

Alive

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It hadn't stopped feeling absurd, even after seventeen days.

He likened the feeling to one he had every year at his office's holiday party. The company would give out awards to every employee—the Clean Desk Award, the Early Bird Award, etc. His boss would announce each winner individually and the winner would then pose for a picture, receiving a certificate and shaking the boss's hand, graduation-style. He found it to all be preposterous but bearable... except for that pose. His coworkers were all goofy-yet-earnest grins of pride and delight, but he could never figure out what to do with his face. When he tried explaining this difficulty to some of his more trusted colleagues, he wasn't able to make them understand. In the end, exasperated, all he could say was, "You get that it's not... *real*, right?"

And that was how he felt now. He'd had plenty of time to get used to the new situation. No matter how unusual the arrangement, seventeen days is more than enough time to adapt to a new set of rhythms and routines. But being used to a thing and that thing feeling normal are not the same at all, and on day seventeen, he felt as silly as he did on day one. Like he was play-acting somebody else's life. Like his coworkers at the Christmas party were now following him home, asking him to just play along, to smile for a picture with the boss and accept the prestigious Coffee Drinker Award

with grace and good cheer.

What made it so easy to get used to was the *stuff*. The brands—Irish Spring soap, Barbasol shaving cream, Lean Cuisines, HBO Go. The bed sheets—one of the nicest sets, not in use recently but whose return to the bedroom would've come sooner or later. The car, the laptop, the bank account—all the same, but in different places. So while there was enough continuity to make the transition seamless, he couldn't bring himself to play along, couldn't accept the new status quo. Because it felt, more than anything, stupid.

The girl was back for her second visit. A weekend visit would be coming up shortly, but this afternoon's would end before the sun was down. He'd not seen her in a week, had been desperately looking forward to today, determined to do something more substantial than what they'd done together the previous week when they'd watched three hours of YouTube videos. When he got her from school she immediately picked up where she'd left off the previous week, issuing rapidfire demands for how they'd spend the afternoon. This made him feel what he always felt whenever he contemplated spending time alone with her: crippling exhaustion.

After an argument about whether or not she would carry her backpack in from the car (she wouldn't), the girl led the way up the three flights of concrete steps,

moving impatiently, purposefully, like she'd used these stairs a million times. This, too, upset him. *Please don't let this be normal for her.*

She went immediately to sit down in front of the TV, turning it on with the same remote she'd always known.

"Let's do something other than TV," he said. She responded by moaning. "Come on," he said. "There's a tennis court. Have you ever played tennis?"

With reluctance, she agreed, mumbling, "Yeah, okay."

They jaunted back down the three flights of stairs, across the courtyard centered on a gazebo filled with picnic tables (all empty), past the swimming pool with its winter coverings, and onto the tennis courts. There each selected a racquet and the handful of balls they could find in the community store and stepped onto the court.

Standing on the opposite side of the net from the girl, just a few feet away, he began his lesson. "What you want to do is hit the ball over to my side, try to get it to bounce one time, and then go wherever I can't hit it back. That's how you get points."

The girl had zero response to this. It was unclear if she'd heard him.

"So, baby, what you want to do is just throw the ball in the air and hit it over to me, okay?"

Wordlessly, she tried to follow these instructions, serving the ball and sending it sailing far above his head and over the fence.

“Good, good,” he said. “Not a problem, we have more balls. Let’s try again.”

He handed her a second ball that she sent flying out of the court to the same fate as its predecessor.

“Let’s just practice hitting it back and forth to each other, okay?”

Standing very close to her, he gently hit a ball at her racquet, and it bounced off and back at his. Instantly her eyes widened and her mouth gaped open into her charmingly sincere look of discovery. The ball went past her and rolled a hundred feet away.

“Again!” she shrieked. He handed her their third ball and she immediately hit it to the other side of the court. “Again!” she shouted again, cackling with glee. He handed her their last ball and she hit it right at the net, watching it as it rolled right past her feet and slowly traveled ten yards away.

“Okay, go get your ball,” he told her, but even as he was saying it he was moving to get the ball himself. He hit it back to her and she again sent it soaring into the distance.

Now the usual fatigue was coming in fast. “Baby,” he said, “can you help me get the balls? It hurts my back to have to race after them.”

“But you’re closer!” she shrieked. He could sense a full-on meltdown coming—they had been happening her whole life, a switch flipped seemingly out of nowhere. Recent circumstances had made them much more dramatic, and much scarier. To avert the crisis he trotted out to collect each of the tennis balls. One by one she hit them far past him, and rather than keep up the chase, he decided their tennis time was over.

Back inside, she tried again to watch TV and he desperately felt like allowing it, but decided he should try out one more idea first. He retrieved a Hefty zip bag full of Legos (and Lego knock-off bricks) from the closet and emptied them onto the living room floor.

“Let’s play a game,” the girl said in response to this.

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s play with Legos.”

“Let’s play ‘Family,’” she said. “And we can play with Legos too, but also ‘Family.’ You be the dad, and I’ll be the mom.”

“Fine.”

“What do you want to do today, dear?” she asked as the mom.

“I would like to play with Legos, honey,” he said in an affected dad voice.

“Oh, okay, let’s play with Legos then, dear.”

He sat down next to her on the floor and started piecing Legos together, but she stood up and wordlessly

left the room.

“Where are you going?” he asked after her.

“We need paper,” she said.

“Okay. I have a pack of paper. It’s brand new. It’s on my dresser. Do you see it?”

She came back with the paper, opened it, and started spreading sheets on the floor throughout the living room. “I need a stapler,” she said after a moment.

“I don’t have a stapler.”

“You don’t have a stapler?” she said with derision.

“Sorry.”

“Do you at least have tape?”

“I do have tape.” He fetched a roll of Scotch tape for her and watched as she taped together several dozen pieces of paper, spreading them around the Legos.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m just getting ready for the wolves, dear.” She had resumed use of the mom voice.

“Oh, right. So you don’t want to play with Legos?”

“You can play with Legos, dear, and when I’m done setting up the fence I’ll join you.”

He resumed his work, constructing first a house and then an old-fashioned naval sloop to put on top of it, à la *Mary Poppins*. She had finished taping the paper perimeter together and was now coloring vast swaths of

it brown, blue, and green.

She said, “Whenever the sun goes down we have to be very careful because we don’t have any lights except for a lantern and two flashlights. And it’s very scary and we’re very scared, and that’s why we have to stick together. And... pretend that a wizard came and gave me a potion that means that even if I get bitten by a wolf, I won’t die. Okay? Pretend we have that potion. And, actually, we have two potions, and one is for if I get bitten by a wolf and the other will turn any animal we want into our pet wolf, and he’ll fight the evil wolves!”

“So, when are the werewolves coming?” he asked during one of her brief pauses.

She let out an annoyed grunt. “Not *werewolves*, just *wolves*!”

“That’s what I meant to say.” Her narratives were always dense, and he was rarely ever able to pay attention to more than half the story. To get back into her good graces he resumed his game-dad voice. “Sorry, honey.”

“That’s okay, dear,” the girl/mom said.

He sighed, annoyed at both of them. He knew she wanted nothing more in the world than for him to follow along with her script, to play the part of the ‘Family’ dad and help her prepare for the coming of the wolves and understand what the various potions did. But he couldn’t.

He was exhausted, always exhausted; bored, always bored.

Finally she had completed her work. She'd created a rich canvas of fence boards, green meadows, blue lakes, and a sun that on one half was bright and smiling and on the other was dark and frowning. He thought this was very clever. She looked over his Lego work and asked, "Why did you build that ship?"

"I don't know," he said.

They looked at each other. She had, all of a sudden, become quiet.

"What would a sad man build with Legos?" he asked her.

"He'd build a family," she said, instantly. "He'd build a wife and a daughter and a dog and a mom and a dad and a brother and a sister and some cousins and a teacher and friends and some neighbors, too. And then if he were sad, he could just talk to them, and then he wouldn't be sad." And with that, she was off again, eagerly building out the world of the sad-man-Lego-builder.

Once again the familiar feeling of agitation swelled up. He was never able to catch up, was he? He checked the time, saw that it was later in the day than he'd realized, and that soon she'd be leaving. He was glad.

But the gladness wouldn't last. He knew this.

Because missing her always felt so much worse than being with her felt good. If every person needs to be loved in a way so selfish and smothering that no other person can adequately handle it, then he knew she was already screwed—but he could at least try to minimize the damage by giving whatever he had to give. Which was, at that moment, not much, except for his choice. A non-choice, really—although he'd learned, every day, that not making a choice is itself a choice.

It had not stopped being hard. Had not gotten even marginally easier in seventeen days. He couldn't see it getting easier, either, and thought that all the people telling him it would get easier couldn't possibly know. He knew.