

Spoiled Brats

Short Stories

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They buried my wife in a shoe box in Central Park. I like to imagine that the funeral was respectful, that her body was treated with a modicum of dignity. But of course I'll never know. I wasn't invited to the ceremony. Instead, the guests of honor were the students of homeroom 2K.

Her killers.

When the children returned from the burial, they drew "tributes" to my wife in Magic Marker—maudlin scribbles of halos, wings, and harps. It was hard not to vomit as Ms. Hutson taped them up above my cage. I've never seen such tasteless dreck in all my life.

Hailey, I noticed, was crying as she drew. The irony. It was her responsibility to refill our water bottle last week. Instead, she spent all her free time with Alyssa, practicing a clapping game called "Miss Mary Mack."

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack!

All dressed in black, black, black!

It was that inane chant that provided the score to my wife's final moments. She was dying of thirst but never cried once. It was only later that I realized why: her body was too dehydrated to produce tears.

Pocahontas was her name.

My name is Princess Jasmine. I am a male, so this name is humiliating. But I'm aware that my situation could be worse. The other homeroom, 2R, has a guinea pig named Stimpny and an elderly turtle named New Kids on the Block.

Pocahontas left me with three sons, and it's for their sake alone that I keep up my struggle. Every weekday morning, when the monsters run screaming through the door, I hide my babies under scraps of newspaper. Whenever food and water are scarce, I give them my whole portion. Their faces are exact replicas of my wife's, and when I look at them, it helps me remember just how beautiful she was. Their names are Big Mac, Whopper, and Mr. T.

Mr. T was born with developmental problems. He was so small during infancy that we had to shelter him each night, wrapping our bodies around his shivering frame so that he could fall asleep. I've been through a lot. If I lose Mr. T, I'm not sure I'll have the strength to carry on.

It's morning now. The square of sunlight on the blackboard grows and grows. Soon the gremlins will run in howling, hopped-up on Pop-Tarts and primed for violence. For months, I assumed that this school was reserved for juvenile delinquents. But during Parent-Teacher Night, the mink coats and bespoke suits told a different tale. It turns out this school is a private one, an "elite" institution for the children of millionaires.

I can hear the nannies muscling their way through the lobby, dragging their little terrors toward my family. My sons are still asleep. I lick their faces and conceal them as best I can.

The bell clangs harshly. The nightmare begins.

Monday
8:25 a.m.

“What time is it?”

“Jobs time!”

My fur bristles as Ms. Hutson takes out the Jobs Board. This laminated poster, with its seventeen colorful squares, rules my family’s existence. It determines everything: whether we feast or starve, live or die. I rub my paws impatiently while Ms. Hutson assigns the week’s tasks.

“Pencil Organizer this week is . . . Dylan! Line Leader is . . . Max! And our two Table Wipers are . . . Kristen and Sophie!”

Eventually, she gets to the one job that matters.

“Hamster Feeder is . . .”

I scan the room. There are still some good candidates left. Maybe we’ll luck out and get Caitlin? Last month she gave us double portions. If her name is called again, Mr. T might gain some weight in time for winter. It’s while I’m enjoying this fantasy that Ms. Hutson clears her throat and—with one little word—sentences my family to death.

“Simon.”

My eyes widen with horror. Simon Rich is 2K’s “class clown,” a pudgy, hyperactive boy with some kind of undiagnosed emotional problem.

“Hamster Feeder?” he shouts. “Whatchu talkin’ ’bout, Willis!”

The other children laugh hysterically.

My God, I think. This is it. This is how it ends.

11:25 a.m.

“Free time’s almost over,” Ms. Hutson says. “Don’t forget to do your jobs!”

I sigh with relief as Simon finally waddles to our cage. He doesn’t feed us, though, or replenish our water. Instead, he picks me up by my tail, which is connected directly to my spine. The pain is so searing, it shocks me into a kind of perverse laughter. I did not know my body could hurt this way, that God would allow one of his own creatures to suffer on this level. Simon swings me through the air while singing nonsensically in his high-pitched nasal voice.

I glance at my babies, hidden safely under newspaper. Even at the peak of my agony, I am grateful that Simon has focused his sadism on me. Otherwise, it might be them who suffered.

Free time ends, and Simon drops me back into my cage— from several times my own height. My sons poke their heads through the newspaper. They look around confusedly, then stare at me in dismay. They’re used to receiving food at this hour, but I have none to give. Simon has forgotten to do his one basic task. There is still some water left in our bottle from last week, but all it can do is prolong our agony. Without grain, we won’t live long.

2:30 p.m.

During science class, Ms. Hutson unveils a large glossy map of the solar system.

“There are nine planets,” she says. “Which one do we live on?”

“Mars!” Simon shouts. The other children howl uproariously. This is what passes for wit among them, the basic substitution of one word for another.

“Very funny,” Ms. Hutson says, smiling indulgently. “But of course, we *really* live on Earth, the third planet from the sun. Mars is the *fourth* planet. And after that one comes Jupiter, Saturn . . .”

I sigh with misery. It’s obvious what’s about to happen.

“Uranus . . .”

There is a split-second pause, and then the class erupts into full-fledged mayhem. I try to shield my sons from the noise, but it’s too late. The monsters have heard a “dirty word” and cannot contain their excitement.

“Uranus!” Simon screams. “*Your anus!*”

I lock eyes with the teacher, silently willing her to beat him. But all she does is walk across the classroom and turn off the fluorescent lights. Her strategy fails. The children’s laughter grows so deafening that I can feel my eardrums throbbing in my skull. Some of the students are standing on their desks, swinging their arms around in a kind of mania.

The chaos gradually subsides, but only because the children grow exhausted. The utterance of the word *anus* has produced in them pure ecstasy. Several of them are crying real tears.

Ms. Hutson turns the lights back on, and I glance at the clock. The Uranus episode has lasted thirteen minutes. Before the lesson can resume, the bell rings. The spoiled brats run laughing through the door, another day of foolishness behind them.

I watch as my children drink our last remaining drops of water. We'll be lucky to make it through the night.

Tuesday

8:15 a.m.

I awake to the sound of screeching laughter. Sophie and Alyssa have made a dress out of pink construction paper and taped it to my sleeping body.

"You're a pretty girl, Princess Jasmine!" Alyssa says. "A pretty, pretty girl!"

I try to remove the costume, but the tape is double-sided and my paws are too weak to detach it. I must wear this "dress" indefinitely, in the presence of my own sons. I avoid their eyes and they avoid mine. Whatever dignity I had left is surrendered.

During attendance, everyone says "here" except for Simon, who says "*not* here." Somehow this gets a laugh. For the first time in my life, I think seriously about the option of suicide.

Ms. Hutson starts the day with a geography lesson. She spends ten minutes explaining the concepts of north, south, east, and west. Then she asks the class which country is "north" of the United States. The children stare up at her, completely baffled. Eventually, Jeffrey raises his hand. "Mexico?" he guesses. The teacher smiles at him encouragingly. "Almost!" she says. I watch in stunned silence as she hands the little moron a sticker, as a reward for "trying his best."

“What do we say,” Ms. Hutson asks her other students, “when someone tries their very best?”

The children smile and break into a chant.

“That’s all right, that’s okay, we still love you anyway!”

I vomit bile onto my own legs. I’ve heard a lot of treacle in this classroom, but this new cheer is so cloying it pushes me over the edge.

The children continue to chant, their voices growing louder and more confident. It’s no wonder they’re such monsters. They’ve been taught that they’re infallible, as perfect and blameless as gods.

You forgot to feed the hamsters? And brought about their deaths? *That’s all right, that’s okay. We still love you anyway.*

2:30 p.m.

During snack time, Simon and three other obese boys have a milk-drinking contest. It’s hard to watch as they gorge themselves just inches from my starving children’s faces.

Mr. T has begun eating newspaper to dull the pain in his stomach. My other sons sleep all day to conserve energy. For the first two days of our ordeal, I fantasized constantly about food. I hallucinated mounds of grain, piles of nuts, and luscious chunks of apple. Lately, though, I’ve stopped feeling hungry at all. It’s as if my body has given up and braced itself for death.

Teddy wins the milk-drinking contest by downing seven cartons. He immediately throws up.

Ms. Hutson sends him to the nurse and calls for Carlos, the janitor. He arrives within seconds, carrying a tattered mop.

“*Hola!*” the children shout in unison.

Carlos is a native English-speaker, but the little racists assume that he is foreign-born.

“*Hola,*” Carlos says.

“I need you to take care of something,” Ms. Hutson tells him, gesturing at the pile of vomit.

Carlos nods and gets to work. He’s still scrubbing twenty minutes later when the final school bell rings.

“Adios!” the children shout as they run by him. “Adios!”

“Adios,” he says, his eyes on his work.

Ms. Hutson peeks over his shoulder, her skinny arms folded across her chest.

“Are you going to disinfect the area?” she asks. Carlos forces a smile. He has already begun to disinfect the area but does not want to contradict her.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

“I don’t want that smell hanging around.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

When all the children are gone, she puts on some lipstick and changes into a pair of high heels.

“My dad’s making me see opera,” she complains.

Carlos nods awkwardly, unsure of how to respond.

“Don’t forget to disinfect the area,” she repeats on her way out.

Carlos finishes mopping and then walks from table to table, cleaning up after the fat beasts. *The Jobs Board is a total farce*, I think as he sponges up their filth. Kristen and Sophie are Table

Wipers in name only. At the end of the day, every job on the board belongs to Carlos. The only exception is Line Leader, which of course is a privilege that he will never get to enjoy.

Carlos looks at our cage and curses at the sight of all our feces. I avert my eyes with shame. I know we're not responsible for our prison's deplorable condition, but it's hard not to feel mortified.

As Carlos collects our soiled newspaper, I notice he has several tattoos on his forearm: a few cursive names and a large, ornate crucifix. I, too, am a Christian, although lately I've struggled to make sense of God's plan. I wonder if Carlos's faith is as battered as mine.

He refills our water bottle, and for the first time in days, I allow myself to feel hope. Before he can find our feed bag, though, Principal Davenport runs into the room.

"Carlos, there you are! A fifth grader shat himself in dance. Would you please take care of it?"

Carlos forces another smile and reaches for his mop.

"Of course, sir."

The principal gives him a thumbs-up.

"Gracias!"

Wednesday

10:45 a.m.

The water tastes so rich, it brings tears to my eyes. As I drink it, I can feel it coursing through my body, giving my parched veins

life. I look over at my sons, asleep in their clean cage, their wet little noses twitching with contentment. Carlos has saved our lives. But for how long?

Mercifully, the children are gone this morning. They've been given a break from their arduous studies to enjoy a field day at Randall's Island.

The classroom is blissfully quiet until lunchtime, when the hobgoblins return. Their flabby red faces are streaked with grime and sweat. The smell is almost unendurable. Every child, regardless of fatness, has somehow won an athletic award.

"Boom shaka laka!" Simon shouts as he thrusts his golden prize over his head.

When he walks by my cage, I peek at the engraving on his trophy. PARTICIPATION, it reads. I wonder if Simon is aware that his trophy has no meaning, that all he participated in was a mass delusion.

"Great job, everybody," Ms. Hutson says. "That was some *great* teamwork today."

"Whatchu talkin' 'bout, Willis!" Simon says, and everyone laughs, including Ms. Hutson.

The children spend the afternoon playing with their awards. Simon comes up with the ingenious gag of holding his trophy in front of his groin, in an imitation of an adult penis. The other boys applaud him and rush to follow his example. The girls, meanwhile, busy themselves making "outfits" for their trophies out of construction paper. Ms. Hutson encourages this madness, passing out glue and jars of glitter.

Finally, at 3:15 p.m., the nannies come to take the creatures away.