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WRITERS ALLIANCE OF GAINESVILLE

A Subtle Change in Tone

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The mother at the playground on Christmas Eve was doing nothing wrong. She was just like many other parents I met at parks when my now-teenage daughter was younger. The mother's oldest son was refusing to go down the slide, clearly antagonizing his younger sister, who was sick of waiting for her turn and crying for maternal intervention. The youngest was pulling at her knee, calling louder and louder as his pleas failed to distract her from her attempt to discuss the craziness of the holidays with my wife. The mother was not particularly mean to her children. She was just trying in vain to have a normal conversation with an adult during her endless daycare shift that she knew would continue through Christmas. But still, the mother's tone triggered the fire alarm inside my brain, and I had to find a new perch to stare at the scrub pines on the far side of the lake.

The afternoon reunion on Christmas Eve at Walsingham Park has become a tradition for my wife's extended family that we rarely miss. My daughter, once the youngest of the tribe and now happy to babysit her second cousins, loves seeing everyone each Christmas. My wife's family is close, and although I generally dread the holidays, they are the only extended family I've ever known. They are kind and happy, and I still enjoy catching up with the new mothers and fathers who were carefree teenagers when my wife and I began dating. But I'm also comforted by the schedule. Arrive at the rented cabana around 11:30, then leave to return with my wife's parents to peace and quiet by 3:00.

For years, the evenings after our family reunions were spent in serenity at the bayside home where my wife grew up. Conversations with my in-laws were always pleasant and easy. Memories from my daughter's childhood, updates about the far-away families of their other children, casual inquiries about work. Never any passive-aggressive advice about how I should live my life. Just a welcoming aura that felt like the warmth from a fireplace in winter. It took years for me to get used to it, but it was the first place I'd ever felt at home.

Deteriorating health forced my wife's parents to move years ago to a landside retirement community, so we now spend Christmas mornings at home. But we still look forward to the reunions at Walsingham Park. So as always, we retreated to the playground before eating so my daughter could coach her youngest cousins on the slides and jungle gyms. Our arrival

coincided with the pre-dinner recess at the other cabana, and the preschool chaos was in full swing.

"My sons will be done playing with all the crap we bought them before February." The mother's irritation was very matter of fact. Then she looked down with more severity at her youngest, still struggling to climb up her leg.

"No! Mommy is trying to talk!" The toddler was unfazed and continued to tug.

Herself a busy working mother, my wife sympathized and smiled at the other mother, perhaps reminding herself that we were fortunate to have only one child. "They grow up so fast."

"Not soon enough." The other mother avoided spoiling her comment with levity. She then turned toward the commotion atop the slide and re-raised her voice. "You better not make me come over there!"

Standing invisibly several feet away, I tried in vain to ignore the electromagnetic pulse radiating from our companion. It clearly didn't faze my wife, but the other mother's energy began wearing on me. I tried to focus on my daughter, straining to decipher her words of encouragement to the cousin on the swing, which drowned in the distance like song lyrics beneath FM static. But my mind just could not muffle the tremors behind me.

Two minutes into her rant about ungrateful husbands and biased lawmakers, I had to walk away. I drew no attention and instead strolled casually past the teeter-totter while pretending to look at my phone. I found a safe spot beside a tall old pine, tucked beyond the line of sight of any other parents. No one would notice, I was certain. I turned toward the lake and disengaged. Deep breath in, deep breath out. As the chaos faded, I opened my eyes and noticed a heron gliding inches above the water's surface before landing on the near shore. That's it, much better.

★ We began the two-hour drive home to Orlando after this year's winter reunion shortly before 4:00. Spending Christmas morning at home would also shorten our drive to our weekend destination the next morning. Now it was time to call my parents.

Even before depression had forced me into partial hospitalization more than a year ago, my wife had become sensitive to my discomfort during the winter holidays. We stopped driving to my parents' place for Christmas more than a decade ago, after too many family explosions that I'm sure I played a role in igniting.

My mother was always too busy for quality time during Christmas. Choir duties forced her to leave before 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve for services that ended long after midnight; then it would be back to church the next morning, before her paying job as a pediatrician inevitably required her

attention soon after. The limited time together somehow compelled her to prepare an elaborate Christmas Eve dinner, even though she always reminded us while we ate about how much she hates to cook. There was never any extended family on my side—we'd left them when we moved to Florida when I was eleven and never stayed close. But my mother often invited a friend anyway, who seemed as uncomfortable to join us as we were to call her "aunt."

I had learned long ago to keep any non-sardonic conversation superficial. My mother had always had characters in mind that we were all supposed to play, and there was no point in trying to deviate from the script. My father was a silent extra, rarely given any lines. My sister was to play the submissive caretaker. I had long ago accepted my role as the defiant son who never did what he was supposed to but chafed at constructive criticism. It was all a bit cringy, but by instinctively fighting back with biting humor, I at least provided some entertainment value to help boost ratings.

It took me many years to realize how unhealthy it all was. During the decades when my sister and I were getting along, we prepared for the holiday by sharing a bottle of wine when my mother wasn't looking. Then we all strapped in for the ride. It didn't take long before someone got offended, which usually led to retaliation and then the awkward charade that nothing was wrong. Our spouses, unaccustomed to such family dynamics, counted the minutes quietly in the background.

When grandchildren arrived, they provided some distraction, as their starring roles during the new season were easier to play in infancy. But my sister and I eventually realized that the Christmas holidays were better spent elsewhere. Better to let them visit us on our own turf where we could write the scripts and dictate the rules of engagement.

Still, it would be cruel to not call them on Christmas Eve, and the drive back to Orlando provided a convenient time to connect before she left for church. The first ten minutes went smoothly with the predictable exchange of pleasantries. My mother then moved on to news about relatives I hadn't seen since puberty. My wife and daughter noticed nothing, but I felt a change in tone that would soon take us down a sour path. She was about to vent about what's wrong with the world, and I somehow knew it would be tied to me. I instinctively braced for another lecture.

"My niece was killed by a drunk driver. One of those assholes going 85 in a 55 zone, playing loud rock music. Another Mexican. Probably on welfare."

Innocent enough. I had never killed anyone driving drunk. But had she forgotten that I had avoided calling her for almost a year after she lectured me on my daughter's birthday about how fast I drive, straining to

connect my heavy foot to injuries my brother-in-law sustained in an unrelated car accident? Perhaps she also forgot that she spent my entire childhood and half my adult life berating me for listening to rock music she dismissed as satanic. I couldn't find a reason for the footnotes about Mexicans and welfare.

After a split second of processing, the fire alarm that my wife couldn't hear returned and began amplifying. I had no logical reason to believe her comments were aimed at me. But I'd been stung over the years by too many harangues about my driving and my music. And about watching college football, and not going to church, and disagreeing with her about politics, and about failing in whatever way to be the son she had hoped for. She'd never felt the need to deliver such censures with empathy. I suppose it shouldn't bother me. I'm a grown man now, and a lawyer at that. I'm trained to shake off condescension. I guess I'm just too touchy.

"Her brother is talking about adopting the kids, but he'll have to fight her ex-husband for them. He's a real piece of work. Spends his life on the couch drinking beer and watching football . . ."

At that point I began curling into a fetal position against the passenger-side door. I pulled the brim of my hat down over my eyes and turned my shoulder to prevent my wife from seeing me cover my ears. Hoping my daughter would not notice, I pressed my fingertips against my ear drums and began humming. My wife would have been baffled by this behavior a few years ago. Back then I wouldn't have shriveled. I'd have probably lashed out, rudely changing the subject as I had many times before. But things have changed since my hospitalization last year, and my wife and daughter have learned a lot about me. Perhaps I have, too. They both get it now. I just have a few too many bad memories.

"Well, we're coming up to our exit now, so we should probably let you get ready for church. Hope you have a nice Christmas!" My wife's little white lie betrayed nothing about the tension gripping me in the passenger seat. There was no point in trying to explain. We each added "love you" before the call mercifully ended. I opened my eyes and exhaled. "Thanks, babe, I'll be fine. I can't wait for tomorrow."

★ As the logs crackle in our fire pit beside the Santa Fe River, my girls and I now sit silently beneath a crescent moon, twenty-eight hours after the call with my parents and a 100 miles from the living room where we opened presents this morning. The citrus hue of our fire dances behind us across the facade of our rental home. It's raised atop pillars to protect against seasonal floods, and on the concrete foundation behind us, only a rack of firewood, a picnic table, and a hanging swing separate us from impenetrable darkness. There are no neighbors on either side of the river, just a forest of cypress and

live oak and an occasional dock leading to an unoccupied spot for an RV hidden on the banks above. This is my wife's Christmas present to me.

My girls sit in the two folding chairs, their blond hair and light skin glowing crimson like my bottle of cabernet waiting on the picnic table behind us. A little boy again, I am busy wrangling the fire and rarely sitting on my camp stool. But my fumbling does not disturb the tranquility. I'll leave that to our unseen friends in the forest.

"There they are, my owls." The distant echoes of who-who-who seem to be getting closer. They transport me back to my first nights backpacking when depression returned almost two years ago.

"Don't they scare you, Daddy?"

"No way, I listen to them all night when I'm in my tent. I missed them all summer."

A pair of shadows swoop into the live oak beside the ramp for our kayaks, and their chants now resound with such clarity that we detect flirtation. My wife takes out her phone to record.

"I think they're gettin' it on, Daddy." My daughter inherited my sense of humor. We pretend not to see my wife's wrinkled brow.

I suspect my daughter is getting bored. My wife must be exhausted and ready for bed. It won't be long before they leave me to my owls and my river. But they know I cherish these moments, and they indulge me. I move behind my daughter, wrap my arms around her, and kiss the top of her head, whispering I Love You to my wife through the darkness.

She knows why I'm stalling to keep them there. Soon the moon will dip below the treetops behind us, and the sky will light up as it did while my girls slept last summer at Grand Teton.

"Wow, the stars are really starting to come out."

I often watch constellations crawl across the sky at home while tending Solo Stove fires. But here, far beyond the city lights, the sky becomes an ocean of shimmering diamonds.

At my wife's suggestion, we grab a flashlight and head to the limestone outcropping over the river. Above the cypress on the far shore, Orion lies on his back, the pinpoints outlining his shield held skyward. I hold my daughter's arm and extend my finger to connect the stars outlining his form. Perhaps she recalls books from kindergarten that taught her to draw.

Before long it's time for my girls to retire. My wife kisses me and tells me to not stay up too late. She knows I'll finish the wine. The buzz intensifies the calls of my owls and the ruffle of the river grinding away to the Gulf. I can't see them, but I feel them throughout my body. Each howl

and hoot and splash remind me of how small I am, how trivial all the bad memories are and how easy to let go. I feel alive.

Tomorrow we'll hike, and the next day we'll paddle. More happy memories will be made. My wife will reflect on how much better this year has been than the last. I'll tell her again how lucky I am to have met her, and how hard it will be when our daughter leaves to start her own family. But for now, I'll enjoy the smoke on my skin and the tender embrace of my live oaks. My girls are with me, and I am at peace.