

edition

ALL THE PRETTY
PEOPLE AND
A FUSSY LITTLE SICK

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The skyscraper is made of glass and has no floors save the ground floor. The glass walls rise up as if to the bruise coloured sky that rumbles loud and deep. The clouds are big and fat and shift. I am standing inside the glass skyscraper. The glass skyscraper is on the beach. I am the only one there. Everyone else must have got away long ago. They ran quickly and swiftly to higher ground. I seem unable to move from the beach. The ocean is angry and I watch it as it grows in rage. The waves crash and get bigger with every try. One wave gathers size in slow motion it gets higher and high and I have to hurt my neck in order to look up that high. I am going to drown. This wave is going to crash on top of this glass skyscraper that I am inside. The water will smash the glass and I will be at the mercy of a deluge of angry water and broken glass. Yet, I still do not get away or try to run. How did I even get inside this glass skyscraper? There is no door. I can hear the roar of the wave as it towers over me.

When I wake up I am on the beach and the sand goes on for ever. The waves are no longer angry but calm and lapping at the sand lazily. The sky is still dark but the sky scraper is gone and I am lying down looking up at the sky. I am hungry and need to find food. I sit up and then stand.

I open my eyes and feel hot. So hot. My face feels like its on fire. I kick of my blankets but then I am cold. I cannot get it right. I press my hands to my hot cheeks and for head. I am also itching like mad inside the bandage that is over the exit wound of my permacath. I have only had it in for a few days. I scratch around the edges of the bandage so as not to ruin the bandage dressing. The permacath exit wound only has two stitches. The tube with the two small tubes, has been used for plasma exchange. My antibodies were not being lazy and dozy enough. They were fighting to the end. Which means they would attack my Dad's kidney as soon as they sensed it inside their habitat. I lay there getting incredibly agitated by the heat of my body and the intense itchiness. I continued to use my fingernails to scratch around the exit wound. The relief only lasted as the

scratching was being carried out. As soon as I stopped, it returned.

I started to sweat and I got more and more agitated. I was sharing a two bed hospital room with an older gentlemen. He had the bed nearest the door. I had the bed nearest the window. I had placed my books on the window ledge to make it feel more homely.

I could not lay still in my bed. I was so uncomfortable. I kept jerking from lying on my left side to trying to lay on my right and realizing it was too uncomfortable with my permacath hanging there. I kept scratching around the bandage. My scratching was getting more and more aggressive. I scraped my nails down hard into my skin surrounding the bandage and a little bit over the very edges of the outer tape of the bandage. I buzz for a nurse and ask for a cold face washer. I get given a damp tea towel and place it on my forehead. The damp coolness is a relief. I close my eyes and manage to finally fall back asleep.

This time I am in a group of people who also survived the raging waves. The whole world looks like the beach now. A land of dirty wet sand. We walk together in search of food. We walk and walk and walk. We do not speak. I have a sandwich in my hand and nobody seems upset about this. I also feel very damp and clammy. I start feeling at my shirt.

When I open my eyes again, I am looking up at a nurse named Johnny. "Hi." He says. I feel awful. I feel like I have not slept at all. My head hurts and I feel shaky. I also feel damp and clammy. I reach up with my left hand and pat my t shirt. It feels wet through. "I think I sweated in the night." I say. Johnny does not say anything. He switches on the light that falls directly onto me. I sit up woozily and look down.

Everything is red with blood. My blood. The sheets are wet through with it. My t shirt is wet through with it. The fitted sheet is red with it. I can feel blood dripping down my stomach and pooling in my belly button. "Oh my god. Oh my god." I say nearly crying but too scared to even do that. Never seen so much of my insides on the outside.

"It looks worse than it actually is." Johnny is telling me kindly. He has sun browned arms and hands. He wears black framed glasses on his face. His expression is calm. "Can you take your t shirt off?" He asks me. He draws the curtain around my bed and I carefully remove the beloved hot

pink t shirt I got from Footscray Community Arts Centre, 3 years ago. It is now ruined. It is so wet with my blood that it needs to be squeezed out. The blood soaked t shirt is placed in a blue plastic bag and tied in a knot at the top. "Do you want it thrown away? Or try and clean it?" Johnny says. I don't care at all and my brain is fuzz. I finally get some words out. "Try and clean."

Johnny gets a cloth and cotton balls to gently clean the blood off of my front. "I think you popped your stitch." Johnny tells me. My breasts are dripping with blood. The blood travels down the drips into my belly button. I try to disengage from my physical reality as Johnny wipes blood from my breasts and stomach.

It is a very busy dawn of the day for Johnny, who is the ward manager for the day. He cleans me up. He puts a fresh and clean bandage on my permacath wound. He gives me two hospital gowns to put on. I put on the gowns and sit in the chair under the window, while Johnny changes my bedding. With clean bed and blood free body, I get back in bed and doze off.

I wake up with a start and sit up. I look down and see the red has seeped through everything again. It looks even more gruesome to see the blood all over a white oversized hospital gown. The bedding is bloody and so is my chest. I start to tremble a little. My hand is shaking as I fumble for the buzzer to call a nurse. The blood has soaked through the bandage and my gown and the blankets again. This time when Johnny sees me he stands for a moment and then leaves the room. When he returns he has a sand bag the size of four water bottles. The sand bag is wrapped in a hospital gown. He puts the sand bag down on my little table and he cleans up the blood and change the sheets again.

"Press this to your chest." He tells me. My bed is slightly upright so I lean back with the heavy sand bag and hug it to my chest, making sure the weight falls onto the exit sight of all the blood. "The pressure and weight should stop the bleeding." Johnny tells me. He leaves the room and I lay there hugging this heavy sandbag awkwardly. The breakfast lad comes and places a tray on my table. She does not say anything to me but glances quickly at me. I smile and say, "Good morning."

My roommate starts to fart in loud and long bursts. He lets out a sigh

of relief before starting to pass wind again. I cannot begrudge him this. His doctors have been asking him about this. The fact he has started passing wind means he is further along in recovering from his kidney transplant. I lay there listening to him pass wind and hugging the sand bag, whilst my breakfast gets cold. As I lay there the thought occurs to me that Jesus may have bled for our sins, but, it was seeming less and less likely that included me. Seems I am doing a brilliant job of bleeding for my own sins.

Eventually two nurses who were not Johnny came and looked under the sandbag to see if the bleeding had stopped. It had. When the neurologist did the rounds. They stood around my bed and looked at me. They had been told about my night-time temperature spike and the bleeding. "We are going to need some blood tests." Peter Hughes told me. I sighed dramatically. "Cant you just squeeze some of my blood from the blood soaked bedding? Or my t shirt?"

They couldn't of course and I got blood taken two more times.

Hours later, around lunchtime, my stitch gets re stitched.

I am told that I will receive more plasma exchange.

My friend Erin visits me after work. She takes my picture. I find myself wishing I had gotten a photograph of me waking up covered in my own blood.

That would have looked so cool.

The day after I wake up covered in my blood, is a busy one. I am ill equipped to deal with it. My body shuts down and I feel shivery and weak and dizzy. I cannot even sit up without my head feeling as though it is on a roundabout, being pushed by an extremely strong and enthusiastic pusher. I get up to go to the toilet and need to grip the edge of the bed as I make my way to the toilet that is simply a few steps away. Before removing both hands from the bed I make sure one hand is placed against the wall near the toilet door. I feel like the floor is reaching up to grab me if given the opportunity. I have run out of clean clothes and underwear.

When the doctors come round they notice something is wrong. "Your not your usual upbeat self." He says. I shrug and fight tears as he takes my blood pressure and presses his stethoscope to my back. I am told that my body is showing signs of infection and they need to find out what kind it is. "We will get you in to have some more plasma exchange." The doctor says. I nod and ask if I can lay down again, please.

It is on this day that he visits me for the first time. Just the evening before Erin was asking me if he had visited yet. "No, and he wont anyway. I upset him." I say. "By writing about how much he disappointed me, the last time we hung out. " I had been sitting at my laptop in my bedroom on Brunswick rd. Pretending to write, when he text me. It was the last line that flipped my switch from distracted to psycho mad. "I'm trying to be your friend. But, your making it difficult." I sat there in my bedroom, totally stung by the irony of those words. I text back simply. "If I'm being so difficult, do not trouble yourself." I was done. Completely and totally done trying. I worried about that boy constantly. About his health about whether he was doing alright. There was always some disaster awaiting him or attacking him. I wanted to be there for him. But as soon as I ever tried he responded with disinterest or being super busy. But, when he text me about some disaster I was always quick with concern or a pep up, or an invitation to hang out. As I sat there thinking all this, my phone kept beeping. Over the next ten minutes, as I sat at my desk, staring at my laptop screen, my phone lit up three times. I checked the length of the messages. They were long and I had no heart to read them at that moment. My eyes were too blurry with tears. I was so alone. The January summer heat was absolutely slaying me. I had no energy to go outside save for my visits to the royal Melbourne. Afterwards I would go home and lay on my bed with the blind down to block out the sun, and give in to the heat induced dizziness that engulfed me. I would get up to make toast and only get about half a slice down. The rest would go to waste.

It was Erin who I handed my phone to. "You can read what he responded with." I tell her. "Tell me if I was right not to bother."

She nods and reads the messages. She does not read them out loud. As she reads she shakes her head of perfectly straightened black hair. I recommend having attractive friends visit you in hospital. It is a complex

combination of cheerful distraction coupled with a compounding reminder of how utterly lustreless you must look in comparison.

“You were right not to read that stuff.” Erin tells me as she puts my phone on my bed. I am sitting up with my legs crossed, at the edge of my bed, facing my friend. Erin is sitting in the chair under the window and facing me. “He basically puts it all on you, as if you don’t have anything big to deal with right now. And he says all your friends are drug addicts.” I sigh in sadness. Why does he keep thinking this? I have lots of different friends and not all of them take recreational drugs. I hardly even drink these days. It is not as if I think all his friends are manipulative narcissists just because he is. I don’t even know his friends. He does not know mine. He is basing this assumption on isolated experience he has had years ago. When we were sleeping with each other and I slept on a friend’s couch with no room off my own.

“Speaking of drugs.” Erin stage whispered to me. She leaned in to me with a beautiful grin. “Me and Roxy took MDMA on Saturday night while on Sydney rd.” I giggled and leaned in to get closer to the story. Erin smelled like fresh shampoo devil may care shined through from her dark brown eyes. Even under hospital lights her skin was luminous and white. At 8pm the announcement comes on telling all visitors to be cooperative in leaving the hospital wards. Erin hugs me tightly and rubs her face into my chest. “Oh my slit.” She says with affection, using one of my nicknames from years ago. A reference to one of my imaginary band names; The Rusted Slits, obviously an all female punk band.

When the tea lady comes I get a tea with milk and sugar and as many little packets of cracker-jack cheddar cheese and Arnotts savoy biscuits. Dinner that evening had been bland and depressing as usual, so at 8:15pm I was quite hungry. The cheese and crackers were a developing addiction.

When he does walk into my hospital room the next day. I am stunned. He had text me asking what bed number and ward. I still did not believe he would show. I just assumed I would get a text saying something had come up at the last minute. I did not hear him walk into the room but I sensed someone approaching. I was huddled on my made up bed, under a white blanket. I was so cold and so tired. I felt as though I would shiver myself to a pile of dust. I saw him as he walked past the end of my bed

to get to the empty chair. His handsome face is observing me with a smile. He is holding a white box that has a tall stem shooting up and leaning over to the left. On the green stem are white orchid blossoms. He places the gift on the windowsill, next to the books. He looks amazing and put together. It is an outfit I find familiar; a button up short sleeved shirt that has flaming eye balls all over it, Black suspenders that connect to black military pants with black lace up boots and a blue tartan bow-tie.

“You look so tiny.” He says as he sits down on the chair. The mere sight of him makes me want to cry. Makes me want to open up the blanket and coax him to crawl under it with me. Share this disease with me. My heart shouts. *It wont be so bad I promise. I will take the brunt of it, you can simply huddle here with me and share your body warmth. I am sorry for being such a silly cow. My dirty insides have muddled my brain and I am not doing so good.*

I stay lying down and smile at him. “I am tiny.” I say.

“I want purple hair.” He says smiling at my bright but messy hair. I fight the disease coursing through my body and manage to sit up slowly so as to better communicate. I wrap the blanket around my shoulders. “Thank you for the flower.” I say. Its so pretty.”

They do well in the hospital environment.” He tells me. “Someone got me one when I was in for Golden Staff and it lasted a year.”

At that moment a beautiful Chinese woman walks in the room carrying a bunch of bright yellow flowers. She is wearing light blue tight jeans and a blue blazer over a white t shirt. It is my friend Ying. She puts the flowers on my bed and leans in to hug me. She introduces herself to him and we fall into a happy chat. I find myself wishing it was still Just he and I. I was already finding it difficult carrying on a conversation with one person. At that moment another bunch of flowers was delivered. This bunch looked expensive. It was wrapped in many layers of tissue paper in shades of purple and then wrapped in brown paper and tied with ribbons. The flowers were an array of wild flowers all fresh and smelling amazing. There was a card and I read it with difficulty. It was hard to focus on the letters. I did manage to read that they were from the art directors of West Space art gallery. **Combat pants** took a photo of them on his phone. “Of course these

are from an art gallery.” I say. “Only they have such an eye for detail in regards to anything of a visual nature.”

A bunch of nurses came rushing into my room and stood around my bed. They admired my flowers and one of the nurses said “We heard you just got the most beautiful bunch of flowers.”

“I have actually gotten three separate but beautiful flower arrangements.” I say so as not to discredit the gifts from my friends who are present in the room. A nurse brings in a large glass vase and arranges the flowers from west space in the vase of water. Ying places her yellow flowers amongst the others. It is a beautiful and cheering sight. The nurses leave.

A doctor enters the scene and it is the handsome Asian one I like so much. He has lovely features and a kind smile. His name is Tom. “I am afraid I need to take more blood.” He says. “Is that OK?”

“Anything for you, Tom.” I say with a feverish grin.

The diminutive old flame in combat boots gets up and throws his backpack over one shoulder. “I will leave you to it.” He says.

“Oh, OK. Thank you for coming.” I say.

He exits. Ying stays by my side as I lay down on my back and throw off the blanket to allow easy access to my arms. Tom takes the little green container that is kidney bean shaped and places it next to him on my bed. He levels the bed up so he does not need to bend over so much. I am starting to think that this day will be free of peace and quiet. I just want to close my eyes and disappear into navy coloured velvet. As I lay there Ying reaches down and holds my left hand, squeezing it gently.

Tom washes his hands in the sink across from my bed end. He dries his hands on paper towels. When he comes back to my bedside I get to look at his face better as he leans over my arm and traces the best vein with his finger. He swabs the area and I turn my attention to my lovely friends face as she tells me about her art projects and upcoming exhibitions. Tom slips the needle in and fills up about seven tubes with my blood. “We should know if and what sort of infection you have tomorrow.” Dr. Tom tells me as he throws the used needle into the medical waste bin. He collects the kidney bean shaped container with all the blood filled tubes. I notice he has a wedding ring.

Once The doctor of heart palpitations leaves, Ying tells me of her cat drama. Her ex got one of the three cats they shared together, from the break up. This break up happened three years ago. So Ying was surprised when she got a call from the ex informing her that the cat was missing. Ying was quite upset about this and thought it very careless of her ex to misplace the beloved pet. Ying has the other two cats; a grey and white one called Babushka and a large grey cat called Tom. The cat showed up not far from Ying’s apartment three days later, looking skinny and dirty but alive. An amazing show of resilience and a certain cats obvious preferred parent.

I was starting to get crazy tired. I could barely keep my eyes open. Ying noticed. “I better get going and let you sleep.” She says, squeezing my hand one more time. But rest is not forthcoming. Doctors show up again to check me out and tell me more things. “What’s wrong?” One asks me. “I just want to sleep.” I say with tears rolling down my face. They leave me alone and about five minutes later my lovely friends Tim and Rhiannon arrive. They look so good and healthy. Rhiannon’s long dark curly hair and Tim’s red beard. Rhiannon is carrying a gift bag. I am curled up in my bed, sweating but cold. I see them and burst into tears. “I am so so tired.” I say pitifully. “I’m so sorry for not being fun.”

‘Aww Jess.’ Tim says. He looks so concerned as he sits across from me on the chair. Rhiannon sits on the edge of my bed. “We got you some pyjamas.” She tells me. I had been saying how I needed nice pyjamas. I was put in hospital so suddenly I did not have time to pack accordingly.

“Thank you.” I say. They leave.

And I continue to shiver.

Some may find me moderately attractive from afar.

I cannot force anybody to become an organ donor. All I can do is be honest and upfront about how grateful and humbled I am that my father chose to donate his kidney to me. That because he was willing and a match, my way of life is forever changed for the better.

It had been three days since the long awaited kidney transplant operation. I had spent those three days in the Royal Melbourne Hospital Intensive Care Unit. It was precautionary to keep me there, as my body is small. (I am 32, under 5ft and my weight is 31kilograms). Too many things had gone wrong in the lead up to this transplant. The Doctors wanted to be sure everything went well and there were no complications.

The last thing I remember before going to sleep via the magic of my anaesthetist , was my surgeon standing at my bedside and telling me. "I have seen your father's kidney, Jess, and it is so beautiful." She was not exaggerating. My father had lived a clean life of no alcohol or cigarettes. If you could choose an organ from a line up, it would be the organ donated by a non smoker.

My father gets taken to recovery after the operation and my mother and her sister flit between my father and I. My father is high on pain killers and when my aunty tells him how well his kidney is working while inside of his daughter. When he is told how much I am weeing thanks to his kidney, and how much this is pleasing both the surgeons and the doctors. My father says. "You know what? All this pain I am feeling right now is totally worth it. Because my daughter is weeing thanks to me."

When I do finally see my Father after the transplant. I am lying in a bed in the dialysis ward. I am getting a dose of plasma exchange to ensure my antibodies do not attack my father's kidney in a foolish attempt to save my body from this foreign object. I am yet to have much energy. I am facing the entrance to the ward so I see him as soon as he enters the doorway. He refused any help to walk as he wanted to see me unaided. This moment was for he and I alone.

He is wearing the white hospital gown and the knee high white socks they give you. He is not standing up strong and straight like I am used to. He leans on the door a moment to gather some more strength. He is smiling at me though. His glasses are on his nose and his blue eyes are crinkling at the corners. I have never been prouder to have inherited his blue eyes.

When he gets to my bedside, I reach out my left arm from under the blankets and he takes my hand in his. I look right into his face and looks down into mine. "I think we did it." I say. "Yep." My father says.

"Are you OK?" I say.

"Yep. Fine." My father says.

My transplant operation was on the 26th of march this year. Three months later and both the donor and the receiver are doing fine. The best thing to come from all this is a better understanding and connection between my father and I. We rarely agree on anything. I joke that his donated kidney is now a transgender feminist and equipped with this secret weapon, I will use it to systematically smash the patriarchy wherever I see it.

So, thanks Dad. Thanks to everyone who has signed up to donate when they die. Thanks to all the live donors. Thanks to all the people who are going to become future donors. It is a remarkable thing to do. It is a remarkable thing to receive.

I REALLY WANT TO BE A GOOD FEMINIST. I know that it is OK not to be perfect. It is OK to make mistakes. I have read Roxanne Gay's wonderful book, *Bad Feminist* and have gifted it to a good friend. But, it is hard sometimes, when the people I want to share my feminist enthusiasm and knowledge with, are people who seem to be pretty happy as they are in the not knowing. Ignorance is bliss after all.

We were getting ready to go for a walk in the last bit of winter sunshine for the afternoon: my brother and my second youngest sister (at 23 years old) Libby. I was so happy to be having some sibling time. My sister lives in South Australia and rarely comes to Melbourne. My brother does live in Melbourne, but we rarely hang out. We are very different.

My brother could be in the Australian version of an *Entourage* style film. I use the term *Film* loosely. He has the good looks and swagger of fictional characters such as Vincent (from *Entourage*) and Archer (a cartoon character from a cartoon of the same name). I wonder sometimes if he naturally seems similar to these types of guys. Or is it that he has merely been inadvertently influenced by them. In the country high school we attended, I was often stopped by girls who wanted to enquire if I really was "Adam's sister." It seemed a concept difficult to understand as I was not nearly as attractive as him, just a scrawny bird like thing with severe scoliosis, an a habit of waiting outside the library for it to open. One of my favourite high school 'Being Adam's sister' moments, is as follows. I was on my way to a class when a girl from my brother's year stopped me and told me that my brother "was a real sex machine."

Yeah, I know; ew!

On this particular afternoon, I wanted more than anything to be a good feminist example to my sister. I wanted to show her that caring about feminist issue was easy and worth doing.

I failed though.

My brother and sister were chatting as we put on our coats and it was then that my brother made the rape joke.

It was then I thought that this was my great opportunity. I would call my brother out on his bad joke and make him see how those jokes contribute to rape culture and the low reporting rates on actual rapes and sexual violence. More than this I would show my dear sister how important it is to have the backs of women who may not have a voice. I would show her that it is OK to care and speak out about such things.

I was doing it for all the women I knew who were trying to put such terrible experiences behind them. These amazing women who were not merely statistics to me: friends and dearly loved people.

"You know what they say." My brother said as he put on his beanie, "Nine out of ten girls enjoy rape."

My sister laughs and my blood goes cold. I fiddle with my scarf and say with a heart beating wildly. "That is not fucking funny and as a person who has four sisters. You should no better."

"It's a JOKE." My brother says. My siblings roll their eyes at me.

"Well since 1 in 4 girls will be molested or victims of sexual violence by the time they are 16, you should probably re-consider your genre of humour."

"Do you want to go home, Jess." My brother says to me. His voice is hard and it is clear he has had enough of me already.

I want to cry but I fight it. I think of some of my fav feminists. Does Clementine Ford have a brother? What would she do? Why does having sisters matter? You should not need sisters to know that rape is not funny when the punch line of the joke is rape victims.

I remember when my brother and I were younger. I was really sick and vomiting a great deal. My brother got an empty ice cream container and wrote a sign on it that said JESS'S SICK UP BUCKET. I regretted being so controversial. Why couldn't I just shut up and leave it alone? I am so lame. A stern reaction from my brother and all my fight disappears. Maybe I was in the wrong after all.

I found myself thinking that if I used a softer tone of voice when I confronted my brother's bad joke. The outcome would be different. He would stop and look at me and say. "Sheesh, your right. I should not joke

about rape as my gender and size means I do not need to ever walk around alone with the fear of rape in the corner or forefront of my mind. Thanks for the kind sounding heads up. I will also speak up when I hear my male friends make similar jokes in future.”

Oh why. WHY did I seem to have a standard bitch voice?

I stayed silent as we walked out of my brother’s apartment and made our way down the stairs. As we walked down bridge road my siblings chatted happily. I observed how easy they were with each other. I felt very much on the outside and I knew it was my fault. My fault for being a feminist kill joy.

My siblings and I stop at a traffic light, they are discussing how other women dressed. “Sometimes I see girls wearing stuff so small and I think how did they come to think that outfit was a good idea? Did they just have a few drinks?”

I want to say that perhaps these girls were just comfortable in their own skin and should not be fat shamed because of it. In a society that seems hell bent of making women hate themselves and profit from such a belief, we should probably unite with fellow women and lift each other up, rather than tear each other down.

But I remained silent. I failed at being a good feminist and super strong and fierce big sister AGAIN. Would Libby listen more if I were actually taller than her? I wonder. As the eldest of Five siblings I am the smallest.

Once across the road we walk a little ways before it is noticed that I am lagging behind. “Your so slow lately, not your usual quick step.” My sister says.

They wait for me to catch up. “Its my new kidney.” I say with a bit of laboured breathing. Walking around DFO with my sister whilst carrying a backpack full of post transplant meds has left me pretty exhausted.

“Aww its my new kidney.” My sister mimics me and it makes me laugh.

My brother takes us into a pub were there is sports on big screen plasmas but not many people around. It is 3:30 on a Tuesday afternoon. I order a pot of cider and my brother looks at me with his big brother expression. He is 18 months younger me. “Go easy, Jess.”

He says. “You better be looking after yourself.”

“I am. I don’t party much these days.”

“Good.” He says as The bar tender serves us the drinks. “Don’t do anything stupid with that new kidney.”

When my sister gets back from the toilet, she shows us the photos she took of photos that our grandparents had of us as kids. Libby had visited them before coming to Melbourne. “I want that photo Nan has of me with that big egg shaped bump on my head.” My brother says.

“From the time you careened into a wall at a church function?” I laugh as I remember that evening. He could not have been older than five. In the photo he is looking rather sad and holding his injured head with one hand.

Later that evening my brother drives me home so I do not need to get public transport in the dark. I may be a bad feminist but it does not mean I should stop trying. Even if that means I am destined to forever being the most annoying Knight sister.

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