. Well, there were certainly many more weaknesses she had, but those were reserved for the director’s cut...

“Still envy that about her,” Frank spoke with no shame.

“Think she could manage that on a plane?” Mary asked. “If so, I think I’ll need to ask her what her secret is.”

“One of life’s many mysteries!” Joyce ended it with a laugh. “To be honest, I was a little worried she wasn’t going to fall asleep so easily... The last thing I’d want is for her to worry about getting the car dirty.”

“She does seem to care an awful lot,” Frank added, and Mary ‘mmm’d’ in agreement.

It was true, and to hear others acknowledge it openly put a small smile of pride on Joyce’s face; as a partner and a mother. But, if today had taught her anything, it also meant she was too caring, that in the negative sense. In exchange for connecting deeply with others, she made herself just as vulnerable to the bad feelings as much as the good ones. And once there was that bond, any sort of hiccup was something she assumed was her fault, yet it couldn’t be further from the truth.

Still, on a thoughtful note, Joyce happily agreed. “She does... It’s something definitely unique about her.”

“Oh? Unique?” her mom didn’t seem to let a moment pass by on that remark. “Do you mean that in a good way or bad?”

“Good, of course.” Joyce was quick to respond, just to steel her own resolve. The timing was the perfect spur for humor though, as the older couple started laughing.

“I think we’ve started to see just how protective you are of her?” Mary chuckled, leaving Joyce in yet again an awkward spot. Suddenly she was wishing Emily hadn’t left her all alone while she went off to play in dreamland...

Of course she sounded flustered, trying to explain herself, “...Well...of course I am...”

“Relax, sweetheart,” Mary laughed once more, but thankfully Joyce didn’t take offense to it. “It’s a good thing. Though, to be blunt, what’s so funny is how you seem like a totally different person now.”

Just as Joyce was going to count it a victory, her mom had gone and said that.

“Di...different?” It could go either way with that. “...How?” Was she really acting that strange? No, strange didn’t describe it at all. Of course she was a different person, all thanks to Emily. She was better for it. Rather than stuffing wishful thinking, pipedreams and silly desires in a dark corner, she finally knew what it was like to embrace them. Life certainly had a renewed shine to it now.

“It’s not a bad thing, I promise.” Mary assured her daughter, and Frank agreed all the same. “In fact, I think I like seeing you like this much more.”

“Well...like seeing me like what?”

“Not that you weren’t before, honey,” Frank took the reigns, “but, to put it simply, happy.”

“I’ve never not been, though?” She *was* happy to feel like she’d grown since being with Emily, but truthfully, she didn’t want to make a spectacle out of it.

“We know you love your job; the work combined with the payoff, but we’ve never known you to be someone very interested in romance?” All this talk about herself was starting to feel weird... At least with her parents.

“Hon, I think we’re embarrassing her...” Frank spoke in a hushed, yet obvious voice. He cleared his voice to make it clear, “Joyce, all we mean is that we’re seeing a new side to you, and we think it’s a good thing.”

They’d compromised to an addition, but truthfully, a transformation was a better way to describe her character. All the same, there were few moments when Joyce showed any intimate affection for anyone in front of anyone relevant, especially her parents. There were moments in the far, far distant past, sure, but never to this degree.

The bounds of Joyce’s love was as uncharted to her as it was for the spectators. The chase was so captivating, it was easy to forget just how far she herself had come already. Day after day, watching Emily slip so wonderfully into a cushier mindset and routine, never once had she stopped to consider where she herself was drifting toward or from. And even if it wasn’t totally positive, it was still an example of that seemingly unnoticed change.

“Still, whatever you’re doing, clearly it’s a good thing. I think you both have each other wrapped around your fingers!” Mary laughed, and Frank wasn’t far behind. “Even with that said though, you better keep her happy, otherwise I’ll be right back over here to give you a piece of my mind...” Mary coolly warned, whilst Joyce was having a double take.

“Wait, what? Aren’t you *my* mom? Doesn’t that mean you’re supposed to be looking out for me? Not Emily?” She let out a laugh.

“Of course I am! And this is how I’m doing it.”

A happy wife, a happy life. The words echoed in Joyce’s head, and she snickered.

“Alright, well, no promises, but I’m pretty sure I know all the right buttons to keep her content. I just hope Emily’s parents are going to care about me like you guys do for her...”

“Oh? You haven’t met them yet?” Frank asked.

“No, not yet. Come to think of it, we haven’t really talked about them much...” Joyce started to think to herself. “Then again, who knows? Maybe they’ll drop by our doorstep by tomorrow morning? You know, maybe call less than 24 hours in advance, throw our everyday routine in a tizzy...”

“Hon, I can’t help but think she’s talking about us...” Frank jokingly nudged.

“I think so too...” Mary wasn’t laughing so much.

“Joking!” Mostly. Joyce laughed in her mother’s place. “We managed, seeing as we were able to make a day out of today?”

“Joyce, maybe if you knew what it was like to be frugal you’d see why we took as good of a deal as that.” Frank spoke with a sense of pride. The pride of saving money. “Penny saved is a penny earned!”

True, but being brutally honest in her own head, Joyce could afford to lose a few pennies. Not that she didn’t respect her dad’s philosophy, but with the extra concern it took to be like that, the price to be carefree wasn’t something Joyce couldn’t handle.

“Is Emily like that at all? Someone who spends money like there’s no tomorrow? Like a certain daughter we might know of?” Now it was Mary’s turn for payback.

“Actually, I’ll have you know,” Joyce curtly replied, “I spend frivolously, plenty enough for the both of us. I’ve already had to tell her plenty of times her money is no good.”

“Really? You don’t let her spend anything?” For some reason, finally hearing it from someone else other than her own thoughts and Emily, it might sound a bit weird.

Tactfully reorganizing her approach, Joyce tried again. “Uh, well, anything that we do run into, it’s just more convenient for me to pay.”

“Does that bother Emily at all?”

“At first, it did, but I keep telling her I don’t mind...”

“Are you letting her contribute at all?”

“W-well, yes...emotionally...” This wasn’t sounding so spectacular anymore.

“Joyce, I think it’s clear that you’re the purse strings in the relationship, but I would still take Emily’s feelings into consideration. I won’t say I know how she feels, but I know I’d feel a bit insecure if I weren’t pitching something in.”

“I let her keep her money so she can buy her own stuff.” She didn’t want to be rude, but frankly she didn’t need Emily’s money. However, it was a given that she needed Emily and all the love she could give. Didn’t the two balance each other out?

“But from the sound of it, even there you pick up the tab?” An obvious hole had just been poked.

“Okay, okay, fine.” Joyce sighed. “Maybe you guys have a point.” They did. And thinking about it now with a fresh perspective and an outside opinion, she didn’t feel great to admit that these were all the same valid complaints Emily had raised with her. And reflecting on how she waved them off so simply, it only meant how much Joyce needed to work on herself.

Thankfully the rest of the car ride consisted of less serious topics. At some point Emily did wake up to rejoin the conversation, only after getting past a few teases about her sleeping habits. Emily kept trying to glance at the seat underneath her, looking for dirt, but Joyce need only threaten to make her walk home if she kept worrying about it.

“Home again, home again!” Frank walked through the apartment door, then looked at Emily expectantly.

“Uhm...what?” Was it something about the dirt?

Frank kept the suspense though, apparently giving her a hint to the phrase. “Jiggity?”

A hint that made Emily even more confused. She was probably reading too much into it, but it confused her no less. Her silence lingered for too long, and Frank sighed.

“Jig.”

“Home again, home again...jiggity jig?” Emily put it all together, but in place of the enthusiasm Frank was using, she substituted for confusion.

“We’ll need to work on that.” Frank sufficed, and Emily stood in the shoe area, bewildered as she watched him walk off.

“What’s with that look on your face?” Joyce came in next, eyeing her with a curious smile.

Emily turned to her, then said the dreaded words, “Home again, home again, jiggity jig?”

Joyce’s smile turned into a frown. “Oh, don’t tell me he’s teaching you that too?”

So she did know? “It’s a weird phrase, isn’t it?”

She let out a deep sigh. “Emms, I think I need to keep you in sight even around the apartment...” Nervously looking from side to side as she leaned in close, “He could be anywhere, waiting to grab you at any minute...! Ah! My poor Emily!” Pretending a sob, she pulled Emily in for a rocking hug. “What will I do if you become like my dad?! You’re too sweet for that!”

In a muffled voice, thanks to Joyce’s chest, Emily mumbled, “I think you guys have a vendetta against Frank...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe!” Still with the exaggerated act, Joyce released her. She sat her down on the ledge where the hardwood floor began, then took the liberty of undoing her sandal straps for her.

“So you had fun today?”

“Mhm. Lots.” Emily smiled to herself. There was a slight bump along the way, but given what it was about, it was something they were bound to run into at some point. And now that they’d overcome it, Emily felt better than ever. Michael’s advice from earlier really did have some merit to it...

“Good, because I did too. And I never did say it properly, but I’m sorry about getting you so dirty...”

“It’s okay.” Emily exhaled through her nose once the sandals came free; a pair of shackles removed from her feet. “I thought it was funny, but I was just worried about getting your car dirty.”

“Would you stop that? Emily, there’s no chance of making me mad at you, especially over something *I’m* responsible for. Really, don’t sweat it.”

Emily’s response was to wiggle her toes.

“I’m sorry? What was that? I don’t think I heard you.” Joyce leaned in with her ear, and Emily could feel her hand squeeze the ball on her foot. Again, nothing from Emily other than a smirk, which led to Joyce’s disappointed sigh. “I suppose we’ll have to do this the hard way...”

Emily didn't have time to think, as with that same hand gripping her foot, it pushed underneath it with great force, knocking Emily's back on the floor so that her feet were primed for Joyce's fingers which were already moving in for the kill.

"No, please no!" Amidst her pleas, Emily was already helplessly giggling.

"Oh? *Now* you're ready to talk?" Joyce smirked as she kept teasing Emily's foot with the faint scrape of a nail. She tut, tut, tutted. "Honestly, what am I going to do with you?"

The situation was mind over matter, because even before Joyce started tickling the girl, she was close to tears just from the mental baggage of all the past tickle attacks; loads of pleasurable, silly trauma weighing her down.

"Okay, I'm going to let you go, *just this once*, got it?" She tried to look stern, but the smile behind it was crumbling any sort of iron-hard authority she had.

Emily kept shaking her head yes so hurriedly, you might think it was ready to pop right off.

Slowly, Joyce unclasped her hand, and just as there was enough wiggle room, Emily quickly scurried herself across the floor, mainly by sliding on her bottom, right against the wall breathing frantically.

"Having fun, you two?"

The exciting tension was thrown into disarray, hearing the third voice. Both turned to the source, which was Mary, the caboose to the quartet, hanging in the doorway, looking quite entertained.

Though she surprised them, Joyce kept it cool as a cucumber, welcoming her inside. "Hey mom, just finishing up taking off our shoes." And to prove her point, that's just what she started to do with hers.

"Uh-huh? Is that so?" With Emily still watching from the wall, Mary sat herself down next to Joyce. Then in a lowered voice, with a strange tone about it, at least to Emily, she spoke. She'd known what Joyce could sound like if she wanted to sound stern. Loving, but ultimately an order that you weren't supposed to refuse. In Mary's case, there was probably that same amount of concern, but right beside it was an even heavier authority, so much that if she were to talk to Emily, she wouldn't think twice about disobeying. She wouldn't think of it once. The idea of rebellion seemed foolish from the get-go.

“Joyce?” The atmosphere had changed completely.

“...Yes?” Joyce suddenly didn’t seem so mighty anymore...

“You weren’t bullying Emily, were you?”

“Hah? A bully, me?” Well, maybe if she needed to strongarm a business deal, but in the home? With Emily? “Never!”

Mary turned her head over to Emily, who was watching with an odd curiosity.

“Emily, is this true? Don’t let her push you around, you know?”

Emily almost sputtered out a laugh. The cards were now in her favor. She held all the power, the dice were loaded, and she need only speak a single word that would dictate her partner’s fate.

It was so simple, and here was her chance. Just to think, no more tickle attacks! No more bedtimes! All the coffee she could ask for!

“Yes.” However, she betrayed herself.

Merciful? Maybe.

No. Deep down, she knew exactly why she protected Joyce.

Mary held all the power, sure, but her reach and reign was only as effective as she was here in the flesh. Give it a few more days and that’d change completely. It was all one big trick; a trap fate had cleverly disguised for Emily! If she betrays Joyce now, there’ll be nothing around to protect herself in a few days time.

“See?” Joyce kept up the act, standing back up, barefoot this time. “When have we ever been anything but peachy?”

Mary seemed to be trying to read through the lines, but she ended it with a shrug. “If that’s what you both say! And Emily, I know my daughter can be a bully, so don’t let her tease you too much...” Joyce was about to leave the room, but spun her head around.

“I am *not* a bully!”

“Well, you certainly are a leader?” Seeming to form a connection between the two personalities.

Joyce groaned, and a giggle escaped Emily, leading both Summers to stare at her; one curious, and the other jokingly annoyed.

“You. Bath. Now.” Joyce stood her up and helped usher her off, quietly mumbling about her mom all the way.

It felt like a breath of fresh air being away from her mom, once the two sealed themselves off in the bathroom.

“Wouldn’t a shower be better?” Emily passively watched Joyce turn on the faucet for her, lingering like a fly on the wall. “I coulda ran the bath by myself, too, you know.”

“Whelp, since I’m already here, I guess we can’t do much about that” Joyce helplessly shrugged, moving over to the towel cabinet. The way she was so absorbed in a task she wasn’t even responsible for, Emily could take a hint.

“Does being teased by your mom bother you that much?”

“Yes,” Joyce quickly replied; seemingly no filter. “Well, no. Not really.” Quickly, she back-pedalled. She let out a complex sigh. “She just...” She looked to Emily, as if the answer were drawn somewhere on her face. “Just... I don’t know; gets under my skin?”

With a smirk Emily’s head drifted in a different direction as she left a passive comment along the way. “Sounds like somebody I know...”

“I can always make this water boiling hot, you know?”

Emily stuck out her tongue with a small giggle.

Joyce stayed by the tub, making sure to give it the occasional temperature reading. Maybe she wasn’t going to make it scalding... If she did, her baby girl wouldn’t be so much of a snowflake anymore and instead a permanent tomato.

Emily, relaxing in her own spot, was finally feeling the grime she was covered in, including a few crusty spots from the packed dirt. She definitely was ready for a bath. But before that, a different kind of nature was calling to her, and for once she didn’t have a friendly diaper to

answer the door for her. This time she had a...particularly 'solid' guest waiting to be let in...or out.

She walked over to the toilet, lifting her dress to undo the button on her shorts, then after dropping them to her ankles, only now did she take stock in the other person in the room. It took a visual cue to stop her, now remembering Joyce was with her.

She stopped, but not completely.

...Truthfully, how different was this from baby-play? If anything, this was less embarrassing. Sure, what she was doing was more visible, in a sense, but at least now her business was being done in something significantly more dignified. Besides, at the rate they had their mommy-and-me time, access to a toilet was a blessing.

“Did you plan on using the toilet?” Joyce spooked her from her thoughts as she called over to her.

“H-huh?” Clueless, Emily looked at the shorts around her ankles. “Oh! Uhm, yeah. Why?”

Joyce could have made a spectacle of it, but she chose not to. Instead, she'd celebrate the small moment with just herself. It felt like ages ago, remembering the first time she had Emily on the toilet. It was certainly stressful, as well as emotionally exhausting for the girl. Yet another showcase of her astounding progress... The best she could do was limit it to a smile.

“Are you just peeing? Or is it, the, uhm, other one?”

“The...” still with a straight face, Emily's cheeks still grew red. “The other one...”

Joyce shook some of the water off her testing hand then finished the job with a towel. “Wait right there then. Keep those panties on until I get back, got it?”

As if to prove it to herself, Emily lifted the front of her dress, catching a glimpse of her perfectly clean, striped panties. The goats may have been fierce, but thankfully denim shorts had been her knight in shining armor. Panties covered in dirt sounded ugly and uncomfortable, and lord help her if one of those goats got too close... Though, why did Joyce want her to wait? “Uh, okay?”

Joyce opened the door and walked out, leaving a small crack in the doorframe. And for a brief moment Emily was being a little too air-headed, because she realized someone walking by in the hallway might be able to see her standing around, flashing her underwear.

The dress quickly came down.

Joyce soon came back in, only this time she was accompanied by another person.

“P-Pip?” Emily blinked, watching as Joyce with the ball of stuffed mochi in her arms came over to her. What she hadn’t stopped to consider was how quickly she was taking to the name; recognizing

“Yep. Don’t tell me you forgot already, did you?” She gave her a second to think, and yes she did remember. It was quite the unfortunate memory. One that she could practically smell.

“Ew.” Emily scrunched her nose a little.

“Smelly, yes, but we’re trying to make that easier.” Joyce helped Emily’s arms into a hold on her friend. “And here, I’ll get these for you...” Her hands went under the skirt of the dress and down Emily’s panties went. She felt especially bare downstairs now.

“Wait, won’t Pip get dirty if I hold him?” Suddenly, Emily was looking for a spot to put him down. Maybe Joyce didn’t mind getting her expensive and lavish things dirty, but Emily didn’t feel the same about her much cheaper possessions.

“Then if that happens we can give him a bath, too. Things can be cleaned if they get dirty, would you believe it?” She smirked, once more playing into Emily’s silliness, just so she could realize it herself.

With one arm Emily lifted her dress, sitting down on the toilet, getting herself comfortable. It felt a little weird sitting on the toilet again. Pleasant, but different from the usual.

Still, it felt a little weird making a bowel movement in front of Joyce, but with everything in the past taken into account, this sort of display seemed surprisingly tame.

“...Now what?”

“Now,” Joyce came closer again, adjusting her arms for her, positioned like a rollercoaster bar for Pip to be locked in tight. “Once um...you squeeze down there, you squeeze Pip with your arms. It’s kind of like in the movies when someone bites their teeth on something when they get a shot or surgery?” Ugh, too graphic for Emily. All those scenes tended to involve either blood, gore, or both. Her analogy made its point, though.

And so once she felt the movement coming, she squeezed Pip, then understood exactly what the goal was. While she pushed on her bowels, she felt a small strain in her muscles in her core. By squeezing Pip she was inadvertently putting more force into it, lightening the load on a single section of her body. She was training Emily to have smoother bowel movements?

An involuntary sigh escaped her once it plopped into the toilet water.

“All done?”

Emily sheepishly nodded her head.

“Perfect. I’ll take back this guy then,” Joyce reached for Pip, giving Emily a chance to disarm him as he exchanged caretakers. “And don’t worry, he’ll be waiting for you tonight, okay?”

“I don’t really need him, you know?” There was a small sense of guilt attached to that. Pip hadn’t done anything wrong, after all...

Joyce, however, looked 1 syllable short of mortified, who immediately cupped her hands over Pip’s imaginary ears. “Emily! I can’t believe you!”

“I wanna take my bath, now.” Emily haughtily scoffed. “Please vacate yourself from the premises!”

Joyce chuckled as she held the stuffed toy to her side with a single arm. Speaking in a deep and loyal voice, she said, “With pleasure, your majesty!” Backing up with a bow and outstretched hand, she excused herself from the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

There were still the lingers of a smile on her face as Joyce looked at the door one last time, though it transitioned into a curious look, thinking about when she walked back in with Pip.

Did I ever close the door after that?

She chose not to dwell on it for long, walking back to her room to drop Emily’s friend off.

Pip stared back at her as they exchanged silent glances at one another, and Joyce spun on the ball of her foot, closing the door behind her as she rubbed her stomach.

“So very, very, very hungry~!”