

Somber Stroll

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Safety First

I used to be excellent at caressing clients, listening to their problems and plans for vacations, stroking their egos. But now, on calls like this, all I want to do is scream. Just send me the information so I can do my job and get the fuck off the phone already.

Susan's pretty hot for fifty, crediting her workouts and diet, and I know why she won't end the call. She's lonely. And she's attracted to me, or at least the old me I pretend to be when I'm on the clock.

"I'd feel better going over this whole thing in person," she says. "Maybe you can stop by my office Wednesday. We can do lunch."

I consider inviting her over to the house, nine o'clock after Ashley's asleep, but I'm so disgusted with who I've become I can barely speak. I tell Susan sure thing even though we both know I'll cancel. It gets me off the phone, out of the office that used to be ours, but is now only mine. Ashley no longer needs it, being officially out of the work force.

Downstairs there's a clash of ninjas and dragons battling. So much for only allowing educational programs.

My laptop's on the couch where I left it, but someone has shut the lid. I don't say 'what the fuck,' but I'm thinking it. "Come on, Brayden, you know better."

Ashley's caving in the cushions a few feet from my computer, right where I left her two hours ago. Her finger keeps flipping down her phone, her lost-at-sea blue eyes mostly blank, looking nothing like my college sweetheart she'd been half a life ago. She doesn't even register my presence.

Brayden's not curled up beside her, eyes glued to the giant screen like I expect. I mute the TV, wait a second for him to pop out of one of his hiding spots.

"I don't have time for your games," I say, wondering how hard he slammed the lid and whether it cost me any work "Get in here. Now!"

Ashley stops slouching, puts the phone down. "Why, what'd he do?" she says, sounding like her lunchtime pill is still pulling her down.

I point at the laptop, biting my tongue because she's too fragile to yell at and it won't help anyhow. Yeah, I should never leave work where Brayden can reach it, but Ashley's one job is to watch him.

I head to the kitchen which is empty; half of his three-day-old birthday cake still sits on the counter. "Fine, your cake's going in the trash."

Ashley says, “He’s probably in the bathroom.”

I march to the stairs, pissed that I’m losing my cool. “Well, he should still say something.” The bathroom door’s open, and it’s obvious no one’s inside. Brayden knows not to go in the other rooms.

Ashley scoots to the edge of the couch, puts both hands on the coffee table to steady herself. Her eyes go wide. “Is that the pump?”

I hadn’t noticed the low rumble. The back door’s ajar, the alarm’s 9volt battery sitting on top of its casing. Ashley’s on her feet, yelling as I throw open the door and fly down the porch steps. Brayden’s next to the rockslide in his bright red Superman shirt, a foot from the pool pump gate, maybe two from the deep end.

The back door slams shut behind me and Brayden jumps up, loses his balance. I’ve never run this fast, rounding the corner of the shallow end, screaming his name. “Sit down!”

Brayden drops the stick he’d been holding, his chubby arms wheeling, his shirt not giving him any super powers. He keeps stumbling, then goes over the edge.

His back smacks the water just as I grab his wrist and yank him into my arms. His ghost white face turns red, our hearts thundering against one another. I backpedal from the pool, away from the gate, and notice the stick Brayden dropped.

It’s difficult carrying him up the stairs to the house because he’s all wet and squirmy, and starting to freak out. I set him down on the porch, probably harder than I should have. “No! You don’t get mad at me!”

Brayden scrunches his face and throws a half-hearted punch with no intention of it landing. He changes tactics, grabs his arm and starts crying. “You hurt me.”

I get down on his level, my face a foot from his. He needs to understand this is serious. “No! You were a bad boy! That was naughty!”

His wrist is already purpling from my fingers. I’m sure it hurts, but it’ll make for a better lesson. Plus, he cries like this every time he gets in trouble.

I hear a soft shuffle and my heart skips a beat. I stare over Brayden’s shoulder at the closed gate, but the shuffle comes again and I realize it’s coming from right behind me. Ashley’s walking away, her slippers dragging on the kitchen floor. Leaving the parenting all to me.

I keep my hands on Brayden’s shoulders, hold him in place, the water puddling around his feet. “What were you thinking? You know you can never come out here by yourself.”

He can’t stop crying.

I take a breath, try to maintain my composure. “What were you doing? Why’d you go outside? Why’d you have that stick?”

He sucks back snot, shows me his empty hands. “I don’t have no stick.”

“You never ever come out here by yourself. You can get really, really hurt.”

Brayden holds out his hands to show all of himself to me as proof. “I fine.”

“This time you were fine. This time you got lucky. You fall in that pool and you’ll drown. You’ll die. You understand me?”

Brayden nods and now both of us are in tears. I hear it then. It sounds like sandpaper on steel, a rough shuffle behind the gate, but it might be the wind through the trees. I can’t tell if Brayden heard it, but he’s looking in the same direction.

“And you never open that gate. You understand? It’s dangerous back there.”

He salutes and says, “Yes, sir,” not like he’s being a dick, just something he got from one of his cartoons.

I take a deep breath, blow it out, and wait until he meets my gaze. “I love you, buddy, but this can never happen. You come out here on your own and you might not ever see Mommy and Daddy again. Ever.”

What a shitty thing to see his little brain comprehend, that his parents could disappear forever. His eyes are too shiny so I look at the gate. The goddamn gate. “You won’t come back.”

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Brayden’s been out for five minutes, starfished on top of the sheet, mouth hanging half open. I whisper, “Daddy loves you,” and kiss his forehead, pressing my lips against his smooth skin for several seconds. I wish him no nightmares and ease out of the bed and creep across the floor, taking my time securing the childproof gate. Brayden’s been able to open it since last month, but at least it slows him down.

If he wakes and I’m not around, he knows to go to Jessica’s room. That door’s closed, but I don’t bother opening it to check if Ashley’s already passed out on the bed. I never say anything about it. We each deal with it our own way.

All the lights are off and I leave them that way. From the closet I grab the sleeping bag, blanket, and lantern. I pop out the 9volt at the back door and slip outside, careful the door doesn’t bang shut. It’d be easy to fix the door so it closed quietly, but Ashley won’t change a thing since Jessica left us. And, in what was the hardest thing to hear her say, she said she felt safer having a backup alarm.

The pool light is on, a deep purple glow, another thing Ashley won't change. I've always thought it's too eerie although I do like how I can't quite see to the bottom. I can't tell if Jessica is staring at me from down below. It's why I don't come out here during the day. I don't want to see my little girl, always a four-year-old. I know she didn't drown and I know she would never have left us. I know what took her, but I'm such a fucking coward I can't say it.

The gate had been opened, something Jessica could only have done on her tippietoes. Or with something like a stick to undo the latch. And there was absolutely no way she could have scaled either of the giant fences enclosing the small area next to the pool pump hidden behind the waterfall. The cops examined all three neighboring yards but couldn't find any tracks or traces. Jessica hadn't left that way—voluntarily or otherwise.

I break the trance, my gaze on the gate, and set the bundle beside the storage bench. I unlock the bench, take out my bong and pack a bowl, my ears listening for everything, but nothing coming over the hum of the pump.

It feels safer back on the porch where I take a huge rip, hold it, and blow it out with all the stress, weight melting off my shoulders. This has been a rough week, even before today. Brayden's birthday will always prove difficult. It sucks for him, and there's no way that'll ever change. He shared Jessica's birthday. It was like Ashley jinxed her, setting up Brayden as her early replacement.

The pump shuts off at nine o'clock. It takes a few seconds to adjust my hearing, take in the night. A bird, someone's TV, the Brewster's goddamn yapper. Nothing from within our oasis. Everything is beautiful, but we owe more than it's worth. Ashley had hated our backyard before the remodel, said stepping outside made her sick. The loans were a calculated gamble based off what had been a positive trajectory, not the horror that would follow.

There's still plenty of green in the bowl so I give it my all, take in a bit more and hold it. My heart slowing, my mind slowing, my senses on full alert. The stream of smoke slithers free, a tendril writhing over the water. In front of the gate. Forty-three steps away; probably double that number for a four-year-old.

I know the motherfucker's back there before I hear it, the sandpapery slide a second jolt to the system.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I lock the back door, put away the weed, and turn the waterfall on low so the neighbors won't hear any talking. I need to get moving.

The side gate leads to the driveway. I take Ashley's black BMW, the one that just sits there unless I use it for something like this. It's not the best for blending in, but it lets the girls know I'm serious.

Southside isn't far and I know the way. The first time, I offered a homeless guy the backyard to sleep in for a week, saying it would give him time to make his life a little better. Maybe he assumed there'd be sex involved, so I can't say he wasn't just a cheap hooker.

But homeless guys weren't really safe so I headed a few blocks north. There were always women down the street from the strip club. Last time it'd been easy, the tatted redhead so high she was down for anything.

I was in such a panic last time that I hadn't been thinking about what would happen if I got pulled over with a hooker. I hadn't worried about what it'd do to my family, my job. I'd have nothing left. But now I understand the risks, and I know exactly how I'd end it if that ever happened, by strapping dynamite around my chest and hugging the pool pump goodbye.

There's a tall woman at the bus stop. I tell myself this will go just as smooth as the last one and force a smile when she sticks her head in the window, her hair the kind of brown that looks just as dirty as it smells. If I let her in the car, I'd never stop worrying about Brayden crawling around and catching a face full of lice.

I make a right two times and pull over by the alley. A woman who looks built for her black miniskirt steps out from the shadows, bends down so I can see her rack—too good to be true. I ask for directions to the nearest gas station and wish her a goodnight.

Odds are she's a cop, and I can't count on her not calling it in, telling her buddies to keep an eye out for me. On the corner there's a thick brunette in tight jeans and tall boots, a leather jacket covering up the rest.

I pull over and say hello, can't really make out her face in the shadows. Her voice cracks when she asks if I want to have a good time. I say I'd love to and lean over to pop open the door. The way she slips into the car is too forced to be sexy, especially for someone who looks to be pushing forty.

Her hand's on my thigh as soon as I drive from the curb. I hate that it actually feels good to be touched. "You can park on the next street," she says. "Or get a room. Depends on what you want to spend."

"I'm not worried about the money." I say, "My place isn't far from here. I want to go there."

She really checks me out, pretending like she'll pass up a paying gig that's already cleared the car light reveal. And especially with someone nice who can make her feel special.

That's why the first girl I'd ever been with decided to fuck me. My brother and his buddies each pitched in ten bucks at his bachelor party for her to blow me. I was scared and didn't want to, especially with a room full of guys listening on the other side of the door. But that's when I found out it's next to impossible to say no if her hand's already wrapped around me. There was

no stopping her when she slid me right inside, no condom, no problem, a couple of pumps on the bathroom counter. I wasn't one to judge.

"I don't usually charge by the hour. How long you planning?"

"I'm a couple more streets down, and I'll have you back by ten. I just want to lay with you under the stars."

She looks hurt. "You don't have to be an asshole. Let me out."

"No, I'm serious." I hold out my hand, flash the ring. "I've got a wife and kids. I need to do this my way. I'll pay for your time."

She sits back, blows out a breath, says she's married too. This was temporary. Something not so great to prevent something worse. With a raspy chuckle, she says, "At least I'm getting back in shape."

I make a left on my street, driving slowly to make sure none of my neighbors are out. I cut the lights and pull into my driveway, coast to a stop.

"Wow. This is yours?" Her dark eyes brighten and I wonder if she just thought of blackmail.

I take her hand and wait until she looks at me. "What's your name?"

She starts and stops like she's considering the truth, and then sticks with a lie. "Darla."

I do the same and say, "Danny," so she doesn't feel bad. "Look, I'm trusting you. The waterfall covers a lot, but absolutely nothing above a whisper." I take two hundred-dollar bills from my pocket and hand them to her. "Can you do that?"

She squeezes my hand, the money disappearing inside her handbag. "Of course, Danny. We'll make this nice."

I turn off the car, walk Darla to the backyard, hand her the blanket and sleeping bag, turn on the lantern for her like a gentleman. "Behind the gate, there's plenty of room to lay down. Why don't you get comfy and I'll get another hundred? I'd like to keep you until midnight."

Darla gives a thumbs up and a crooked smile, tiptoes across the concrete. I unlock the back door, lock it behind me, confident Darla can't hear over the waterfall. She's going through the open gate, and I stare as the lantern's light creates a brilliant backdrop behind the rocks.

I leave on the porch light and head upstairs, creep past Jessica's room and enter Brayden's. He's still a lazy starfish, but his head's now facing the foot of the bed. The floor squeaks and he moans, but keeps his eyes closed. I whisper, "It's okay. Daddy's here."

The dust on the blinds sticks to my fingers. I peek out, seeing only rock, fence, and waterfall in the shine of the lantern. The light flickers off and on, off again, and then stays that way.

I close the blinds so I can pretend Darla changed her mind and hurried home to her husband. I'm not a heartless bastard. I'm doing this out of love. I slip out of my clothes, snuggle beside Brayden and hold him tight. It doesn't feel like such a lie when I swear I'll keep him safe.

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It's ten o'clock on a Wednesday and I should be at my desk. But I'm on the couch, and Brayden's bored, all because Ashley's migraine is back and she's treating it in bed.

I accept I can't do anything that requires thought, but even filling out forms can be tiresome when someone keeps begging for ice cream. Brayden's over by his blocks, wearing all black so he can be Batman. He asks me again.

I put my laptop down, call him over. "You've got to stop, you understand me? I already told you no. I told you I'm working."

"I want to play."

"Yeah, go ahead, knock yourself out, that's what I keep saying. Go play. Let me work right now."

The silence lasts a few minutes. Brayden asks, "Where's Mommy? I want Mommy!"

"Calm down. I already told you, she doesn't feel good."

We go back and forth, a few sentences on the document, a few interruptions from my buddy.

I'm hungry. I'm bored. Play with me, play with me, watch me.

"I am watching. That's why I'm not in my office. I'll play later."

"No you're not." Brayden nods at the computer. "You just say you're watching."

"Well, someone has to work. That's what I'm doing on the computer. Trying to do, but not really able to because I keep getting distracted."

"But I want you to play with me."

"I will after lunch. I have to get these done, okay? No more talking, bud."

Brayden's cheeks quiver.

"Your magnet blocks. Show me what you can do with those. Build Draco a roost."

Brayden picks up the giant purple dragon he got for his birthday. “Roost?”

“His home. Up high.” I check for emails, open Susan’s file. “Show me how high you can build it.”

Using his super sweet, I’m so cute voice, he tilts his head. “Then maybe some ice cream?”

“After your lunch, if you’re quiet and let me get some work done.”

He smiles and sets Draco down so he can build a tower with the magnetic tiles on the coffee table. It’s not long before he’s telling me to look, look how high he’s made it. I say uh-huh, but he doesn’t stop until I glance over.

I might not be all that convincing when I say it’s awesome and go back to the document I have to deliver by noon. “Five more minutes, buddy. Five more and we can play.”

The doorbell rings, probably a delivery. Brayden gets to the door before me; he pulls it open, the first time I’ve seen him do this. Little dude is getting big.

Tommy and Rachel from next door give a shy wave, say hello and apologize for bothering us. “It’s our ball,” Tommy says. “It went over the fence.”

They’re good kids and know to never go in the back. I almost say go on and get it, you’re old enough now. Tommy’s the same age Jessica should be. I stop myself, tell them no problem, I’ll throw it back over.

I lock the door, take the 9volt out of the backdoor alarm. Brayden’s trying to push open the door. “No, Brayden, you stay inside.”

He cries, but I don’t care. I tell him, “Do what you’re told,” and let the door slam shut on him.

I take a deep breath and blow it out. The pump’s off. I strain to listen, but all I hear is the neighborhood. I think I might’ve heard the shuffle last night, but I couldn’t be sure. I didn’t want to be sure. I don’t want to make another drive.

With one eye on the gate, I head for the football sticking out of the bushes. My fingers have just touched pigskin when the unmistakable shuffle paralyzes me. I hear it again and clutch the ball, spin, ready to release it hard as I can.

The gate’s still closed, nothing’s visible. Brayden laughs from the porch, his hand to his forehead. “You are silly.”

I point. “Get your ass inside. Now!”

He disappears and I toss the football over the fence, head inside after him. I shout for Brayden to come over, but he's grabbing himself saying he's going to have an accident. I help him with his shorts and forget how mad I was as his little butt scurries up the stairs.

I tell him to wash his hands when he's done because he's been known to go exploring. He says, "I know, I know," and closes the door behind him.

Back at my computer I realize there's not much left to the document, but Brayden returns too soon. "Five more minutes, all right, bud?"

Brayden stops beside the coffee table and admires his tower with Draco roosting on top. He says, "Mommy wants you. She's crying."

I mumble, "Of course she is," and set down the laptop. I turn on the TV and tell Brayden to watch a show. "Don't come up."

Brayden promises he won't and plops onto the couch, eyes glued to the twirling ninjas. Jessica's door is open, but Ashley's asleep, snoring like she'd been at it for a while. On the nightstand next to her is the ever-present pill bottle. Sometimes I'm jealous of her ability to escape whatever guilt she is feeling, but I swore when Jessica disappeared that I would be present for Brayden. With my son I'd never experience the guilt of not knowing my child, working night and day with the intention of providing all the best money could buy. No, Ashley's escape was definitely not an option for me.

I close the door and head back to my computer, figure I'll get an explanation from my son after I send Susan the file. I mute the TV when I sit down, and then realize that Brayden's not on the couch. I don't see him anywhere.

It's hard to breathe. I try not to sound scared when I call Brayden's name. "Get in here now! This isn't funny."

He's not coming, not making a sound. I spring from the couch, bumping the table in my haste. The tower collapses and Draco falls, grazing my hip on his way down. Higher than the handle on the pump gate.

I sprint to the kitchen. The fucking 9volt's on the floor, the door cracked open. I pray for mercy and bolt out the door, down the steps, freeze by the storage bench. Brayden's standing in front of the opened pump gate, peeking in to look behind the waterfall.

"Brayden! Back. Up. Now. Get away from there."

He does as I say, doesn't look the least bit scared. I run past him, slam the gate shut. I grab hold of Brayden's shoulders and shake him. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Sandpaper on steel coming from the house, the slam of the back door. I spin so fast I almost fall.

Brayden says it's okay.

“What?”

“It's okay, Daddy. It's just Moogie. He said he'd give me ice cream.”

“Who's—”

A piercing shriek from upstairs cuts off the moment it starts. I run for the door, but Brayden grabs my wrist, squeezes so hard I'm sure it'll turn purple.

“No, Daddy!” he scolds, shaking his head. “Don't. He only needs one.”

I try to shake him off, but he's not letting go. Brayden warns me, “You need to do what you're told or you'll be next.”