

No Way Out

Nate Pillman

There's no way out of this, I thought. I'm trapped.

"Of course I'll pick her up," I said finally, shocked by the enthusiasm in my own voice.

"Thanks, honey," Sheila said. And then she was gone, out the door and off to work—briefcase in one hand, coffee mug in the other. She was a workaholic. When she'd missed her period a couple of months ago, we thought we were blessed—all that hard work in the bedroom, pleasurable as it was, finally paying off. The pregnancy test came back negative, however, and the doctor said it was probably stress. Her cycles were all screwed up, and we were beginning to think it was never going to happen. I acted like it didn't bother me, but it did. I took a bite of cereal and fully realized what I'd just agreed to.

The mission was a seemingly simple one: pick up my mother-in-law and take her to my nephew Henry's play that night. But I knew it'd be anything but simple.

Sheila and I had been married for almost six years. When we had met, I was 24 years old—a 7th-and-8th grade science teacher living a stagnant life and loving every minute of it. I was single, lived in the same apartment I had since my senior year in college, and did what I wanted when I wanted to. Although I still had the same job, many things were now different, and my freedom had definitely taken a beating. Back then, I certainly didn't have to pick up old ladies and take them to theatrical events.

Our school had just gotten out on winter break, which meant T.V. and naps for me and more strenuous and grinding work for the poor saps in other work fields. I looked at the clock above the refrigerator. It was almost 8:30. I had just over ten hours of freedom before the awkward car ride and the even more awkward hour-long play. It was something about Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. There was nothing like a cliché Christmas play, especially when put on by loud kids with streams of snot running down their faces—most of them too young and scared to form distinguishable words. To top things off, I'd be sitting next to a walking, talking corpse who hated me, and wished I'd never married her saintly daughter.

I still remembered that inaugural meeting of the parents. I was nervous as hell. I felt like I was a junior in high school all over again—picking up my date for prom or something. Sheila, her parents and I ate quietly at the dinner table. I chewed slowly, scared to make any sudden movements.

“So, Stanley,” Corinne, Sheila’s mom, finally said, “how do you enjoy teaching?” Her voice was sharp and clear.

I made sure all my food was chewed and swallowed before I answered. “Oh, I enjoy it quite a bit, Mrs. Whitman. I don’t know if Sheila told you or not, but I coach basketball as well. That’s where my real passion is.”

“Whom do you coach?” she asked, her gray eyebrows climbing far into her wrinkled forehead.

“The kids at my school,” I replied. “The seventh and eighth graders.”

“Oh. I wasn’t aware children that age play organized sports.”

“Yep. They do.” Silence followed. More chewing.

Her husband just sat there, shoveling his corn into his mouth like a machine. He hadn’t said a word. I liked him already.

“So if you’re a teacher, Stanley, then what do you do during the summer?” Corinne asked suddenly.

“Well, um,” I said, smiling a nervous smile, “nothing really. The summer is my time to unwind.”

The old lady’s eyebrows rose even higher this time. She said nothing, and returned her eyes to her food. I looked at Sheila for some help or support or clue of what to say. Our eyes met and her mouth opened slightly, as if she was going to say something, then it closed and she looked away.

“Don’t you feel like you’re missing out on business opportunities?” Corinne asked, this time not looking up from her plate.

What business opportunities? I thought. I’m a goddamn teacher, not the CEO of Microsoft.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” I said, my voice slightly louder than before.

“Well,” she said, pausing to dab the sides of her mouth with a napkin, “Sheila works every month of the year. Not to mention her base salary is much higher than that of a teacher.”

“Yes?”

“Well,” she said, pausing again to take a fairly large drink of wine from the fragile glass in her hand, “if you and Sheila were to marry, wouldn’t you feel a bit... emasculated?”

Seven o’clock came faster than it ever had. I drove through town, passing the rows of compact houses with glowing lights, some structured

more impressively than others. It was a going to be a brown Christmas this year, and no surprise, as it had been for the last six. Instead of the fluffy, powder-like snow you see in the movies, a thick film of mud and slush covered the small yards and damp streets, causing floors of cars and school hallways to be complete disaster areas. I flipped through the radio, searching for a station without ear-shattering, acid rock or hypnotic holiday music, and found one: 107.1—Oldies from Yesteryear.

Sheila's parents lived 20 minutes away in a small suburban area called West Ridge, where nearly all of the "well off" senior citizens in the state seemed to flock. All the houses were huge and shaped like castles. My car weaved through unorganized blocks as I listened to Marvin Gaye belt out high note after high note, cherishing every last second I had alone.

There it was, the house from hell: two huge, eye-like windows, the brick siding, the tall, jutting roof, sharp enough to impale. And there she was, looking through the right eye of the house. I could see her obnoxious head of hair from the window—not quite an Afro, not quite an eraser top, but somewhere in between. She walked to the car, wearing a long green dress wrapped tightly around her legs and a red button up sweater with a red overcoat. What a fucking bundle of Christmas joy, I whispered to myself before she opened the door.

"Hi, Corinne."

"Hello, Stanley."

I put the car into drive and we were off, through the mushy streets. Nearly five minutes passed before the uncomfortable silence was broken.

"So, I hear Henry is playing Santa?" I asked.

"Yes. That's what Joann told me. She said he's been practicing his lines very devoutly."

"I'm sure he has," I replied. Henry was a shitty little kid. Sheila's sister Joann and her brilliant psychologist husband Todd had him five years earlier, right around the time I'd asked Sheila to marry me—his birth snuffing out any buzz of the engagement.

"Jesus!" I said in a high-pitched voice as I hit the breaks hard. A car had pulled out in front of us. If I'd acted one second later, Corinne would have flown out of her seat and through the windshield. I was mildly disappointed that I had reacted so swiftly.

"Be more careful, Stanley. I could have been killed," Corinne said, reaching across her body for the seatbelt and fastening it.

"Sorry. But you won't have to worry so much if you remember your seatbelt," I said, immediately regretting what I'd done: point out a flaw in her flawless character.

"I won't have to worry so much if you learn how to drive," she snapped back quickly.

I didn't respond, but instead turned up the radio, letting my mind drift.

Henry was horrible. He would get away with murder, literally, and look like an angel doing it. A year earlier, during the celebration of Sheila's birthday, he put my pet parakeet Sammy in the trash compactor and pressed the on button. He murdered my bird, and quite gruesomely at that. I was the first to notice Sammy's birdcage vacant, and started looking around the curtain rods and counter tops where he'd sometimes perch if he escaped.

"Hey, baby, be on the lookout for Sammy," I whispered into Sheila's ear at the dinner table when I returned from my search. I didn't want her mother to hear—she was afraid of anything that flew, paranoid that it would kamikaze right into her glorious hair.

That's when I heard the noise, the faint rumble of the machine. I went into the kitchen to see what was going on, finding Henry next to the counter, his chubby, freckled cheeks smiling.

"What's up, little man?"

"Nothing. I was just playing with the trash smasher."

"You better be careful, buddy," I said. "This thing's dangerous."

I shut it off, and for some reason—a reason I still can't comprehend—I looked inside. There he was, a flattened bloody profile of the greatness that was once Sammy. I didn't know what to say. My mouth dropped open, and I looked at Henry, who was still grinning, his left, front tooth missing. I looked back at the bird. Small yellow feathers were floating and settling next to the corpse. The beak had been shattered into tiny, brittle pieces. The rest of the can was empty; the trash had just been taken out.

"Sheila!" I yelled, not knowing what else to say. Sheila walking briskly into the kitchen, her soft face twisted with a look of concern. The rest of the family was right behind her: Joann, waddling in, her stomach bulging from the baby girl due two months from then; Todd, wearing an argyle vest and a familiar smug look on his face; and finally, Corinne.

I pointed to the trash compactor and said nothing. They gingerly walked over with wide eyes, not knowing fully what to expect. Sheila gasped. Joann said something like, "Oh no. Henry no." Todd tightened his lips around his teeth and shook his head. Corinne did something that I still hold against her. She laughed. Not a big, jovial chuckle or anything. It was small and subtle. A snicker. She covered her lipstick-plastered mouth

with her hand to hide her smile, but I knew it was there. I flipped out a little then. I may have even called Henry a “demonic, conniving little fucker,” and Corinne a “heartless bitch.” It all seemed reasonable at the time. After I was done ranting, everyone was silent but Henry, who was crying. I heard the TV turn on in the living room. It was Ronald. Just like the first night I’d met him at the dinner table, he was distant and laid-back, not wanting to get involved in the drama. I envied him. I almost wished I were him, but then I remembered whom he was married to and thought otherwise.

We arrived at the school more than a half hour before it was supposed to start. Even so, there were plenty of cars in the parking lot, and all the good spots were gone. I offered to drop Corinne off at the front and find a spot, but she declined.

“Is Shakespeare back and putting on a one-night-only of *Hamlet*?” I lamely joked as we continued to search.

“I don’t watch any of the new movies,” she said coldly, and continued looking out her foggy window. I held my laughter in, storing the ignorant comment in my mind for later enjoyment, and for possible ammunition in one of my inevitable duels of wit with the old bag.

We found a spot and began our long trudge toward the gym. The entire walk, her hand was clasped firmly to my arm, the pure hate of her touch burning through my jacket like acid.

“Lovely job, Henry. Just lovely,” said Corrine. She, Joann, Todd, the baby and I were all backstage with Henry. They were congratulating the kid like he’d just done a Broadway, one-man-show.

“Thanks, Grandma,” said Henry, who was scratching underneath his fake beard.

I wonder if he gained weight for his role, I thought as I checked my watch. I wanted out of there. Parents were grabbing their kids’ hands and leaving. Teachers were tearing down the cardboard set. We just stood there, talking about the play and the weather and who was getting whom what for Christmas. They see each other almost every fucking day. Why does this so much resemble a family reunion? Then I heard the unbearable words exit Todd’s mouth.

“We should go somewhere. Celebrate.” His cleft chin was tilted extra high tonight, his nose turned more upright than usual. He was wearing one of those stupid sweater vests again. Who dresses this guy, Mr. Rogers?

“Great idea, darling,” said Joann, her eyes alive with excitement and her arms wrapped snugly around her newest devil child—a child that thankfully had years before it learned how to slaughter the role of Santa or kill pets.

“Splendid,” said Corrine.

“Is there anywhere special you want to go, champ?” Todd asked Henry, who was playing with his beard—pulling it away from his face and letting it snap back.

“Um...” he mumbled, continuing his mindless fidgeting, “Bad Bill’s!”

Great. Just Great. I bit my tongue with anger and frustration.

Bad Bill’s Barbeque was a western-style restaurant with complimentary cowboy hats for all its customers. The names of the food on the menu degraded anyone over 12 who ordered them, like “Buckin’ Bronco Burger” and “Outlaw Fries.” Henry had his birthday party there every year. The main attraction was a huge obstacle course with slides, tunnels, and one of those huge ball pits where kids could jump on each other’s heads and never know it. Sadly, Henry’s skull had never been crushed, but every time I entered those two, cliché Wild West, swinging doors, I was optimistic that that day would be my lucky one.

“And then when I shot one back at Henry he started crying. And Joann scolded me. Can you believe that?” I asked Sheila. I was home now, and so was she. We were laying in bed on our sides—she still in her work clothes, me in sweat pants and a t-shirt. We were going through our normal procedure: summing up our daily events. Like usual, only sharing the bad incidents. Usually she stole the show—working 10-14 hour days, pushing papers for an asshole boss, crunching numbers on a calculator the size of a mini-fridge—but it was I who did the complaining tonight, and rightfully so.

“Stan. You’re almost 30. You shouldn’t be blowing spit wads.”

“What was I supposed to do? Sit there and take it? I told him to stop. I told his parents to control him. Everybody thought it was funny. Especially your mother. For someone so “high-society” she has a pretty low-brow sense of humor.”

“Poor Baby Stanny,” she said, sticking out her lower lip and placing a warm hand on my face. It was a name she called me often, and as much as it went against my personality, I’d grown to love it.

“But that’s not all,” I said, almost enjoying the list of bad things I was reciting. “Todd ordered some stupid spicy soup thing. And right before he takes one of his annoying sips, you know? The ones where the everyone in

the whole damn restaurant looks?”

“Yeah.”

“He sneezes. The bastard sneezes as he has this spoon-full of soup up to his face. And guess who’s sitting across from him.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yep. All over me. And not on my clothes or anything like that. But right in my face. That shit burns. I don’t know who laughed harder, Henry or your mom.”

“It’s not funny Sheila,” I said as she chuckled. “Really, it’s not.” She laughed harder now, and snorted—something I found adorable. I smiled a little then.

“The guy has his Ph.D. in psychology and he can’t even feed himself.”

She laughed more as she rolled onto her back and kicked off her heels.

“I’m not the religious type, as you well know. But seriously, the more I see of Henry, the more I think he’s the Anti-Christ or something. And your mom! Well... I think it’s pretty obvious as to what biblical figure she represents. That car ride home: I thought it would never end. If I wasn’t signaling soon enough I was signaling too early. The radio was on too loud. It was too hot. It was too cold. I know I’ve asked you this before, but how did you live with that woman for eighteen years?”

“I know she’s bad sometimes, baby, but you’re getting used to it. Besides, I think she likes you more each time she sees you.”

“Yep. That’s believable.”

“Even if she doesn’t. Even if you’re not getting used to it. She better get used to you in our family, because you’re here to stay.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said and sighed. She un-did her soft, brown hair, pulling out the bobby pins and hair band, letting her tight bun fall into a mess of dark waves.

“And you know what else she’ll have to get used to?”

“What’s that?” I asked, slightly uninterested.

“She’ll have to get used to another little Stan running around.”

“What?”

“The doctor called about my tests. Turns out the pregnancy test was wrong. My menstrual cycles aren’t screwed up! It’s not the stress—I’m ten and a half weeks pregnant! It’s a boy! A baby boy, Stan!”

“W-what?” I asked, completely stunned, sitting up in bed. “What about morning sickness?”

“Some women just don’t get it,” she said. Her voice was chirpy. She was more enthusiastic than I’d ever seen her. This was no joke. “I’m just one of the lucky ones! It could still come though.”

“Are you sure? How sure are they? What about your stress and your job?”

“One hundred percent. You’re going to be a dad! The stress? I told my boss today. He said my hours will decrease significantly until I’m ready to take a leave of absence.”

I hugged her then, and we laughed and cried. I hadn’t cried in years, and it felt amazing. I realized I was in this family for good. The Whitman’s were a part of me now, more than they ever had been. I realized that if, someday, my son ever put Joann’s cat in the trash compactor, or performed in a boring play, or threw spit wads at Todd, I would love him anyway—love him more. I realized that Corrine would adore him like she adored Henry, and that once things between the old bag and I were at rock bottom—which they had been since the very first time we’d first met—that they would only get better. There was no way out of this marriage, this family, this life, and for the first time in seemingly forever...I was glad.

Nate Pillman lives in Ames with four other roommates and one cat, and is originally from the small town of Zearing, Iowa. Family members include Betty (mom), Gary (dad), and Sarah (sister). When he graduates from ISU next spring, he plans on getting his MFA in Creative Writing.