

“SPREAD YOUR LEGS AND SHUT YOUR MOUTH”

Ginny grimly remembered a conversation she'd overheard as she waited in the Walmart checkout line one day. Two women were standing in front of her, and she couldn't help but overhear the first woman in line talking as she unloaded her cart, which like Ginny's, consisted of more beer than food.

“Oh, he don't work.”

“Why not?” The woman behind her asked.

“Broken hand.”

“How he'd do that?”

“Got drunk and punched a wall.”

“How y'all getting by?”

“I'm working at Home Depot.”

“How 'bout the kids?”

“Momma looks after 'em.”

“You thinkin' 'bout throwin' 'im out?”

The first woman sighed. “Oh, he ain't that bad. He's really good in bed, and he don't beat me none 'cept when I'm naggin' at 'im.”

“Spread your legs and shut your mouth,” the woman behind her laughed.

“You got that right.”

Bad as the woman's situation sounded, Ginny was almost jealous. She'd trade places with her in an instant. First off, Ginny's husband, Charlie, was anything but good in bed. His idea of foreplay was, “Wake the hell up, bitch.” As far as a beating, at least the woman knew what brought it on. If she nagged, she got beat. Ginny knew better than to nag; yet, she still got beat.

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She told her best friend, Verna, about how Charlie slapped her around.

“You know how big he is, Verna. God forbid he ever hits me with his fist. He'll kill me for sure.”

“What sets 'im off, Ginny?”

“Anything. I never know when he’s comin’ home, and he expects dinner to be waitin’ on the table for ‘im. The other night he didn’t come home ‘till midnight. I was sound asleep, and he dragged me outta bed to warm up his dinner. Then he slapped me ‘cause he said it didn’t taste right warmed up in the microwave.”

Verna nodded her understanding, but still looked at Ginny in a parental way. “You know it’s dangerous working at the shipyard. Two men was killed there last year. And welding down in the bottom of them ships ain’t easy for Charlie and Dale.”

“I never said it was, but I don’t see Dale slappin’ you around none.”

“That’s ‘cause I don’t give ‘im no reason.”

“We ain’t gonna be best friends much longer if you sayin’ it’s my fault.”

“Ain’t nobody’s fault. It’s part of being married.”

“I don’t remember taking no vow to get slapped.”

“Men make the livin’, and they expect us to take care of the house and raise their kids for ‘em. They tired when they come home, and the last thing they want is some ungrateful woman pickin’ at ‘em.”

“I ain’t ungrateful.”

“I ain’t the one you got to prove it to.”

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Ginny decided to take Verna’s advice. She became the epitome of sweetness. She smiled at every drunken thing Charlie said, apologized profusely for having to warm-up his food, and appeared at his elbow with a fresh can of cold beer like a magical genie the second he slugged down the last swallow of the can he was working on. She even waited on his freeloading friends when they came over to watch the Saints or the Ole Miss Rebels play on the 75-inch TV he’d bought on his already overloaded credit card.

“Gotta hand it to you, Charlie,” his friends said approvingly. “You got your old lady trained right.”

All to no avail. His slaps were getting harder and more frequent. Everything was her fault. He slapped her twice one morning because he couldn’t find his truck keys. He’d left them in a cup-holder in his truck.

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She decided to talk to Charlie's momma, who seemed to like her. She always introduced her to people as "My beautiful daughter-in-law."

"What'd you mean you got a problem with my boy?"

Her tone was such that it occurred to Ginny it might be wise to stop then and there. Even though Charlie was six-two and weighed 220 pounds, he was still his momma's 41-year old baby boy.

"He beats me, Momma Lois."

"Beats? With a belt?"

"No, he slaps me."

"A little slap ain't never hurt nobody."

"They ain't little slaps." Ginny pointed to Charlie's latest, which, despite two days of ice packs, was still red and swollen.

Her mother-in-law inspected the cheek. "That ain't nothing, girl. That's just a rash. You imaginin' things."

"I ain't. He slaps me hard. He's gonna really hurt me. I'm scared of him. So are my boys."

"Well, boys oughta be scared of their daddy. My daddy used to whip my brothers all the time, and they glad he done it. Taught 'em to be men."

"Couldn't you talk to 'im? Ask him to stop slappin' me around. A husband ain't supposed to treat his wife bad like that."

"You saying he's a bad husband? Don't look that way to me. When y'all come over here for dinner, y'all don't walk over. Y'all pull up in a brand-new Ford pickup truck. And y'all livin' in a double-wide with three bedrooms. Mikey and little Benny got their own bedrooms. And how's the food? You goin' to bed hungry at night?"

"You ain't listenin' to what I'm saying, Momma Lois. He beats me!"

Her mother-in-law's face puffed red when Ginny raised her voice. "You Watch how you talkin' to me, girl. If I didn't have arthritis in my arm, I'd fly out of this chair and slap the hell out of you myself for sassin' me. You oughta be kissin' the ground my boy walks on for the way he takes care of you and them boys. Maybe if you showed some appreciation to him for all he does he wouldn't have to slap you now and then."

It was a hopeless cause and Ginny decided to cut her losses. "You right, Momma Lois. Charlie works hard, and I should be lettin' him know how much I appreciate it instead of comin' over here and aggravatin' you. I just gotta try harder. I'm really sorry I upset you."

“Well, I hoped you had more sense than that.”

Ginny leaned down and kissed the old lady on the forehead. “I’m sure glad I got someone like you to come over and talk to. Get me back on track again.”

That assuaged her. Her redness disappeared and, despite her supposedly crippling arthritis, she climbed easily out of her chair. “I made some peach cobbler. Let me fix you up some to take home to Charlie and the boys.”

“That’d be nice, Momma Lois. They love cobbler. Ain’t nobody makes it good as you.”

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Ginny thought about going to the police. She’d heard they had a female cop whose sole job it was to look into domestic violence.

Screw that, she decided. Half the wife-beaters she knew of were cops. She’d really have to be desperate to consider that a viable option.

It didn’t take long for that to be a viable option. Momma Lois told Charlie about Ginny’s complaint. He must’ve stopped by her house on his way home from work, because he came home fuming.

“I hear you been lying to my momma.”

Ginny was scared but held her ground. “You slap me around, Charlie, and you know it ain’t no lie.”

He totally lost it. “You lying shit!” He screamed and came up from the floor with a slap so hard it lifted her off her feet. She was unconscious before she hit the floor. It was just him standing there and then total darkness.

She was unconscious for five minutes. She woke up laying on the floor with her sons kneeling beside her. Mikey, who was nine, was rubbing her face with a wet towel. Six-year-old Benny was crying.

“Your face is really swollen, Momma. You want me to call 911?”

The room was spinning around at first, but it eventually stopped. Her focus returned, and she was able to see the worry and concern in her sons’ eyes.

She moved her tongue around her mouth. No more teeth loosened anyway. She felt her jaw with a hand. She could move it, although the upper part was tender and throbbing. Didn’t feel like it’d been broken.

“No, Mikey,” she finally said. “Where’s your daddy?”

“He left in his truck, Momma. Didn’t say where he was going.”

“Help me up, boys. Let’s see if I can stand.”

They helped her up. She was a little unsteady but able to walk.

“Y’all come help me. I gotta get dinner started.”

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Ginny went to see the lady cop the next day.

She said call her Sergeant Alice. She noticed Ginny’s swollen face. “Your husband done this to you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Y’all fighting?”

“His momma told him I complained to her ‘bout him hittin’ me. Next thing I know I’m lying on the floor.”

“You provoke him in any way?”

“I just said I told his momma the truth. That’s when he slapped me.”

“Slapped you? He didn’t hit you with his fist?”

“My husband’s weighs 220 pounds and has arms as big as your legs. He played football at Ole Miss until he flunked out. He knocked me clean off my feet. My son, Mikey, said I was out cold for five minutes.”

“But he ain’t never hit you with his fist?”

“Not yet. I’m hopin’ you can prevent that. If he ever does hit me with a fist, I ‘spect he’ll kill me.”

“You got any money?”

“What for?”

“To hire a lawyer and get a restrainin’ order.”

“Restrainin’ him from slappin’ me?”

Sergeant Alice nodded. “If the judge agrees, he’ll order your husband to vacate the house and not come near you. If he does the judge can put him in jail. Anybody see ‘im slap you last night?”

“No.”

“Not even your kids?”

“They was there, but they didn’t see ‘im slap me.”

“Anybody ever see ‘im slap you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then it’s just your word against his.”

Ginny sighed. “There ain’t nothing you can do then?”

“Not sayin’ that. I can arrest him, but without witnesses the judge is just gonna let ‘im off. If you serious ‘bout doing something, we could start buildin’ up a complaint file. Sometimes that scares the husband, and he stops. The thing is...”

“The thing is what?”

“Never seen a judge yet what come down hard on a husband ‘cause he slapped his wife. Lots of judges is old-fashioned, and they believe a husband’s got the right to slap his wife if she gets out of line.”

“Complaining to my mother-in-law about being slapped around all the time is getting out of line?”

“Sarcasm ain’t gonna help none. My job’s to do what I can for you, but I wouldn’t be doin’ you no favors if I didn’t tell you like it is. It ain’t gonna be easy for you.”

“So I just spread my legs and shut my mouth?”

Sergeant Alice frowned. “I explained the law to you, Honey. Now, you wanna start a complaint file or not?”

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Ginny was a beautiful girl, Verna thought, even laid out in her casket. The undertaker had done his best, but he couldn’t completely hide the large bruise and swelling on the left side of her face. Verna noticed it immediately.

Dale saw the bruise, too. “That must be from where she fell against the bathtub like Charlie told the police. Damned linoleum floors. They got a little wet, and you go flyin’.”

Verna rolled her eyes. Dale noted her disagreement but ignored it.

“Poor old Charlie,” he commented. “Look how hard he’s takin’ it.”

Charlie was seated next to Momma Lois and had his head on her shoulder crying. She had an arthritic arm around him. His broad, muscular shoulders heaved as he sobbed loudly. His sons, Mikey and Benny, sat next to him. The boys were holding hands.

Even though Verna was 20 yards away, she could still see little Benny trembling.

THE END.