

Daddy's Home

Erin was proud for nodding assuredly and offering spot-on insights over glasses of Chardonnay. “Apparently,” she told Alice, “he is very insecure despite his success. He needs to fill some void that lives deep inside, in a place no one can touch. It’s not about you Alice; you are beautiful, funny, and supportive – the problem is him.” Wow that was good, Erin thought as she looked at her watch, wondering when lunch would end. She had left Lily at home with the sitter and driven almost an hour to meet Alice who sounded desperate in her email. Now she was anxious to leave without appearing desperate herself. “That’s exactly what my therapist told me,” said Alice. “But isn’t that what everyone says when they want to console the jilted wife?”

“Maybe,” said Erin, “but in this case it’s true.”

“Boy, have I missed you,” said Alice as she reached her hand across the table to squeeze Erin’s arm. “We’ll have to do this more often,” she added.

“We will,” answered Erin, feeling the pressure of Alice’s grip. “I must admit, I was a little surprised when you emailed – happy to hear from you, but surprised. It’s been a few years, I think.”

“I know and I get that it seems so out-of-left field. Honestly, Erin, I just can’t share this with anyone close, at least not now. I mean anyone who sees us all the time, like our friends in Red Brook or my parents, God forbid. My parents adore Brad and would be crushed, if they knew. No, I won’t mention this until I know what I’m doing. I urgently needed to get it off my chest and get some advice. You’ve known Brad and me for a long time.”

“That’s true. I have known him quite a while.” Erin peered into Alice’s eyes, trying to read her expression. It was exhausting and unnerving to listen to her prattle on about the details of Brad’s innumerable episodes of infidelity, the time he spent away from home and his phone fixation. Then, Erin remembered Alice’s recent Facebook post about some guy at a bookstore mistaking her for a college student and an Instagram image taken when Alice was hanging upside down doing aerial Yoga. Apparently, Alice believed she could be mistaken for twenty-five. It occurred to Erin that Alice was

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unfaithful in her own way. Brad wasn't on Facebook so he probably had no idea Alice was preening for the public. Erin recalled a *TED Talk* with the therapist, Esther Perel – something about reconciling monogamy and the many facets of betrayal. Maybe Alice wasn't sleeping with anyone or maybe she was, but clearly she was cheating on the intimacy of her marriage to Brad. She betrayed Brad every time she shared images of herself with her followers, depending on their likes to make her feel loved.

“He's been fucking her for like five years.”

Erin startled at the word, *fucking*. She flushed at the intensity of Alice's rage. “What makes you think that?”

“A few months ago he was working on his computer and left it open. I glanced at the screen and saw an email to j.enders@fosterswm.com That dick wrote to tell her how much he missed her and the kids. He said he would drop over the minute I left town to visit my sister. I feel so stupid when I think of it now because I remember when I was packing, I thought he was being sweet helping me gather my stuff and speeding to the airport, worried I might miss my plane. What the hell? Now I realize he was rushing me out the door to steal away with his honey.” Erin felt a wave of nausea that had plagued her for the past few days. She reached for piece of bread to quell her upset stomach.

“The indignity,” Erin said.

“When I confronted him, he had the nerve to tell me some ludicrous lie and asserted he's not having an affair. He told me j.enders is someone he works with at Foster's and “the kids” are clients they share. Does he really expect me to believe that crap? I feel so confused because I want to trust him,” Alice admitted.

“I think there are lots of things you can trust about Brad, Alice. I believe he loves you even if he is fooling around. It's a mid-life crisis, not the end of your marriage.” There, thought Erin, hopefully that will satisfy her. She wondered if it was premature to change the subject. Maybe she could ask about her

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aging mother, or maybe their puppy, but then she realized Sparky was probably dead by now. Was that dog's name Sparky... Erin wasn't sure, maybe it was named Sally.

Alice looked at her salad as if trying to decide if she had the strength to lift lettuce. "All those business trips, and checking his phone for the latest stock prices – now I know. He was texting her. Sometimes I think if we had kids, he wouldn't have strayed." Her voice choked at the mention of kids. Erin remembered when Alice miscarried a few times during the early years of her marriage and later remarked that a life without children was freeing. She went as far as telling Erin that women who had children were boring, including some of their mutual friends who were starting families.

"I thought you decided a life without children was more dynamic – you know, travel, museums, dinners at high end restaurants." Alice took another sip of wine while Erin downed her glass.

"I said those things, but I'm sure you know I didn't really mean them." Erin could see Alice's eyes welling as she fought the urge to sob. "But on a brighter note, my lawyer says I stand to win big here. Brad is worth a fortune and parting with money scares him. I can't wait to see how scared he gets."

"Are you really thinking of divorce?"

"I am - thinking of it. I'm not sure I could trust him again even if he does end his relationship with the mysterious J."

"Do you know who 'J' is?" Erin asked. Alice took a tentative bite of her salmon mousse. Erin watched while she moved her lips meditatively.

"I'm not sure... I've been thinking Jessica. She's the woman who worked in his office when he first started with Foster's and when they moved him to Stamford, she conveniently transferred soon afterwards. It certainly fits with j.enders."

Erin recalled when she first met Brad. She and Alice were fresh out of college and new teachers in the late 80s. On Saturday's they went to dinner parties that often led to drunken dancing and

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conversations brimming with sexual innuendos. Brad and Alice were the only married couple in the group. One time, Erin walked into the bathroom and caught Brad kissing another friend. He grabbed Erin and pulled her in so the three of them could enjoy a few minutes of bad behavior. They took turns sneaking out the bathroom and returning to the dinner table where the guests stared at their disheveled clothes and guilty grins. Alice didn't seem to notice, or if she did, she chose to ignore Brad's transgressions. It was as if Brad, with his unrestrained sexuality and aggressive business savvy was the grand prize in the marital competition for Best in Show. Alice was the smug trophy holder with a pretense of blind trust for Brad. Nevertheless, here we are, fifteen years later and Alice is forced to conclude her perfect life isn't so damn perfect.

Alice's mood lifted as she relayed details about meeting Jessica at the holiday office party. Jessica's outfit was dowdy, and her weight - decidedly flabby and her hair - cut close like a helmet around her skull while other women looked like Victoria Secret runway models in scant cocktail dresses with plunging necklines and spaghetti straps. "Looks like Brad is attracted to an overweight, frumpy woman. I think she's just over forty, but looks eighty," said Alice. Erin twisted her finger around the end of a curl. She wanted to grow her hair longer but worried about looking like she was trying too hard. Alice dyed her hair blond and wore it long and straight to match her skinny jeans and snugly fitted tops. Erin thought she looked ditsy, but mostly she thought she looked sexy and annoying.

The friends sat quietly, finishing lunch with cappuccinos. Erin tried to picture the woman Alice believed to be the object of Brad's desires. Maybe she was brilliant, if not glamorous. Erin slid her hand into her bag and felt for her phone, but decided not to check it. She shifted and pulled her sweater over her shoulders, announcing she needed to get home to Lily. "I'm so sorry," said Alice. "I've been dominating this entire conversation. How is Lily? I cannot believe you have a little girl and I've never met her. How old is she now?"

"She just turned three," said Erin.

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"You have to post pictures of her on Facebook, everyone posts pics of their kids."

"Not me," Erin said. "I don't want to share Lily with 250 "friends." I want to protect her for as long as possible."

"You're amazing," said Alice. "I cannot believe you have been raising your daughter alone. That is so brave."

"I like my independence. I actually think I could handle an open marriage, if it came to that. I mean, I used a donor bank to conceive Lily, but if I had known someone, someone who was smart and good looking, even if he was married to someone else, I could deal with it. Don't misunderstand, I can see the benefits of marriage especially financial, but it's tedious to constantly negotiate with another person."

"An open marriage sounds dangerous," said Alice. "But, you always liked a little danger. I must admit, my friends - ones with kids, constantly complain about how little their husbands help as if we haven't progressed since 1955. Forget sex. They feel like their husbands are just another kid they have to manage."

"That's what I'm talking about," said Erin. "I have friends who work demanding jobs, earn more than their husbands and feel stuck as primary care-givers. I'm happy to care for Lily without worrying about someone else's needs, and be with men on my own terms."

"I guess I can see the appeal. Thanks for letting me vent, Erin. Oh, and I almost forgot to congratulate you on your new home," said Alice.

"It doesn't seem so new anymore. I moved in right after Lily was born. We needed a bit more space."

"Of course," nodded Alice. "Children need space to grow. Yeah, I heard about it from Deena. She said she ran into you at the West End shops. Sounds like a gorgeous home, overlooking the pond."

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“We like it. Hey, I’m glad you called. I’m sorry Alice. I know this is a tough time for you. I just wish there was something I could do.” Erin pushed back her chair and Alice stood to embrace. “Stay strong,” Erin told Alice as she pulled away. “Call anytime, night or day. I’m here for you.”

On the ride home, Erin reviewed the conversation hoping she didn’t sound too haughty. It was hard not to come off that way with Alice, which was one reason she had stayed away for the past few years. Something about being with Alice made her feel both defensive and jealous – a bad combination for any relationship, even one feigning as friendship. When she thought about what drew them together in the first place, she realized it was nothing more than being the same age, teaching in the same school and sharing interest in the same television programs. Not exactly the material of an enduring friendship. She would be fine if she never saw Alice again. It was too much work.

When Erin pulled onto the driveway, his car was parked in front of the garage. Brad was in the kitchen making a grilled cheese sandwich for Lily who sat on a stool at the counter, scribbling in her coloring book, and chatting with Brad about princesses. “Look Mommy,” Lily shouted as if calling from a distant mountaintop. “Daddy’s home.”

“I see that,” said Erin. Brad looked up from the skillet where the sandwich was turning golden brown and waved the spatula in Erin’s direction. “I thought we could give Lily an early dinner. I asked Beth if she could sit again tonight and she said sure. How would you like to go someplace romantic?”

“That sounds wonderful,” said Erin. She bent to kiss Lily. “I could use some time to unwind. I had lunch with Alice.”

Brad turned off the stove and flipped the sandwich onto a plate. “Here Lily girl, why don’t you get started on this while Mommy and I go upstairs to talk for a few minutes.” He followed Erin out of the room. She was halfway up the stairs when she turned toward Brad and asked, “By the way, who’s Jessica?”