

## TAKING CARE OF KIDS

Peg wore her two-piece bathing suit to the community pool whether anybody liked it or not. If her leathery skin and bony old body bothered them, tough. Sitting by the pool in a lounge chair, she felt good about herself when she saw her neighbor Janet come through the gate from the parking lot. Better to be skinny and tan than fat and pale like Janet, even if Janet were twenty years younger.

Janet dragged a lounge chair from the other side of the pool to sit next to Peg. Janet's two grandsons followed. She set her straw tote down on the deck and took out suntan lotion that she rubbed on the kids. The boys, both well under ten years old, ran and jumped in the water.

Janet sat down and began rubbing suntan lotion on her legs, arms, chest, and shoulders. "How you doing, gorgeous?" she said.

"Fine sweetie, how are you?"

"Fine."

Peg sat up and swung around to face Janet's chair. Without saying a word she took Janet's suntan lotion and applied it to her friend's back. After returning Janet's lotion, she took out her own and handed it to Janet. After Janet applied lotion to Peg's back, Peg lay on her stomach to continue tanning.

"I can't believe school's out already. I'll have the little ones every weekday now until fall."

"Enjoy it while you can," Peg said. "They'll be grown up and gone before you know it, and you'll miss them then."

"I know. You must miss seeing your grandkids."

Peg said, "Sure," although she never missed her grandkids. Her daughter Kathleen and Kathleen's husband Troy had moved to Tampa when the kids were still small. Cute when they were babies, by the time the family moved the kids were tiresome. Like their mother, they had gone from helpless little creatures dependent on adult protection, to little tyrants demanding their entitlements.

A boy and a girl, they grew from whiners to sullen appendages of video games, to rude teenagers. The boy, Jeremy, would soon graduate from the University of Florida with a degree in English literature. Peg knew he considered her beneath him. Her career in real estate and her taste for television crime dramas were too bourgeois for him. On the other hand, Erin the girl, an undergraduate at Florida State majoring in finance, considered her grandmother's business experience too unsophisticated to navigate the complex investment strategies of the twenty-first century. Both kids used a lot of gratuitous curse words in ordinary conversation.

After Kathleen and Troy moved, Peg and her husband Bill visited Tampa once a year, and Kathleen and her family came up to Knoxville once a year. After Bill died Peg and Kathleen drifted apart. She still visited Tampa for a couple of weeks every year, flying down now that Bill wasn't there to drive. Kathleen's visits back home became less frequent, every two or three years now.

Peg didn't mind her daughter distancing herself. From the time she could walk and talk, Kathleen had been a daddy's girl. Bill spoiled Kathleen, but that was all right; he spoiled Peg, too. Peg accepted her own jealousy of Kathleen as a normal feeling.

Bill was a keen businessman, although a gentle person. A sports fan but never a jock, he'd as soon go to a concert as to a ball game. He liked the outdoors for hiking or picnicking, but never went fishing or hunting, and never owned a gun. Avoiding quarrels, he stepped in to amicably resolve Peg's many disputes with neighbors and business associates.

When Kathleen and Troy moved away, she had Bill to herself. They travelled when and where they wanted, went to whatever show or sports event they wanted. Only when Bill died with a massive heart attack did she realize how happy he had made her. She missed him, but she didn't miss her haughty daughter or the obnoxious grandkids.

Knowing what was expected of her, though, she said she missed her grandkids. In reality, she pitied Janet for time spent babysitting rather than building a good tan by the pool.

"Have you met our new neighbors?"

Peg welcomed that question. "Not exactly. From what I've seen, I don't know that I care to have them as neighbors."

Janet's eyes lit up behind her sunglasses. "Really? What happened?"

"I was in the yard Saturday weeding my flower beds when they came walking down the street. I gathered they were taking a family walk through the neighborhood, sort of getting to know things."

"That sounds nice."

"I agree, very nice. The kids were playing with a ball, throwing it back and forth. The little boy threw the ball too hard, or maybe his sister just couldn't catch it. I was watching out of the corner of my eye. Anyway, the thing fell into my yard, and both kids came after it."

"Well, Mr. Bigshot head of the household bellowed like a mad bull. 'Get out of that yard,' he said. You'd think those kids had broken a window or something. My gosh, those kids

had sheer terror on their faces. I tried to defuse the situation, I said, 'It's all right. They're not hurting anything.' And he said, to the kids, 'I said get out of that yard,' and then to me he says, 'And you don't tell me how to raise my kids.' I thought he was going to come at me. I didn't say another word. Afraid to.

"They continued on down the street, and I sat there in the grass staring at them. His wife with her mousey bob cut and the kids following behind him, scared to death. His face all red like his head was going to explode. He's a big man, tall and heavy."

"Good lord, Peg, that sounds terrible. But some people talk like that to their kids. That's not right, but they're probably used to it."

"I don't know. They looked awfully scared."

The scene in her yard on Saturday had bothered her for the rest of the weekend, and still bothered her now on Monday. Telling Janet about it made her feel better.

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Tuesday morning the doorbell interrupted her as she finished breakfast. She looked through the peephole in her front door to see the new woman from next door. Peg started to ignore the doorbell, but decided to get the unpleasantness over with. She opened the door.

"Hi, I'm your new neighbor."

"Hello." Peg tried to sound noncommittal.

"I'm Amy."

"I'm Peg."

Amy stood there, holding a plate covered with aluminum foil. She must have been expecting Peg to invite her in, which Peg had no intention of doing.

Amy waited, then spoke again. "I made cookies and wanted to share some with you."

Peg had to relent. "Thank you. Come in, please."

"Thanks." The grateful tone in Amy's voice embarrassed Peg.

She led her back to the breakfast nook and offered her a chair at the table. Amy continued holding the plate of cookies. When she didn't set them on the table Peg took the plate from her and set it down. "Would you care for some coffee?"

"Oh, I don't want to be any trouble."

"Don't be silly." Did she have no manners? Peg offered her coffee, and she should have accepted it. Peg started a fresh pot. As the coffee seeped through the filter Peg returned to the table and took the foil off the plate. "Don't they look good. Chocolate chip."

"I hope you like them. I wanted to meet you. I know Aaron--my husband--seems kind of gruff sometimes. I thought that he might have come across in a way he didn't mean to the other day."

"I've dealt with gruff men before. Don't worry about it." She felt a mixture of disgust and pity for Amy, trying to clean up after her husband.

"Thanks."

"How old are your children, Amy?"

"Noah, he's eight, and his little sister, Emily, is six." She smiled as she talked, and relaxed.

"How nice. They're in school, I guess?"

"Noah will be in the second grade, and Emily starts kindergarten in September."

“They’ll go to Westlake?”

“Yes.”

Peg waited for Amy to initiate some conversation. Running out of questions, she thought the other woman should ask some. Didn’t she want to know about Peg’s family? Apparently not. Peg looked at the coffee maker, still dripping coffee into the pot.

She gave up on Amy saying anything unprompted. “Where does Aaron work?”

“He owns Cumberland Rental. They rent equipment to construction companies. He inherited it from his dad, and it’s expanded a lot since Aaron took over. He started working there for his dad when he was in high school. He really knows the business.”

“I bet he does.” She stood up and got a mug, which she set in front of Amy. She poured coffee into it, and into her own mug, still sitting on the table from breakfast. “Milk? I’m afraid I only have Splenda, there in the packets in that bowl. No sugar.”

“No, that’s OK. I’ll drink it black.”

The younger woman ran her words together and fidgeted with her hands. Peg couldn’t imagine how Amy survived living with the big, aggressive Aaron. Amy’s plump figure projected softness, and she stood a head shorter than her broad-shouldered husband.

Peg resolved to wait for Amy to ask her some questions. When she didn’t, they sat in silence, sipping their coffee. Peg took a cookie from the plate for herself and motioned with her hand for Amy to take one. Amy didn’t take a cookie, nor drink much of her coffee.

Peg’s coffee was almost gone when she said, “I hate to rush off, but I’m expected at the library at ten. The Friends of the Library are having a used book sale to raise money. I have the first shift today.” In fact, she could have been late. She volunteered for the early shift because

there was never a lot of activity at the book sale at that time of the day during the week. She liked to sit at the book sale table reading and taking frequent breaks to chat with the library staff.

“Yeah, I need to get back to the kids.” Amy seemed relieved to have an excuse to go.

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A few nights later Peg lay in bed reading. She'd enjoyed lunch with a real estate agent friend she used to work with. The weather had been nice for tanning at the pool, sunny but mild, with fun people there. She looked forward to a good night's rest, falling asleep reading her mystery novel.

Her eyelids were growing heavy when the doorbell rang. The clock radio on the nightstand said ten-thirty. Putting on her robe and slippers, she walked down the hall and into the living room. She left the lights off, to make it harder for anyone outside to see into the house. Turning on the porch light, she looked through the front door peephole to see Amy standing there with her two children. She opened the door intending to bless Amy out. Before she could say anything, the younger woman pushed past her with the kids. Amy shut the door shut behind her and locked it, then turned the front porch light off.

Startled by Amy's quick actions, so decisive and out of character with her usual, tentative movements, Peg said, “What are you doing?”

“Aaron's upset.” Amy spoke in a coarse whisper. Even in the dim streetlight coming through living room picture window, Peg could see Amy's eyes opened wide with fear. The girl clung to her mother's waist, burying her face in the woman's hip.

The boy said, "Dad hit Mom." He stood close to his mother, one hand clutching her sleeve.

"It's nothing. He's just upset." Now less frantic, Amy sounded as if it were normal to run to a neighbor's house to hide in the night.

Peg felt all her disgust with Amy boiling to the surface, but that was overcome by her pity for the kids.

"Let's go back to the bedroom. We can watch TV." She led them down the hallway. In the light of the bedroom she saw a big welt on the left side of Amy's face. The white of her left eye showed bright red spots from broken blood vessels. "Have you called the police?" She tried to sound relaxed, normal, to avoid alarming the kids.

"Oh, no! I never do that! He's just upset."

As Amy finished speaking there was a loud knocking at the front door, and the doorbell began ringing. "He's trespassing now." Peg picked up her bedside phone and punched in nine one one.

"No, please!" Amy grabbed Peg's arm, and Peg shrugged off her grasp.

The operator took Peg's information, then asked, "Is he still there?"

"Yes."

"Stay on the line with me until the patrol car gets there."

"OK. Thanks." The banging on the door continued along with the ringing of the doorbell. She looked down at the kids, the girl still clinging to Amy, the boy looking serious and scared as he grasped his mother's arm. Peg wanted to hold them, to make them unafraid, but she knew they didn't want an unknown old woman touching them. She started to choke up, but managed not to cry.



“Are you still there?”

“Yes, ma’am.” It felt odd to say “ma’am” to the dispatcher, who Peg guessed was in her twenties.

“They’re on the way. They should be there in less than five minutes.”

The noise at the door was getting on Peg’s nerves. “Amy, you and the kids get up on the bed. Here’s the remote, put something on TV you like.” She gently pushed Amy, who got on the bed, the kids following. “Take this and listen.” She handed the phone to Amy and left the bedroom.

As she walked up the hall to the living room she heard Amy say, “Yes, we’re still here. We’re all right, you don’t need to send them now.” If Peg had still been in the bedroom, she would have smacked Amy. Her priority now, though, was to stop the constant pounding on the door and the ringing of the doorbell.

“Who is that? Stop knocking on my door!”

“You know who this is! Send my wife and kids out here!” Aaron sounded crazed, worse than when he yelled at the kids in Peg’s yard. She wouldn’t have recognized his voice if she hadn’t already known who he was.

“No, I don’t! I don’t know what you’re talking about! Get away from my door.”

“Open the door, you old bitch! Let me come in there and get my wife!” He banged on the door again, and the doorbell resumed ringing.

“Shut up! Shut up!” The racket stopped. “Get away from my door, you son of a bitch! I’ve got a shotgun aimed right at you. I’ll blow your goddamn brains out.” She felt silly saying that, but the cursing made her feel better, and at least the noise stopped.

The quiet continued, and at first she thought she had scared him away. Then, by the light from the streetlamp, she could see Aaron through the picture window in the living room. Standing by the door, out of the direct line of sight of the window, she could see him, but he couldn't see her. His hands cupped around his eyes, he pressed up to the glass as he peered into the darkened room. She was thinking of what she else could do to scare him away when car headlights flashed from her driveway. Aaron didn't notice, until the blue lights atop the police car began flashing. He jerked erect, looked behind him toward the police car, turned, and vaulted over the porch rail.

She could see one police officer start off after Aaron, now out of her sight. She turned on the lights on the front porch and in the living room. The second policeman started in the direction that Aaron and the first policeman had run, then stopped. He looked toward Peg's house and walked to her porch. As he climbed the steps, she opened the door.

"Thank God you're here, officer." She didn't like people who always talked about how wonderful first responders are, but she was grateful. "Would you like to come in?"

"Thank you, ma'am." He was tall and muscular. She was glad that both officers had that football player look. She could see Aaron walking to the police car, head down and hands cuffed behind his back, with the first officer following him.

She was telling the policeman, Officer Connelly, what happened when Amy came into the living room with the kids. "Is he hurt?"

"You're Mrs. Peeler?"

"Yes. Did you hurt Aaron?"

"He's fine. What happened?"

“He was just upset. It didn’t mean anything. She called you, I didn’t.” She jerked her head toward Peg and spoke like she was angry.

“What happened to your face?”

“Nothing. I fell.”

Peg said, “The boy said his dad hit her.”

Officer Connelly kept looking at Amy while Peg talked. “It’s all right,” he said. “I want to help you.”

“We’re fine, we don’t need any help.” Amy’s confident tone, so different from her usual nervousness, surprised Peg.

“OK. I would like to let someone from our staff, a woman, come and talk with you.”

“No. We’re fine. Let my husband go and we’ll go on home now.”

“We’re going to hold your husband overnight.”

“Why?” Amy sounded offended.

“You must be kidding. If you won’t press charges, I will. Coming to my house, banging on my door to frighten me. I want him held on charges, regardless of what you do.” She would have said more, to criticize Amy for not taking care of her kids, for putting up with Aaron’s bullying, but she knew she’d said too much already.

“Leave us alone! Don’t persecute my husband!”

“I have to take him in since we’ve been called for a domestic violence incident. We’ll decide tomorrow where we go from there.” Officer Connelly spoke in a measured, professional tone, which Peg found comforting.

Another police car turned into Peg's driveway and parked behind the first car. A policewoman got out of the car, walked to the house, and knocked on the door. After Peg let her in, Connelly introduced her as Officer Bryson.

"Can we sit down and talk a while?" the woman said to Amy.

"Not here. Let's go to my house." Her tone nasty, Amy avoided eye contact with Peg.

"All right. Where do you live?"

Amy, holding a child's hand in each of her hands, led Officer Bryson out of the house.

Officer Connelly asked Peg some questions, then thanked her and left. She had an urge to call Kathleen, but decided it was too late and went to bed.

END