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## A Measure of Innocence

A dream jolted Josh upright. The numerals on their alarm clock scrolled 5:37, 5:38. He rubbed his eyes, tried to shed the dream. Renee snored. Stopped. Started again. Eager to get back to school, he'd set the alarm for 5:45. The dream had stabbed him awake. He listened for Dale. All was quiet. He was painfully aroused. Dream scenes drifted, faded. His team had been lined up for batting practice. A girl. Every head turned. The girl unbuttoned her blouse. Like an honor guard the guys saluted with their bats. The girl's grasping eyes sought his. Slinky, sexy. With horror Josh recognized Megan, a senior in his honors class. She'd invaded his dream, wrenched him from sleep. She had no right. He shuddered. Twelve years and he'd never had fantasies about any student, pretty as some of them were. Damn her. Damn him. In the dream she'd stalked through the guys. They melted away, leaving him alone, trapped. Her eyes gleamed. Inside his dream he heard his own weak voice, 'get away.' Her eyes slid to the side. Her blouse opened, tight, pink nipples. Josh eased out of bed, checked Renee. The predawn sky, a bruised purple. He was glad he'd caught the alarm before it jumbled their tiny apartment. He stumbled to the bathroom.

Renee heard Josh humming in the shower. She reached gingerly to make coffee, put up toast, every movement a twinge. She knew how anxious he was to get back to school. For days all he'd talked about was the start of practice. He'd refused to discuss the girl who'd called twice; waking her once, stopping Dale's nursing the second time. The girl's mother had even phoned. She'd brought the calls up again last night. She felt raw. Her nipples oozed. It was hard to sit upright. She adjusted her robe, inhaled the scent of coffee, took a long sip. Across from her, Josh slid onto his stool. She smiled, "You look ready." She buttered the toast. "Will you speak to that girl today." She took another sip. "Give her a break."

Josh set his Yerba Mate down, "I thought while you were nursing you were going to try to take less caffeine."

Renee shrugged, "I am taking less." Her mug clinked on the formica. "That poor girl, why don't -"  
"Poor. Hardly. She's a rich bitch and a nasty piece of -"

"What an awful thing to say." Renee tucked her dark hair behind her ears. Her mother had

suggested she cut it. She was still uncertain. Josh had not said a thing. “Little wonder all your students adore you.”

“Just saying.” He shook his head. “You don't know.” He didn't mention his dream. “Deal spades, call spades.”

Across the street, the sun glossed the top floor of the triple decker. Josh liked seeing the sunrise reversed, top down. It paralleled his view of history. He wove it into his lessons, a story the rich tell on the poor. He'd taken the whole month of February off, paternity leave. He understood it was the natural thing but it felt unnatural. Today, March first, first baseball practice for a team with serious, state title aspirations. His fingers tingled for the feel of the ball, the fungo bat, his glove. And, in his senior honors class all the term projects, including the girl who'd invaded his dream, were due this Friday. He wrapped his hands around his glass.

Renee shifted, tried to sit up straighter, everywhere ached. She tugged at her robe. Her breasts stung. She blushed. She used to be proud of them and now she needed to nurse but dreaded waking Dale. *'Never wake a sleeping infant'* her mother's voice. She tried to catch Josh's eye. “I'm only trying to be helpful.”

“You're always helpful but that doesn't mean you're always right.” He added protein flakes to his drink, drained it. Her face looked swollen, blotchy. Her short hair made her look waif like. The apartment smelled of baby, a warm wet mingling of diapers, powder, ointments.

Renee tapped a fingernail against her mug. She needed a manicure, a shampoo, a massage. She felt a mess. He looked so boyish in his back to school readiness, hair still uncombed but clean shaven and clean shirt. He looked about sixteen. She loved his flashing eyes. She wished she could run her fingers through his curls. She missed their intimacies. Of course he was obstinate too like a teenager. She frowned. She'd read all the stats about the absence of sex and the resultant affairs. There'd barely been time for cuddling and what was his problem with the girl who'd called. She lifted her coffee, put it down, “You know, you're reputation's secure.”

“You mean,” He grinned. “Hard ass.”

She nodded, “No one's going to imagine you'd be making a concession or offering any special treatment.”

“I'm not.”

“So where's the harm in meeting with her?”

“Enough.” Josh knew his irritation was misdirected. “You don't really know about it or her.”

Dale's cry startled. Josh stood. “I'll get D.B.”

Renee frowned, “Why do you use,” she made finger quotes, “defensive back -”

“No.” He chuckled, “D.B. for discord barometer. Isn't it obvious. Any time we raise our voices he goes off.”

Renee tucked her hair back behind her ears. She hadn't raised her voice. Had he? She wondered if she'd ever catch up again. She took a sip of coffee. It was tepid. She pushed it aside. She'd chosen Josh because she knew he'd be a good father. She was pleased their first was a boy. He'd expressed no preference. She was not getting enough sleep. She felt like she was swimming in a fog. A large fly thwapped against the window. Across the street, the entire front of the building was lit by the rising sun. She knew he needed to leave soon. Nose to tail, two empty, school buses trundled by.

Smiling Josh reappeared. Dale's warmth and solidity felt wonderful against his chest. Arms cradled he bent forward. The thumping of the baby's heart flooded him with a mix of terror and pride. “He looks eager to me.”

Renee held her arms out. Her robe opened. She smiled. She felt Josh's eyes on her nakedness. It pleased her. Dale's fingers splayed, flexed. His lips made little round circles. She snuggled him, tried to settle him at her breast.

Footsteps clumped in the hallway. Their neighbor, Mrs. Konstance's voice rang out. “Are you decent. Are you decent.” She preferred her voice to the door chime. “And that gorgeous hunk of yours is he dressed.”

Renee reached her hand out, covered Josh's, “Go ahead. We'll miss you.”

“Me, too” He nodded toward the door. “She's really wonderful but don't let her keep you from napping.”

She felt a long tug from Dale, smiled blissfully, “I won't.”

He patted her knee. “I have practice you know after school.”

Renee nodded.

“Decent or not here I am.” The door burst open. Mrs. Konstance arms laden with freshly baked rolls, a gleaming piece of coffee cake, a raisin studded morning bun, a thermos tucked under her arm brushed past Josh. “Off you go. Off you go, you dashing, young man. And, darling don't you look sweet this morning. I've brought...”

From behind Mrs. Konstance, Josh blew Renee a kiss.

Dale at her breast, she waved, “Resolve what you have to with that girl.”

He closed the door behind him.

At school, he parked in his old spot behind the gym closest to the field. The grass was freshly cut, the foul lines gleamed white. He took a deep breath. It felt like starting over, like he'd been away

a year. Inside, Sam, mop in hand, gave him a high five, “You be the first today.”

“Nice job on the field. Sorry for the footprints.”

“First, won't be the last.” Sam shrugged. “You got yourselves a player or a cheer leader.”

“Eight more and I'll field a team.” Josh laughed.

On the third floor, his classroom, the filtered light, the scarred desks, the odors; old sneakers, the chemical erasers, lingering hair spray welcomed him back, a home away from home. The reproductions of Sadler's Battle of Waterloo next to two, intimate Vermeer's as he had left them. He used them to illustrate his vision of history. He told his students there were of course the famous moments like the battle of Waterloo crowded with memorable names. He wrote Napoleon and Wellington on the board. But there were so many more of the small, the anonymous. He'd pause, switch into an ironic tone. 'In a hundred years, well in my case maybe fifty, who in this room will be in any history book' and then switching voices again, 'unless that is you're scratching your name in a school text.' Appreciative grins would light the room and he'd conclude, 'That's what the Vermeer's do for us. We do not know their names. No one does. But we do know their lives captured in one still moment and so recognize through them the precious opportunities each of us has in front of us.' He worried sometimes it was too preachy but he cherished the moments he could rouse his students. At the same time he remained mindful many of them only wanted to know the dates since that's what would be on the test. He set his briefcase down, reviewed the substitutes' notes. The first, a woman, complained bitterly about his fifth period. 'A disgrace. How do you tolerate such insolence.' He didn't. The second note, a man he knew from baseball, 'That girl, Megan. Third period. She's something else.' Josh grimaced. Was it that obvious. Was that how she'd invaded his dream. He knew he'd have to confront her today. He was not ready. He crossed the room to raise the shades.

The principal, Herb Thomas' loud, “Welcome back, Bro. We missed you.” turned him. “How's the wifey and baby?” Josh side stepped the offered bear hug. Thomas had been all-state in three sports. “You're good to go for first practice?”

Josh nodded.

“Your timing's spot on.” Thomas gripped his shoulder, “Wouldn't have it any other way and while I got your ear,” He gave Josh's shoulder a shake, “You got to find a varsity slot for that Prentice boy. He's a senior now, you know, and you know his grandfather's name's on the field. A true commander in his time. I played for him.” Another shoulder shake. “I know the kid isn't much of a hitter but he is a Prentice so on the varsity. Think of that as a commandment.”

Josh backed away. Not hitting was not the problem. Attitude was. Last season on J.V. Prentice at

first, the only position for someone who couldn't or wouldn't throw and was painfully slow had led to Prentice blaming the pitcher and then the catcher for not fielding a bunt, throwing his glove and storming off. The runner wound up on third. That was not going to work for a team with state aspirations. Josh shrugged, "I'll see."

"You damn well better." Thomas pivoted, for an instant he filled the doorway. "I said welcome back."

Ms Emily Larson, Megan's counselor barged past Thomas. Hands on her hips she glowered, "So, you're back and prepared to be reasonable."

"Morning." His return to school energy was fading. He thought of Renee. Hoped Dale's nursing had gone well. He knew it was all a struggle. Was Mrs. Konstance still there spewing homilies while helping. Would she hinder a nap. Would that raisin bun be saved for him? He forced a smile, "I'm always happy to try to be reasonable. How can -"

"So being a new father has not mellowed you at all." Her voice, like a rap on the knuckles.

Josh flexed his fingers. "You've heard, eight pounds, eleven ounces and long, full head of hair and with fingers almost ready to grip a bat."

"Your poor wife." Ms Larson was married but childless. "I need to talk to you, appeal to your better senses about Megan Sloan. She's called me repeatedly nearly in tears about your unwillingness, your absolute refusal to meet with her."

"I have met with her."

"Her mother is thinking about going before the school board. You don't want that. Mr. Thomas would be furious. Ms Sloan suspects it may have something to do with Megan's topic, modern feminism."

Shards of sunlight glinting off the cars filling the parking lot caught Josh's eye. Students in bright colors milled around. He noted a few checking out his window. He felt like waving but had to, if possible, placate Ms Larson. Was there any way to explain. He wasn't certain he could explain it to himself. Girls flirted. What else were they to do when the boys their age remained clueless. Within known boundaries it was an innocent enough game. Did it not motivate some in his class to work extra hard. When they'd first met hadn't Renee's interest in baseball been a form of flirting. Megan was different. He was afraid of her. Maybe not so much of her but of himself. He found her alluring. Who would not. Many of the girls were sexy. None of them had ever moved him. Innocent or not and he had no idea except for so good looking a senior girl not to have any sign of a boyfriend, in fact evidently no circle of girl friends either, no friends at all. The substitute had noticed 'something else' indeed. But if he couldn't explain it to himself how was he going to proceed with Ms Larson who kept

her eyes fixed on him as if she were a hawk. She circled his desk.

He said, "Emily -"

"Make it Ms Larson, Mr. Bass. You know my job is to advocate for the student, to protect and promote them while remaining mindful of what's in the school's best interests." She put her hands palm down on his desk. "Teachers, it won't surprise you, not my job. Quite frankly they can be damned."

Josh exhaled. "Ms Larson let me try to help you advocate for Megan. You know at the start of this semester, in January before I took my leave, I did meet with her in class as I did with each of them. Fifteen or twenty minutes each. Her first meeting took maybe twice that long." He remembered the sound of her legs crossing and recrossing; of her tugging at her skirt and tugging again as she asked questions, took notes and slid her eyes over him. "Subsequently I've been in email contact with all of them. That's the way the senior honors project has always worked. A few requested a second, in person conference, Megan included and I followed up with each in class."

"Understood. Megan has told me so much herself. But none of that is any reason not to accommodate another meeting. Surely you would agree your first duty is to assist your student's progress."

"Agreed." He rocked from heel to toe and back. "Megan did insist on another meeting after school. So before I left, I think it was the Wednesday of my last week, I acceded to her request and scheduled an after school meeting with her in the library where I knew Mrs. Douglass would be present. Megan did not show up."

He flinched, *until that is last night*. He turned aside. He felt his blood rising, balled his hands into fists, "and to the best of my memory offered no excuse."

"Why must you always assume the worst." Ms Larson glared. "She told me she was suffering from cramps and was too embarrassed to tell you."

Josh spread his fingers, "Fair enough. But now after school I have baseball practice." His hands itched.

"There needs to be a meeting. You are being unreasonable and unresponsive."

"O.K." Uncertain whom he might trust, he shook his head. "Someone," He took the plunge, "You would need to sit in on such a meeting."

Ms. Larson's eyebrows arched.

"And, it would have to be before school, say 7:30."

They agreed on tomorrow and Ms Larson said she would notify Megan.

"Good. You do it so she knows you will be present."

Baseball practice was exhilarating also exhausting. He didn't get home until dark. Renee was lying in their bed Dale tucked by her side. Finger to her lips, she whispered. "He finally drifted off."

Josh, grinned, held up the large bouquet his third period class had given him and then the small cake with blue icing 'Happy Birthday Dale,' "From the team." His smile widened.

"Ohh." Renee sighed, "They are beautiful. Thank them from me. And the cake, how special."

He toed his shoes off, stretched out beside her.

"Have you had anything to eat?" She laced her fingers with his. "You resisted the cake. I saved you Mrs K's raisin bun."

He chuckled "For sure." He brought her hand to his lips "You don't even like raisins." He blew against her ear. She shivered. "How was nursing? How long did Mrs K stay?" He touched her lips with one finger, beamed, "and you got your wish."

Renee sighed. Her wish. Nursing remained hard. It did not seem to come naturally. Dale had trouble starting and then would stop. Her nipples, her whole breasts ached all the time. She worried he was not gaining weight. "Mrs. K helped all morning." She tried to resettle herself "What was my wish?" The pressure in her back eased. "Lying here between Dale and you I don't think I have any other wishes." She mussed his hair.

"Oh, yes you do." He hummed. "You do. You were all over my hard ass about it this morning." He caught her hand. "I've set up a meeting with that girl Megan to be chaperoned by her counselor tomorrow morning." He did not mention his dream or explain why he'd insisted on a chaperone. He grinned, reached her hand to his lips. "Practice was pretty cool. The guys cracked up when I asked who baked the cake. Turns out it was some of their girl friends."

Tuesday, Josh left before Renee was awake. He wore a tie. It was late when he got home. After the first day's high, the second, had been a disaster. It had ended with Prentice blowing up practice and began with Ms. Larson not showing up for the meeting with Megan. There was no one to talk to about that, least of all Renee. He shrank from protesting his innocence. Degrading and demeaning. No one prevailed by claiming innocence. It had gone wrong, sadly wrong. He blamed himself for letting her goad him. As the adult in the room, he was supposed to be in charge. In the dark, he tiptoed around the kitchen. Renee had left him a plate of spaghetti. A frying odor floated over the baby smells. He opened the kitchen window. Renee's voice came from the bedroom, "How was practice?"

"Sorry if I woke you?" He twirled a fork in the spaghetti.

It was cold.

“You didn't. I was waiting up for you. How does it feel after doing the right thing?”

Josh blushed, glad she couldn't see him. “Did Mrs K come to help. How was D.B.”

“Oh stop calling him that. Call him Dale. There was no discord. I just got upset. He got upset. Mrs. K tried. It took a long time before Dale stopped crying. I asked why would such a tiny innocent being like him cry like that. And Mrs. K said, nobody's innocent.” The tension in Renee's voice rose. “And that got me so upset at her.” Her voice relaxed, “And now I feel almost like laughing. She's been so helpful and you're home.”

A police siren wailed. Blue and red lights flashed in the window. A following ambulance splayed red lights across the glass. Josh closed the curtains.

“I left you a plate. How was your meeting? Were you able to help the poor girl and get her to stop calling.” Renee was not at all certain why this particular student, amongst hundreds, crowded her mind. She'd heard some about a baseball problem named Prentin or something like that. She turned on her lamp. “Are you coming in”

“I will.” Josh nodded. “I will in a moment. It was all awful. Ms Larson did not show up as she was supposed to and then Megan cut third period.” He slid his fork in the sink. “I haven't seen or heard from either since. And, practice, thank you, was a hell scape.”

Dale cried out. Josh froze. Was the baby reacting to his mood. Renee scooped him up. Dale wailed in her arms, arched his back, thrashed his head against her breast. She stroked his hair. “I told you. He's been like this all day.” The baby gasped, cried until he hiccuped, choked, cried again. Renee slipped a finger under his diaper, “I just changed him. So, it's not that.” Her voice was exhausted. “It's been like this -”

“That's sad.” At the same time he was relieved to think it wasn't his mood that had set Dale off. “Let me.” He lifted him from Renee's arms. Frog like, his tiny arms and legs jerked.

“Mrs. K said to lie him on his back, rub his belly.”

Josh lay the baby down. His hand spanned Dale from chin to toes. With his finger tips he made small circles on the baby's midsection. Dale squirmed. His mouth opened. He crammed two fingers in, relaxed.

They fell asleep as they were.

Before school Wednesday, Mr. Thomas caught Josh in the hall. One hand gripping his shoulder, Mr. Thomas steered him into the office, closed the door. “Sit down.” He pointed. “Now, that did not take long. I'm suspending you as coach effective immediately.”



Josh did not sit. He shook his head, "If this is about Prentice, it's not right. It's not right at all. You can ask anybody. Did he tell you what he did. He refused to take b.p. He started shouting they were going to throw at him. Deliberately. He was swinging his bat like a madman, shouting it's a conspiracy. They're all going -."

"No." Thomas cut him off. "No it's got nothing to do with Prentice though that too is another situation that is going to have to be remedied." He waved at Josh to sit.

Josh shrugged. The office shelves were lined with trophies and plaques from Thomas' career, two generations ago. There wasn't a book visible.

"This is about Mrs. Sloan. She is filing a complaint with the board that you harassed, molested is her word, her daughter, Megan. The girl is home crying and if this becomes a police matter, I'm not saying it will or should, but I have to remind you, board policy, you'll be suspended without pay."

Josh's hands balled into fists. "Do you -"

Heavy palm out like a crossing guard, Thomas cut him off, "In my limited experience with these nasty matters, I suggest you say nothing until you have a lawyer present."

"Do you know what happened to Ms Larson?"

"What has that got to do with any of this?"

"She was supposed to chaperone the meeting."

"Chaperone?" Thomas frowned. "This is on you." He shook his head. "All I know is what I've heard from Mrs. Sloan."

