

Family, and Other Pretenses

By Kaitlyn VanWay

Vivienne stared at the monstrous cedar door, willing it to open without actually having to knock. Tonight would be the first time she'd seen her parents in three years, and she felt tiny. Hunched over with her hands stuffed deep in the pockets of her thin red overcoat, the door towered over her like a guardian, protecting her from the big bad wolves she knew were inside. Her goal was to get in and out as quickly as possible. She was determined to make dinner last no longer than two hours, break the big news at the end, and then leave before her mother could finish her final judgmental thought of the night. The weather, traffic, and school were pretty much the only safe discussion points, but she wasn't in the mood to tell them anything personal, so two hours on the unusually snowy December would have to suffice. Sighing deeply, Vivienne grabbed the brass knocker and rapped three times. One hour, fifty-nine minutes to go.

Bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, Vivienne was anxious to get this night over with. Her heart had stopped pounding once she pulled in the driveway and instead was sinking deeper and deeper, hiding in her stomach. She waited twenty seconds before deciding she couldn't take it anymore. She opened the door and stepped into the foyer, almost colliding with her mother.

She looked much older than Vivienne remembered. Jacqueline Ashford was only fifty-five, but she had deep bags under her eyes. Normally, they were masked by a thick layer of foundation, but tonight, they were protruding and ever-present. Her dark pink suit, though neat, hung awkwardly on her body, as though she'd lost some weight. Her cropped brown curls were streaked with gray, and her face looked tired yet stern. It was as though someone had taken the Jacqueline Ashford she'd grown up seeing, put her in a rowboat, shipped her to a deserted island,

and then made her swim all the way back. Maybe that's how mothers were supposed to look after a family tragedy. But Jacqueline was never good at playing the mother.

“Vivienne,” she said haughtily. “I didn't realize we were just letting ourselves in now.”

And there was the Jacqueline that Vivienne knew.

“Awfully snowy December, isn't it?” Vivienne said awkwardly, taking off her coat.

“Not even a minute in and we're already on the weather. Honestly, Vivienne, you can't think of anything else to say on tonight of all nights?” she took Vivienne's coat and ushered her into the sitting room.

The room was unchanged, a relic from Vivienne's childhood. The walls were painted cream, and a large Turkish rug covered the dark hardwood floor. A fire gave the room a warm glow that seemed unnatural for a place as uninviting as this. Over the mantle hung a large oil painting of her, her mother, her father, and Alex. Vivienne squeezed her eyes shut and exhaled shakily, unsure how much of the evening she could take.

Jacqueline directed her to the golden settee and walked over to the drink cart. Vivienne sat awkwardly, her hands in her lap. One hour, fifty-six minutes.

“Ah, Vivienne,” a male voice boomed from behind. Vivienne turned to see her father coming down the stairs dressed in his signature Richard Ashford suit, his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. Vivienne had always thought he'd been born in a bowtie, his hair graying since the day he was born. He gave Vivienne a half-hearted smile as he reached the bottom stair.

“Nice to see you.”

“I wouldn't exactly call these circumstances ‘nice,’” she said, refusing to return his smile.

His grin faded. “No, I suppose not,” he corrected himself. He sat on the settee across from her and buried his nose in the newspaper on the end table beside him.

“What will you have to drink, Vivienne?” Jacqueline asked, her tone cold.

“Vodka martini.”

She nodded and uncorked the vermouth, her lips pursed together.

“Shouldn’t the maid be doing that?” Richard asked, his nose still buried in *The Wall Street Journal*.

“I gave Claudia the night off,” Jacqueline replied as she gripped the drink cart in a dramatic show of grief. “She loved Alexander like family.”

“Hm,” Vivienne hummed. She picked at her flaking red nail polish and flicked the paint chips on the floor, forming a small mountain on the pristine carpet.

“Vivienne, stop that,” Richard commanded, peering over his newspaper. “I can’t stand that noise. Can’t you just sit quietly with your hands in your lap?”

“Sorry,” Vivienne mumbled, clenching her hands together.

“Honestly, Vivienne,” Jacqueline said, filling the cocktail shaker with ice. “You shouldn’t wear chipped nail polish. It makes you look cheap.”

“I forgot to take it off before dinner,” she replied, staring at her hands.

“You must always make time for your appearance,” Richard chastised.

“Really, Vivienne, you know this. I raised you to know this,” Jacqueline added.

“Appearance is everything.”

Vivienne’s eyes instinctively darted to Alex’s chair, wanting desperately to exchange exasperated looks with him. She inhaled sharply. She wasn’t used to seeing it empty. Getting through this night alone would be impossible, but what hurt her the most was remembering that she had left Alex to deal with these dinners alone every night for three years.

He'd always been better at maintaining his composure than Vivienne, but his eyes gave him away. All Vivienne would have to do was glance at his eyes and she'd know instantly how he felt. Even when he was feeling really low, she could always get his eyes to smile. But last time she'd met him for coffee, his eyes stayed sad the whole time. Alex had barely even looked at her. He must have already known what he was going to do then. Strangely enough, she could feel his eyes on her still; but for the first time, she couldn't tell what they were trying to convey.

Jacqueline brought the drink tray over and set it on the end table. Richard noisily folded his newspaper and reached for his scotch.

Peering at his wife through his spectacles, he asked, "Shouldn't the maid be doing this?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Richard," she scolded, her voice sharp. "Don't you ever listen to a word I say?"

Jacqueline walked haughtily toward the fireplace, her back turned away from her family. She crossed her arms and stared at the oil portrait.

Richard looked at his daughter inquisitively, hoping to avoid another telling-off by his wife.

Vivienne filled him in. "Claudia has the night off."

"Right," Richard nodded. "And Claudia is..."

"The one who actually loved Alex, apparently."

Jacqueline whipped around, her eyes shooting daggers at her daughter. "What did you say?" she said warningly.

"Oh, come on," Vivienne said hastily, trying to avoid a fight. "Just joking."

"Saying that the maid was the only one who loved my dead son is a joke to you?"

“I mean, let’s not pretend here,” Vivienne sighed deeply, her patience wearing thin. She stared desperately at Alex’s chair, grasping at straws for any sign of him. Feeling her mother’s eyes on her, Vivienne continued, “I just meant it’s nice someone in this house loved Alex, even if it was the maid.”

Richard uncrossed his legs and sat up rigidly on the settee. “Do not speak to your mother in that tone. Let’s just have a pleasant dinner as a family without any whining or childish behavior from you, Vivienne.”

Jacqueline stormed over to the drink cart and grabbed a bottle of wine. She uncorked it and walked over to stand right in front of Vivienne, staring at her. For a long time, they both just stared at each other, willing the other to speak.

Finally, Jacqueline took a big swig of wine straight from the bottle and broke the silence.

“Are you insinuating that I didn’t love my child?”

“Not insinuating,” Vivienne said. “It’s no secret.”

“That’s funny,” she remarked, raising her eyebrows in mock surprise. “I don’t remember you coming around for dinner every week. When was the last time you even stepped foot in this house, Vivienne? When you left for university? Alexander was, what, thirteen? Yes, that sure sounds like you loved him dearly.”

Vivienne stood up, desperate to be on the same level as her mother. “I saw Alex. I had no problem with Alex. He wasn’t the one I had to get away from.”

“Don’t upset your mother. Not now,” Richard warned, his narrow eyes worriedly watching the scene play out.

“Yes, because being upset after your son died would be just terrible,” Vivienne scoffed.

Jacqueline lifted the hand holding the bottle, sticking her index finger in Vivienne's face. She had stepped close so that Vivienne could smell the wine on her breath. Jacqueline's eyes narrowed to slits as she growled, "Do not speak to us this way. Not in our home. Not ever."

Vivienne grabbed the wine bottle from Jacqueline's fist and took a long swig, desperate for some liquid courage. Wiping her mouth with her sleeve, Vivienne responded simply, "I'll speak to you however I want to."

Jacqueline took a step back, her expressionless face briefly betraying her surprise at her daughter's gall. Quickly, she regained her composure.

"Is that how you talk to your mother?" Jacqueline asked, as though Vivienne owed her some semblance of respect. She grabbed the wine bottle back.

"I wouldn't know how to talk to a mother any more than you would know how to be one."

Jacqueline's eyes widened in shock. She swallowed hard and folded her arms, closing her body off from attacks.

Vivienne stepped so both her parents were in view. Her heart was pounding loudly in her ears, but she felt compelled to continue.

"The thing I don't understand is why you're even bothering to have a funeral at all. Why pretend you care? It's your fault he's dead."

"That's *enough*." Jacqueline slammed the bottle down on the drink tray, splashing wine all over the rug. The untouched martini teetered off the edge of the tray and came crashing down on the floor, as though it couldn't bear to witness this fight for one second longer.

"It's true! Why pretend any differently?" Vivienne said, her voice rising in anger. "Oh, pretense of familial obligation, I forgot. That's the Ashford way."

Jacqueline whipped around to face her daughter, eyes sharp as daggers. “Please, Vivienne, tell me how horrible I was to you, to your brother. Enlighten me as to how paying for your education, your clothes, your travel, his *funeral*, makes me such a bad parent. Illuminate me as to how I am responsible for my only son’s death,” she growled, her voice threatening.

“How long you got?” Vivienne crossed her arms, mirroring her mother.

“Vivienne,” Richard warned, his voice low.

“No, really. I mean,” Vivienne continued, “I don’t want to leave anything out, but you don’t have a great tolerance for anyone’s voice but your own, so—”

“Vivienne,” Richard interrupted, trying to preserve his wife’s feelings.

But it was too late. The floodgates were open, and Vivienne’s defenses were down. She was ready for a bloodbath. She knew her mother wouldn’t stop until one of them was down for the count, and Vivienne was ready to fight to the death for Alex. Somebody had to.

“I gave him everything!” Jacqueline cried. “Every opportunity, every privilege, every luxury he could ever want—he could ever need—and he jumped off a bridge!”

“You pushed him off! You forced his hand. You suffocated him in this house. You indoctrinated one way of life into him, and he decided he’d rather die than disappoint you.” Her face was burning, and her head was throbbing. The world was spinning around her as she reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out the note.

As she unfolded the paper, she could see Alex sitting in front of her. He was on the edge of the chair, eagerly nodding his head as though telling Vivienne to go on.

“*Viv*,” Vivienne read, her voice shaking. She looked at Alex uncertainly. She could see the pain in his eyes as he nodded. “*I love you, and I’m so sorry. But I can’t do this anymore—*”

“Stop, Vivienne,” Jacqueline commanded. “I don’t want to hear this.”

“There’s so much going on in my head,” Vivienne could feel Alex’s hands on hers, steadying them so she could continue reading. *“There’s so much going on in my head, and I’m scared—”*

Jacqueline put her hands over her ears, shielding herself from her son’s final words.

“I want to change, to be better. I hate who I am, but I can’t control it.” Vivienne could feel her brother’s eyes on her. He shook his head slowly, asking her to stop reading, but she had to finish. He may not have wanted to hurt their parents, but she wanted them to suffer as much as he did. *“I just wish—”*

Richard buried his head in his hands, unable to look up anymore.

“I just wish Mom and Dad would forgive me for not being who they wanted—”

Jacqueline grabbed on to one end of the note and pulled, ripping it in two. She then crumpled it and tossed it into the fire, desperate to stop the guilt. Her whole body was shaking. She turned away quickly and rubbed her temples.

Vivienne let out a blood-curdling scream and dropped to her knees in front of the fireplace. “He was sixteen!” she sobbed. “He was sixteen, and he was scared to death of what you would think of him.”

Vivienne looked around, desperate to see Alex again, to apologize for leaving him in this house of horrors by himself. But Alex was gone. Vivienne clenched her eyes shut. The air was still.

Jacqueline stared up at the ceiling. Her mouth hung open, but no words came out. Richard was frozen in his seat, hands perched on his lap like he was preparing to leap up but couldn’t muster the strength. Vivienne stared into the fire, tears rolling down her cheeks. Silence hung in the air, the perfect frame to a portrait of a defeated family. No one dared move.

After seemingly an eternity, footsteps broke the silence.

“Dinner is ready,” a woman in a lace apron announced proudly as she stepped in the doorway. Noticing the tension in the room, she turned quickly back to the dining room.

Slowly, Vivienne rose up from the floor. She smoothed her velvet skirt out and swallowed her sobs, a lump forming in her throat. “I can’t do this. I can’t pretend for you.” She headed for the door. She could feel their eyes on her. Vivienne’s heart was in her stomach, and she felt like she would be sick.

Vivienne walked to the threshold of the foyer, her heels echoing on the hardwood floor. She wiped her eyes, turned around, and said, “Not today, and not tomorrow.”

“Vivienne,” Richard said, rising from his chair as Jacqueline watched stiffly, following Vivienne with only her eyes. “Don’t do this.”

“Why even have a funeral? He has no need for your fake mourning.” Vivienne opened the door. Looking over her shoulder, she said, “Oh yeah, I forgot. Appearance is everything.”

She stepped out into the blistery December night, a tropical paradise compared to that house.