

## The Mattress King

“If you want anything to drink,” I called my son, “there’s a fridge in the backroom.”

We had been listening to the Phillies home game on my dad’s radio, like I did when I was a kid, but then the rain came. The Crosley was still on, the volume low, the sound now just white noise. My boy Finn was ten, and I had no option but to bring him to work at my mattress store. It was a favor for my ex. Some unexpected *emergency* came up, and so my son and I spent that Sunday waiting, not expecting much action. The rain delay had sent us into opposite corners. I sat contemplating the intermolecular forces between the window and the water while my son stared at the eye of Medusa, his phone. Studying him pissed me off for two reasons: no child should have a phone before twelve, based on studies I’ve read online, and no idiot should name a child after a legendary Irish hero in mundane New Jersey, even if a Finn MacCool tattoo was the hippest thing about the idiot. Finn was born a Phillies fan, but now that his mom was dating a guy from North Jersey, my son unofficially converted to the Mets. Just horrible, really. This new guy, too, was instrumental in the new phone thing. So even when Finn was with me, he wasn’t with me, thanks to this new force.

“We have another hour of this,” I announced to the room. His earbuds worked in blocking me. “Sorry it’s been so boring. And sorry for being a boring dad. And about my marriage . . . for whatever happened . . . I’m sorry. By the way, the Mets suck!”

I noticed there were no creases in the binding of the new book I bought him from Amazon: *The Once and Future King*. I had loved those adventures as a kid, and I thought he would have liked it too. A stack of books on my desk helped me with the salesroom boredom.

Such boredom, however, that Sunday afternoon was soon short lived when, through the streaks in the window, I saw a silver beaut race across the parking slots. Fallen cherry blossoms damned the storm drains. A woman and a teenager exited, walked across the parking lot of the Peach Orchard Shopping Center. As the two drew closer, half hoping they were shopping for phones at Verizon, I realized I knew the woman. We had met at a singles dance, a PBSN event. Professional Business Singles Network. About four or five weeks ago. We danced and talked, had some drinks. I was rather vague about my sales gig, and I didn't have a card or a LinkedIn account that said 'The Mattress King.' I looked her up online and showed my mom the Google pics. She said she was "way out of my league."

"You said that about Morgan," I said.

"And was I right?" she said.

Now a year after my divorce, and very few smiles, I wasn't having astonishing success with the bar scene. I'm a mattress salesman, so I'm not sure if that makes me a professional business single. On most days I mess around with a tie that I never tighten. My neck has sagged some. It's not like I sell the mystique of a Mercedes. The last time I buttoned a top button was on my wedding day. That it choked me tells you all you need to know. Someone in the major leagues, perhaps, would know all about a Windsor knot and cufflinks and buffed shoes. I'm not sure what type of car Faye drove – this woman from the dance was named Faye, but she was Premier league. I found it difficult to dance with her and keep my enthusiasm, let's just say, in the dugout. What was that they used to tell kids at dances? 'Keep enough room for the Holy Spirit?' Sound advice, sure, but now there was enough room for the state of Texas. Well, that dance was the best chance I had since the divorce papers. Anyway, I called Faye. I didn't give a

crap what my mom said. We got along well at the dance, like I said. I left two messages, maybe three, and after a week, I just gave up.

But now she was shopping for a mattress.

I would normally use my rain sale pitch, but seeing Faye again threw off my game. My reflection in the window helped me adjust my Chia-pet mound of dishwater blonde hair. As the bells above the door jingled, I popped an Altoid. She wedged the door open with her black boot. “Will you get in here Justin?” she said. The boy, despite the rain, lagged twenty feet behind, holding his phone. She shook a dripping stub of a navy blue umbrella. “You’re getting soaked!”

“Yeep,” Justin replied, strutting with black sneakers covered in pink cherry blossoms. The boy, probably fifteen, pulled a black hat over his forehead. The rain had made freckles on his black shirt, half-tucked over his baby fat tummy.

“Good afternoon,” I said.

She slowly unbuttoned her jacket and scanned the store. She was just as attractive as I remembered. She had plump lips and wore an overpowering perfume. Underneath her black jacket a tight blouse of Virgin Mary-blue and low-rise jeans defined her reconstructed figure. She was around forty-five, I guess, with long red hair tied up. I fall in love much too fast. It’s stupid to call it love. It’s probably what throws women off me. Too much enthusiasm. I imagined a nice dinner out with Faye, a quiet but busy place where I would not use a coupon. A place where someone might know me, to show I was a local boy, well liked, and all. I would purchase a bottle of red *and* white, not knowing Faye’s preference, no cheap box wine that I would oxidate in the blender. That would break the ice, and get us comfortable while we talked about our sons and our careers and our break-ups. I had one book all planned to discuss: Hampton Sides’ *In the Kingdom of Ice* about the first arctic expedition, and it goes nut crazy. And after

dinner, we would catch a flick, and then maybe, afterwards, ice cream. I can always tell how a woman enjoys sex by the way she eats – at least how Morgan didn't enjoy sex. She would play with her food, flicking this piece here and there and nibble nibble nibble and take most home that would crust over in the back of the damn fridge. Would it have hurt to have tried licking a soft serve? She always used a petite spoon and a cup. Just awful. At the end of the date with Faye, I would shake her hand politely, and ask if I could see her again. I have old-fashioned Irish values in a new world that seems to value nothing that isn't online. Faye would smile, chuckle even, if the wine was still working, and say she would be "quite pleased" to see me again. Thrilled, I would have been surprised if I made it home without jerking off in the car.

"Good afternoon," I repeated with hesitation, approaching her. After standing there for some time in silence like an idiot, I knew my anonymity was safe.

"My son needs a new bed," she said. "I guess it's called a twin."

"Yes. And my name's Cormac," I said. "*Cormac*. Like the famous author, Cormac McCarthy. Looks like he's outgrown a toddler bed."

"Are these the twins?" the woman asked.

"Yes, but those aren't the only twins on display. All models can be ordered as a twin. This model here, The Dreamstate Pose Sleep Excelsior II, is the lowest quality I wish to sell. ."

But she wasn't listening because she pulled out her BFF from her back pocket. From her conversation, it seemed like she would be awhile so I eased back onto the bed. I glanced over to my son, Mr. Stone Face. Did my son even know we had customers? I asked him: "Finn, do you think you could help me out?" But he didn't hear me. Did he even know a larger world existed? Did he even care? I've always wanted to ask him what he thought about my job. All work is valuable, and that he really shouldn't be embarrassed. That guy from North Jersey may have

fancy doodads, but I give him things that money can't, like bonding over baseball stats and love and stuff. I grew up in this area of South Jersey, and while I'm not formally educated, I know the irony of calling a strip mall a peach orchard. When we were young we would dare each other to steal a peach. I would run as fast as I could, hop up, pluck a peach, and race back to the high-fives. The fluorescent light caught Finn's forehead for an instant: how long could I continue to bless Finn with Holy Water while he was sleeping? Morgan refused to baptize him, as she didn't know that my long dormant Catholicism would suddenly erupt a year after a pagan wedding. Faye snapped me back when she asked for a bathroom. I pointed through the store. "I just cleaned it this morning," I said, but this for some reason startled her. Then it started hard: the apocalypse on the roof, and what rain. I approached her son Justin who was pushing down on each bed.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked. "If it's none of my business, you can just tell me to back off, O! Illustrious Mattress King. But what's with your hat that says "dope?"

The kid continued staring at his phone, his fingertips foxtrotting across the screen.

"I have a kid myself, the one other there, and I'm trying to learn the jawn."

"Whatever. It's just a word," the kid said.

"Ah, like cool?"

"Suppose."

"What kind of car does your mom drive?"

"A Jaguar."

"Now, that's dope!" The kid didn't laugh. I pointed to my car, parked all alone. "You see my ride? A 2005 Honda Civic. Stick. 4 banger. 170K. And it goes 0 to 60 . . . eventually."

He didn't want to chat about cars. I'm not sure her son Justin could make eye contact, utter more than a few Anglo-Saxon grunts, or even shake a hand in a rigorous up and down motion. He would give the old limp fish shake. So I had a customer who didn't seem to care and a son who didn't a crap either. So I just stood there, thinking. A girl once said I could be alone in a room and never be bored because of my "rich imagination." Finn had a few years left before the teenage years. Was I seeing the future with my own (I chuckle here) once and future son? I wasn't a punk kid. I followed my mom everywhere and didn't give her hell at all. I was a model teenager. Never caused waves. Horribly shy with women, too. And Morgan was my first, so late into my twenties, and now, for far far too long, my last. As I wondered what deficiency I lacked, trembling, suddenly, with tears welling up, I glanced at Finn and wondered when he would start rebelling against me. Was today the day? Would he have the same problems with women? Would he find his path? His bliss? His calling on the road to Jericho? Perhaps the rebellion already started with the Mets thing, or him snubbing the book I gave him as a gift, or him being sore I missed his home opener. Or that time I gave him actual coal for Christmas (as a joke) for him being greedy about wanting a Smartphone. If I didn't have customers I would have hugged Finn, promising to be a better dad. I would tutor him the way Finegas tutored Finn MacCool, like Yoda to Skywalker, like Mr. Miyagi to the Karate Kid. My dad died when I was ten. But he taught me how to fish and how to avoid the banshees. My dad didn't live long enough to see the failure of his tutelage. After all, what Death Star did I explode? I had to start working to support the family, and I never stopped. There was no one else, as I was the oldest.

I asked Justin what his mom did for a living. She was vague at the dance as well.

"She has her own company," he said. "It's a dog walking service."

"She walks dogs?"

“Yeah, walks dogs.”

I thought damn, my allergies.

“That’s enough to drive a Jag?”

“Straight up.”

Faye startled me with a cough and, with the edge of contempt, asked, “Were you helping us or not?”

Embarrassed, I scrambled off the bed. I had been keeping an eye on her kid, making sure he wasn’t up to anything funny, and I told her he was a fine boy.

“He’s a pain in my ass, if you really must know.”

“Then maybe it’s you who needs a new comfortable bed, right?”

Her son had moved to the Arcadian Rhapsody Pillowtop King.

“Feel free to lie down,” I suggested. The kid stretched out with his arms and folded them around his head. A mess of cherry blossoms dirtied the foot of the bed. He reached out and turned the knob of the radio. The knob came off.

“Hey!” I said. “That’s my radio! My Dad’s old radio!”

“Alright, alright,” he said, trying to wiggle it back. “Who cares?”

I wanted to thrash the punk, but I wanted the sale *and* his mom, and so I joked that he mustn’t be a baseball fan.

“It’s beat,” the kid replied.

“Beat? It’s the All-American pastime.”

“It’s the All-American *beat*-time,” the kid replied.

“What do you think of the bed?” the mother asked hurriedly.

“I don’t like this one.”

“How about this one?” she said, sitting on the next model. “I like this one.”

The boy peeled one of the cherry blossoms from his sneaker, rolled it, then sniffed it and smirked, “Mom, that’s a P.O.S.”

“Watch your language young man!”

He flicked the blossom like a booger and said, “I didn’t say piece of shit.”

“You shouldn’t talk that way to a lady, young man,” I said.

Faye stared at me. “Please. I can handle this.” Then she turned to her son. “I’m warning you. We can leave right now. Listen. When it’s your money you can...”

Her BFF cried out in a series of chimes. “If this is your father again!” Faye sat on my cluttered desk. I was alone again with my thoughts, standing like a petrified fool. I read that 62% of women checked cell phones during sex. And another study found that some “57% of American women would rather give up sex than their smartphones for one week.” I saved the articles, in case I ever needed hard evidence in an argument. Finn rolled away from her in my executive chair and faced the wall. Medusa still held her mystical power over him. I wondered what he was seeing. What was more interesting on his phone than this live drama, full of tension, unfolding in the store? He liked to roll around the room, but now he sat, silent as stone. To my own modern-day Lorelei, I was offended, really, that Faye did not recognize me. True, it was dark at the dance. True, perhaps she had a few drinks. But it wasn’t that long ago. She couldn’t have been too into me if she didn’t start stalking me online, looking for any evidence not to date me. I have almost no digital footprint. As she talked, she picked up the wooden frame with the picture of my son Finn in his baseball uniform. I suddenly felt inspired to help this boy so I asked him to check out the beds. I pushed on the mattress. I imagined taking his mom right there and then in a mad fit of passion, at least once in my life. “This one’s got the right amount of give.”



“What?”

“Go ahead. Lie down. Don’t be shy. This one’s *just* right,” I said like Goldilocks.

Just then I heard broken glass.

“Oh,” she said, looking down. “I must have nudged it.”

The oak frame fell. I said it was okay. It was cheap frame bought with a 50% coupon from AC Moore. I picked out the shards of glass from the edges of the frame. A jagged point sliced my finger. I snagged a tissue from my porcelain baseball dispenser and wrapped it around bloody finger. The picture was not damaged.

“That’s Finn,” I said, showing the picture. “My son. Finn. He’s over there, facing the wall. I named him after the legendary Irish warrior, Finn MacCool.”

She chuckled, I think. “I can see the resemblance.” She checked the time on her phone.

I rolled up my sleeve. “That’s Finn MacCool. Ever heard of him?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

I rubbed the tattoo like a good-luck charm.

She turned to her son. “Have you tried every bed in the store?”

“Yep.”

“Which one do you like?” she asked. He pointed to the one. “How much is it?”

“Just the mattress costs six hundred and ninety nine,” I said, “and ninety-six cents. And that comes with a full nine year and three hundred and sixty five day warranty.”

The woman said she couldn’t see spending that much on just a twin, but I assured her they went even higher. As the boy tossed and turned on the bed, he said, “This one is just right, this one is juuuuust right.”

Faye said she wasn't expecting to pay seven hundred dollars for a mattress. Justin arched his back and pulled up his pants and smiled as he ran his hand over the white pillow top. "It's Dad's money," he said.

I nodded my head, and thought, touché, and pointed my finger like a gun.

"Let me discuss it with my son."

I walked to the window that needed a healthy dose of Windex, fingering the grooves on the golden knob of the radio, wondering about the game. What did it matter? Phillies fan, Mets, fan. Win, lose. Yellowstone erupts. The sun goes supernova. It's all a wash. Why should the result of a game interfere with my mood? And what did it matter what I said about the mattress? And what did it matter that I was a mattress salesman on a soggy Sunday afternoon? I just plug numbers and fill out forms and collect credit card numbers. As I waited, I chewed on the pen and examined my tattoo through my white, threadbare shirt. The tat was born when I was eighteen, down the shore when I was on my own for the first time. I placed my hand over the tattoo and said an ironic prayer to a pagan prince. Even if they both walked out now, I wouldn't have cared. I'd track down a band-aid, follow the game, if the radio still worked, and hug my son. Then with a wave of her hand, Faye called me over. A summons. They decided to get the one the kid liked. "After all, it is his bed," she said.

"Excellent," I said.

As I collected her credit card and pulled the proper forms, the boy stood by my side wearing his black 'dope' hat. While I was happy consummating the sale, I knew I liked her less for her decision. She lacked sound, financial judgement. She lacked the ability to say no to her son. I couldn't be with a woman who had no sound money sense. I also noticed the dog hair on her outfit. And her son rode her like a stallion.

“Keep that thing off inside!” the mother said. “Don’t you have any manners?”

“Nope.”

I wanted to call Finn over to calculate my commission on the sale. It’s the way to learn math. I’m always showing him how much I save and how much the man takes out in taxes and Social Security, which I’ll never see, unless I reach eighty. Soon the rain was horrendous; like the monsoon scenes from third world countries, the rain that drowns oxen. “Looks like we’re under Niagara Falls, huh?”

She didn’t hear or care. She just browsed through her phone when I asked, feeling my gut clench: “Listen, don’t you remember me?”

The question didn’t register. “I’m Cormac. Cormac Nolan. Remember? That PBSN dance?” I ask louder. “We danced, had a nice time, and you gave me your number.”

“When was that?”

“A few months ago. It was winter then. Dark inside the club. Cold as anything.”

“Why, yes, I do remember. I’m sorry. It’s been so long.”

“I left a message, two messages, a third, I think with your son. How come . . . ?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think I ever got the messages.” This time, her phone vibrated. After a quick glance, she said, “Oh my God, Justin. We gotta go!”

“What about my bed?”

“It’ll have to be some other time,” she said. “Maybe we can find something online. We wasted enough time here.”

I told her it wouldn’t take too long to fill out the paperwork. Anything online is just too risky. “You got to test a mattress. It’s something you use everyday for eight hours, and you can’t cheap out on something so essential as lumbar support and what price can you put on a solid

night sleep?" But I knew I lost. I pushed her credit card back across the table. In another year, this store just may be another yogurt store, another burger joint, or another senior urgent care. You see, now everything is just about price. There is no personality anymore. The middle men are just cut right out.

She opened her navy umbrella. She insisted that Justin stay with her. "Or you're gonna get really soaked!"

I walked toward them. I didn't want Finn to hear. The sale may have been lost, but all may not be lost. Her number was still penned in her writing. To prove to her that not that long ago, I was just fine to go out with, I showed her. "Would you like to catch dinner? I still have your number." I read back the digits. "I'd really like to hear more about your dog-walking business, Faye."

Faye hesitated and looked at her son. He shrugged. She raised her eyebrow and said she was awfully sorry, but she really needed to leave. Her friend was having "an emergency." She said she was rather involved in many things, and didn't really have any spare time. "Nothing personal," she said.

"That's okay," I called out to her. I chuckled. "If you have friends, tell them . . . I'm having a rain sale."

She quickly crossed the parking lot. The son lagged behind. The lights flashed on the Jag. Her perfume remained. I noticed that Finn now sat by the radio. He had reattached the knob. He turned up the volume and said the rain had stopped and the game was back on. That was a good thing, I said. And it was a good thing that I didn't go out with Faye. She would have cringed at the torn seat covers of the Civic. She would have quietly criticized the creases in my pants, the frayed edges around my shirt collar, the meat that was too well done, the wine that was not

chilled enough, and that my nose hairs were not plucked and waxed and sanded to satisfaction. And I didn't need any of that. I can get that criticism anywhere, even at home. And I can remain comfortable in my mom's crumbling two-bedroom rancher in Pennsauken that I will inherit after her death. There was a PBSN event at the Sheraton that weekend. And sure, I'd be okay. Hope and eternity, right? Whatever happens, I'd be okay. One day, right, I would find a woman who wanted to settle and start a new family. I always wanted Finn to have someone else, a brother or a sister.

I was about to sit down with my son. The Phillies were losing 8-nothing in the 7th inning. It was a half an hour to closing when the bells jingled on the door. A woman in her early thirties walked in alone with a black umbrella. I gazed at her. She was indeed beautiful. But way out of my league. And for once, I did not want to make mad passionate love on the mattresses. I simply told her that we were closing.

"But the sign says you're open until five," she said.

"Sorry," I said. "Can't be helped. It's an emergency. Try Amazon. They never close."

So I closed the store and moved with Finn to the Honda, leaving the book on my desk for me to read on Monday. We half-listened to the rest of the game. But the game didn't really matter to either of us. The fear of missing out on something online tempted him away and that loathing of missing out on everything in the world saddened me deeply. I looked at my thumb. Such a pudgy digit. It contained no such wisdom. For dinner we ate soft serve cones from McDonalds. He dumped his cone into a plastic dish. He no longer liked cones. "Empty calories," he said, as if under some new influence. I told him I would like to see his next game. I wiped a glob from Finn's nose and asked him what his name meant to him. It reminded him of a shark fin. At least he didn't say "the end" in French. Underneath an overactive air conditioner, alone

with my son, I told him again the legend of Finn Maccool. “His tutor Finegas caught the Salmon of Knowledge, gave it to Finn to cook, but Finn burnt his thumb on the flesh, and by sucking his thumb, received wisdom. And he became a wise poet, warrior, and leader.”

“That’s doesn’t make any sense,” Finn said. “That’s lame.”

“Finn once said, ‘A man lives after his life but not after his dishonor.’”

“He didn’t have to work hard,” Finn said. “Just stuck his thumb in his mouth? That’s lame.”

It was just an old Irish story, I said. Finn had an excellent teacher. Taught him how to fish and asked him tough questions. It’s what I wanted for him. My wife complained I didn’t apply myself enough. When I lost the job at the print shop, I started taking a course at a tech school, but then stopped going. I don’t know why. And then I realized something that made my eyes water.

“Why did we wait for the game when we knew they were going to lose?” Finn said.

I didn’t know what to say. I turned to the window to conceal my tears. He’s no dope. It did seem like a waste of time, forcing ourselves to root for losers. Maybe, I said, it’s like a family, and when someone is having a bad day, or a bad season, it doesn’t mean you walk out, right? “It’s all about hope for the future,” I told him. “Not for me, maybe for you.”

“Dad, you said earlier, ‘sorry about my marriage.’ What happened between you and mom?”

It was either me or her cats. I waited for a response from my wife. I was sitting at the living room table. She was standing above me. She looked at me, and then her cat, who moved between her legs. She smiled, picked up the cat, and kissed her head.

“Why don’t you check to see if the Mets won?” I asked.