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# Pure Love

I HATED HIM, *hated* him, from the moment I met him, but it was some time before I decided to kill him.

His behavior, when my daughter brought him for dinner, was so off the wall it took everything I had not to simply stare at him with my jaw hanging. It wasn't so extreme at first. Yes, he talked too much and too fast, and smiled too little, but initially I thought he was just one of those aggressive know-it-all kids, brought up, as was not uncommon for his and Jessica's generation, to show no deference to adults. One of those kids who used your first name a lot, who thought nothing of correcting you, who put his feet on your coffee table. But then my daughter tried to say something during one of his monologues, and without moving his head even slightly toward her, without interrupting the flow of his speech, he barked, "I'm  *talking*" (blah, blah, blah—I'M TALKING—blah, blah, blah), and I said, "we-hell," expecting it to come out light, but it didn't. He turned red, and everything sane within me told me to make a joke of it (that's  *just* what you want, to make an enemy of your daughter's new boyfriend), but instead I said, "Not a man who likes to be interrupted, I guess. Huh, Jess?"

He stopped talking then, and the look on his face was such that I glanced at my husband, not to signal the usual  *Can you believe this guy?* or even to check my husband's reaction, but out of a primitive need to make sure that my man was close by in case this kid lunged at me.

"My God, what is she thinking?" I cried as soon as they were gone, and my husband said, "What?"

Now Jake and I had our ups and downs, although things had been better since we finally admitted (after just about hitting bottom) that we were pretty much wrong for each other but somehow had not stopped loving each other and, after giving it serious, serious thought, did not want to split up. Still, there were many times, like this one, when if I said A, he said Z.

"You honestly didn't think there was anything wrong with that kid?"

"I don't know. He's a kid. They're all pains in the ass."

"So you thought what he did at dinner—you thought that was OK."

"What did he do at dinner?"

I took a deep breath in an effort to remain calm.

"Well I don't know, but if it was me, and my new girlfriend's mother had spent all day cooking for me, somehow, even if I couldn't stand what she'd

made, I'd manage to force down a few bites. At the very least, I'd push it around with my fork for a while. What I definitely wouldn't do is examine the food with this look of *distaste* and then *shove* the plate away from me."

"That was a little weird," my husband admitted.

"I know I have no control over anything she does," I told my friend Ann a couple of days later at the Indian buffet where we'd met for lunch. "But this guy—Ann, this guy is bizarre. I mean, beyond the pale."

"So what does she see in him?"

I closed my eyes. I had not slept well since that awful dinner, and now I almost felt like crying. "I have no idea," I said, shaking my head.

"Why don't you ask her?"

I opened my eyes.

"Why not?" Ann said. "I've always found that so cool about you guys. The way you tell each other stuff. Believe me, I'm jealous."

I loved talking to Ann, who was a therapist. Her own family treated her like a servant, but she gave the best advice.

"Well, he's really hot for one thing," Jessica said when I visited her off-campus apartment the next weekend. We were holed up in her tiny cluttered bedroom, as the rest of the place was occupied by her housemate and what seemed to be about a dozen guests, all laughing and shouting and apparently having the time of their lives.

"That's fine, Jess, but . . ."

"Look, Mom, I know. It's not like I'm going to marry him."

"Of course not. Of *course* not. I'm just saying that he seemed . . ."

"A little autistic?" Jess said smiling.

I almost smiled too because I loved her so much. I also missed her, even though she went to college not twenty minutes from where we lived and I saw her practically every week.

"I think the visiting-the-parents thing was just too intense for him," Jess said. "He doesn't seem to do well with stuff like that."

"So when it's you two alone he's different?"

"Ye-ah. I mean, he can be weird with me too." She paused and then shifted her gaze from me. "I don't know. I guess he can even be kind of a dick sometimes, but the strange thing is that I don't care. It's almost like it isn't so much about him. It's about me. And how I've never felt anything so *pure* before."

I rose, and I could feel her watching me as I mindlessly wandered the room, bending to pluck clothes from the floor.

"Listen, if you want, you can take us out for lunch tomorrow," she said finally.

I concentrated on untangling tank tops and bras. "Frankly, honey, I'm not

sure getting to know this boy better is going to make me like him better.”

“Actually, I was thinking about him getting to know you better.” She tentatively picked up one of the shirts that I had laid on the bed and then dropped it back onto the pile. “Because, to be honest? Right now he’s pretty pissed off at you.”

Foolishly, I had expected *adult* pissed off, so I found myself again flabbergasted when this kid, seated beside my daughter in the restaurant booth, kept glaring at me with a child-like fury, jiggling his foot so violently under the table that twice he caught my shin with the tip of his boot. He did not break his stare even when Jess turned to him with a “Didn’t you think that was hilarious?” or “You remember that, right?” and it wasn’t until she had given up, and we were deep in a discussion about dogs that we had owned, that he finally spoke.

“The main difference between humans and dogs,” he said in a flat, lecturing tone, as if he had been leading the conversation all along, “is that when a person points, another person will look at what they’re pointing to. But a dog will look at the person’s finger.”

“Actually, our dog Gracie was an exception to that,” I said, excited, in spite of myself, at the opportunity to tell this to someone new. “She actually did look at what you were pointing to. It was her claim to fame.”

He went rigid, his eyes blinking.

“Really. She did. Right, Jess?”

“No dog could do that,” he said. “It’s a scientifically proven fact.”

“Is that so?” I said, as a voice in my brain shouted: Don’t do it. DO NOT DO IT. “So like a bunch of scientists got together and did this major experiment on dogs and pointing? Got a research grant and all that?”

He looked, for a moment, confused. Then he half-rose from his seat. “OK, fine,” he said, sitting again, then half-rising, then sitting again. “If you have this dog that can do this amazing shit that *no other dog on earth can do*, let’s go see it.”

“You mean go see Gracie? Gracie died like five years ago.”

He gave a short, harsh laugh. “I’ll bet.”

“Be nice to my mom, Brian,” Jess said. “I mean it.”

In the ladies room, she said, “Thanks, Ma, that was just lovely. I’m having just the greatest time.”

I drew myself up. There were times when I got tired of bending over backwards for my daughter. “Hey, I’m sorry, Jess, but you know what? That boy had some kind of problem with me before we sat down.”

“I *told* you that. It’s because you made fun of him when we were over for dinner last week. He can’t stand to be made fun of. It’s like the worst thing you can do to him.”

I felt a stab of guilt, suddenly unsure that this wasn't all my fault. I still wasn't sleeping, and it was hard to think straight.

"He's like supersensitive," Jess said. "Some people are like that."

"Is he supersensitive with *you*?"

"He's better with me."

"Oh, Jess," I wailed.

The next week, I stopped over at Jess's with some leftovers. The hall was dark, and it wasn't until I was inside the apartment and had adjusted to the light that I saw that she had a black eye.

"Don't freak! Don't freak!" she cried, as I backed away with my fists pressed to my mouth.

"I hit him first. I went like insane, and he . . . he just got overwhelmed. Listen!" She grabbed both my forearms, pulling my hands from my face. "I attacked him, and he freaked and started flailing around and it was like . . . like walking into a propeller."

I tried to regulate my breathing. I needed to convince her that I was assessing what had happened calmly and objectively if I was to have a ghost of a chance that she would pay attention to anything I said.

"Think about it, Jess," I said quietly. "If this is a boy who gets so out of control that he *hits* you, is he really someone you want to be with?"

Jess walked away from me and dropped onto her dilapidated futon. "Neither of us can judge him," she said in a small voice. "Neither of us knows what it's like to be tortured when you're a little kid."

"Tortured?" I said.

She hugged her knees, and sitting all hunched up like that, in her ponytail and size-0 jeans, she looked almost as skinny and vulnerable as she had in middle school. "What makes me want to be with him," she said slowly, "is that being with him is so hard." Then, jumping up, she ran at me and seized my shoulders. "Listen! Listen!" she pleaded, shaking me slightly, as if somehow that would help me to understand. "If you were with somebody who had stopped trusting *anyone*, and you had to work at it and work at it to connect with him for even a *second*, then that second would be like the most incredible second of your life, right? That second would make everything you'd ever experienced before seem *pathetic*."

I remained immobile until she let me go. "He was tortured?" I said.

"People who were abused are more likely to be abusers, right?" I said to my friend Ann, and when she did not answer immediately I said: "*Right?*"

"There is a better chance statistically," she said with a worried look.

After that I did not hear from Jess for days and days. I left messages on her cell phone. I stopped by her apartment. I fought about the seriousness of the situation with Jake. Then, just when I had worked myself into a state

of near hysteria, she called.

“Sorry I didn’t get back to you, but things have been insane. You’re not going to believe this. I broke my arm! I had to get all my exams postponed and everything.”

A sensation like an electric current shot from my chest to my abdomen.

“Mom?”

“What happened?” I croaked.

“I fell roller skating. I cracked my what-do-you-call-it? My lateral condyle. Anyway, listen. Are you gonna be around for a while? There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“It’s a half-cast,” she said, holding up her arm for me to inspect. “I can take it off for showers and stuff.”

“When did you learn to roller-skate?” I said.

“What? Listen. The most awesome thing happened. Kelsey wants to move out.”

“Where did you go?”

“What?”

“Where did you go roller skating?”

“I don’t know. In the park. *Listen*. Kelsey said she wants to leave. Mom, I didn’t want to tell you, but living with her. . . Mom, I’ve wanted to die.”

“You went skating outside? In the winter? With snow on the ground?”

“She has the place filled with her friends like all night long. I can’t study. I can’t *sleep*. And, Mom, the timing is perfect because Brian lost one of his jobs and can’t afford his place anymore.”

I was speechless.

“He’d have his own room, so really it would be just like . . .”

“Are you *kidding*?” I cried.

She paused, her mouth a little open.

“First you show up with a black eye, and now. . .” I jerked my chin toward the cast, and she stared at me.

“You think Brian broke my arm?” She looked truly astonished. “You think I would stay with a guy who broke my arm?”

All of a sudden, I was furious, and, after everything that I had experienced before, it almost felt good. “All right! He didn’t break your arm. But you know what, Jess? I think that really, when you come right down to it, the black eye is more than enough.”

She refused to look at me as she left.

I waited several days before I called her, and then, when I did, and she did not answer, I thought I would lose my mind. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to call Ann but could not, in the end, tell another upper-middle-class mother with whom I had attended pre-college info assemblies that

my daughter was being beaten up by her boyfriend. And I certainly could not tell Jake because if I did, and he did not react appropriately—if he could accept even the possibility that Jess was in danger—I would have to leave him.

“She’s not home. She’s never home. In the whole time I’ve been here, we’ve hung out for like an *hour*.”

I gaped at him, as he stood in the doorway, and then looked over his shoulder into Jess’s apartment, where boxes and suitcases and a guitar were piled on the floor.

“Are you *living* here?” I gasped.

“I gave up my place for her,” he whined. “I moved all my stuff. You think shit like that doesn’t cost? You think I did that for free?”

“You’re *living* here?” I said.

For a moment he looked blank, and then he studied me, his lips moving.

“I can live wherever the fuck I want,” he said finally.

I caught my breath, and he began to shift from foot to foot. “I know that you fucking hate me . . .”

“You’re aware that Jess’s father and I pay her rent,” I said, somehow managing to keep my voice steady.

“Yeah? So? Just because . . .”

“Can you afford to live here if we don’t pay her share of the rent?”

Again he stared at me, making me wonder suddenly if he might also be a little slow, and then his eyes narrowed. “We could afford to live in a really sketchy, like totally black neighborhood. How would you like *that*?”

“We could also stop paying her tuition. Do you think she’d drop out of school for you?”

He took a step toward me and, jolted by panic, I took a step back.

“Maybe,” he said, “she’d drop *you*.”

“I doubt it,” I said.

“Yeah? Maybe it wouldn’t be *up* to her.”

It was my turn to stare, as I listened to my heart pound.

“Are you saying that you would stop her from seeing us? How? By threatening her?”

“Why not?” he cried, and now he was swaying from side to side, bouncing from one edge of the door frame to the other. “I could do anything I wanted. You aren’t here. It’s her and me here. You’re like miles away.”

“So you’re saying you could like . . . break her arm?”

“How are you gonna stop me?”

“Did you?” I whispered, but he did not seem to hear me.

“I could do anything! I could do all kinds of nasty shit!” His hands jerked about, raking his hair, plucking his collar, scratching at the back of his neck.

“How would you know? *Yeah*, I could threaten her. Fuck, I could *mutilate* her. I could fucking kill her.”

I froze, experiencing a sensation that one might have watching an overturned pot pouring boiling water toward one’s bare feet: the feeling that somehow if you did not react, if you made no attempt to get out of the way, it would not be happening.

And then, like a madwoman, I started to argue with him. “You’d go to jail.”

“Yeah? OK, then I’d be in jail. You’d still never see her again.”

“You could be *executed*.”

“You’d still never see her again.”

“*You’d* never see her again,” I wailed.

“Who cares?” He made a face that I’d previously seen only on two-year-olds. “I don’t know why the two of you think she’s such hot shit. She’s skinny, she never shuts up, and she’s got like no tits.”

That night, I remembered a fantasy that I’d had when Jess was little. Once again, after many years, I imagined that we’d gotten caught in the midst of a bank robbery and that one of the criminals had snatched her from me. I envisioned throwing myself at him like a snarling animal, ripping out hunks of hair, attacking with my teeth, but most of all hanging on, hanging on, until either he let Jess go or I was dead.

It was a daydream that I had enjoyed because it got my heartbeat going. It was exciting, exhilarating even, because I knew that if such a thing really happened, I would do it: I would fight to the death because dying would be better than seeing Jess disappear out that bank door.

Of course I had no proof—I was, after all, a fairly cowardly person—but I knew. Just like I knew what I would do now. It did not matter that I had not the slightest idea how to go about it—or that I couldn’t really imagine myself researching poisons on the Internet or hiding in Jess’s apartment with a gun. (What gun? I had no gun. Where does a person get a gun?) I still knew that if there was no alternative, if I had no other means of stopping that disturbed young man from hurting my daughter, I would kill him.

“He moved out,” Jess said. “You were right. Sometimes, no matter how much you care about a person, no matter how much you want to help them, there’s just no way.”

“Moved out?”

“Of course I don’t know what I’m supposed to do for a roommate now. . . .”

“But. . . you told him that you couldn’t. . . and he just. . . .”

“Well.” She looked down at the toe of her sneaker, which, I suddenly realized, was exactly of the style that, at the age of thirteen, I had told my mother that I would never, ever, even if my life depended on it, wear again.

“The thing is, I kind of started seeing someone else.”

“What?”

“A kid I used to hang out with the semester I was in Scotland. He called me like the day after I told Brian he could move in.”

“Wait... you...”

“We were just friends there, but Mom, I think being with Brian made me realize the kind of boy I really want.”

“What?”

“The problem is that he’s in the U.S. for only like another week. But I was thinking... God, Mom, I told you how absolutely incredible Scotland was. So who knows? Maybe after I graduate...”

I shook my head in an effort to clear it.

“*What?*” I finally said.

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