

There are things in life I deeply regret. Like, for example, my ex. I'd commit deeply to this regret if not for one thing:

My daughter.

I'd give anything to have my daughter but not have anything to do with her mother. Too bad that's not my reality. Her mother, in fact, is the reason I'm standing in the hospital elevator on the first day of summer vacation. Candice's mum is the patient, but nonetheless, I had to pick up Piper from summer camp, run her over for a visit, and then run her back to camp before I return to work.

Piper, blessedly, seems oblivious to the tension that runs thick between her mother and me. If I'm correct—and I don't want to be in this situation—Piper will find out soon enough what kind of person her mother truly is. I hope prior to that, my daughter can find positive female role models to emulate.

It's not like I wouldn't be interested in finding a positive female to spend time with either, but that's a low priority. Piper comes first. And frankly, I was such a bad judge of character last time around, I'm a tad gun shy about diving into the dating pool again. And it's not like I'm going to meet anyone anytime soon.

Certainly not in the hospital.

As the elevator rises to the sixth floor, my daughter starts in on me. "Can't I just come to the office with you this afternoon? I can help out." Piper whines slightly, hoping to convince me. It's not going to work.

"There will be lots of time this summer for you to come in and help me, I promise." I love that she wants to be with me. "Spend the afternoon with your friends. Isn't it the water balloon fight today?"

The doors open and we head toward the nurses' station so I can ask for Susan's room. Before I know what's happening, Piper squeals, "Miss Dwyer!"

I turn to see Piper's teacher shuffling down the hall in a hospital gown and robe, fuzzy socks on her feet, and holding on for dear life to a pillow clutched to her chest. A nurse walks along beside her, walking ever

so slowly and pushing the patient's IV pole. Miss Dwyer looks absolutely knackered. I don't know that I would have even recognized her if Piper hadn't said something. Piper lunges, I'm sure to hug her former teacher, but I grab her shoulder, pulling her back. "Piper, no!"

I don't know why Miss Dwyer is here, but it's obvious she's a patient and in no condition to be mauled by an adoring seven-year-old. I look at her and say, "Sorry," as if it were me who was about to tackle her.

"It's okay. Piper, I'm sorry, but I can't give you a hug right now. Mentally I'm hugging you."

The vibrancy Miss Dwyer showed during the year at open houses and school events is gone. She's hunched forward and pale, knuckles white around the Wonder Woman pillow. Her hair bears a striking resemblance to Cher in the mid-eighties. I had no idea that volume was lurking under the ponytail holders she normally kept it in. I'm about to ask her if she's alight when the voice that fuels my nightmares bellows down the hall.

"There you are! Sterling Kane, you are one of the most useless men I've ever met. Look at her hair! How could you let her go out looking like that?"

I close my eyes tightly so Candice can't see me rolling them. She hates when I roll my eyes. I don't know how to tell her she's virtually the only person on Earth with whom it is a problem.

"Piper looks fine." I glance at our daughter, her wavy hair in a crooked ponytail. "She did it herself and didn't want me to fix it. I respected her autonomy."

Miss Dwyer gives Piper a small thumbs up. Piper, in response, proudly flips her ponytail. I love her sass and spirit. Also, it's why I didn't fix her hair.

"She looks like a homeless child!" Candice wails, drawing the curious eyes of the other passengers in the elevator. "What will my mother think?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to say, "your mother, your problem," but I think better of it. Candice's already off her rocker most days. With her mother in the hospital, she's even worse.

I glance at Miss Dwyer, who has shuffled off to sit in a blue chair. She's having a tremendous amount of trouble moving. It's clear to see how much pain she's in. Poor woman.

And poor me for having to deal with Candice. I say through gritted teeth, "I hope Susan will be appreciative of the fact that her granddaughter is here to see her, especially considering that it's not your day with her." A low blow, I know, but Candice's never flexible when it's one of her days with Piper. My lawyer keeps advising me to treat Candice how I want to be treated, not how she treats me. Too bad Candice's not likewise acquainted with the golden rule.

In fact, the only rule she seems to be acquainted with is "my way or the highway." I gladly took that highway, but sharing Piper will always tie me to her unfortunately. I'll never be able to get as far away as I'd like. At this point, we've been apart for longer than we were ever together in the first place.

Piper nervously tries to smooth down her hair. When she's around her mother, I see my beautiful daughter wilt like a picked flower. I wish there was a way to get Piper away from her mother without hurting her, but I don't think there is. For better or worse, Candice is her mother. It's my job to make sure Piper flourishes despite that.

"Come on. Grandma was asking why you weren't here sooner."

I look at my watch as they walk away. It's five 'til twelve. I wasn't even supposed to bring Piper until noon. I'm not so subtle about rolling my eyes this time. Even if Candice could see it, I'm sure she'd ignore it like she usually does. I'm not sure if she even knows that she's off her trolley or if this behavior is acceptable in her world. I nod toward Miss Dwyer, though I can't tell if she's asleep or not. "It was nice to see you again, Miss Dwyer." Then, I meander away, entertaining myself with a game on my phone while I wait. I'm not the biggest fan of hospitals, and I do my best

to ignore everything around me. It's easier that way than to acknowledge that there are people dying here.

I hear my daughter's voice before I see her. "Hi Miss Dwyer, again! Dad!" Then, Piper bounds out of the room, relatively unscathed by the visit. I swear they just walked away. "Okay, Dad, I'm ready!"

"You're done?" I can't help the words from flying out of my mouth. But with Piper's teacher standing there trying to make it back to her room, it would be impolite to ignore her. "Hi again. Did you have a nice walk, Miss Dwyer? Are you feeling any better after your walk?" I know it's repetitive and bumbling, but I'm a bit thrown by how little time Piper was in with her grandmother. Plus, I'm not sure what to say to Miss Dwyer, who's obviously in pain.

"Milie. We're not in school now."

Before I can respond, Candice walks up. It took us longer to find a parking spot than it did for Piper to visit her grandmother.

"My mother isn't up for company right now. Take her home."

I roll my eyes. I don't even care anymore. I'm fed up with her. "Already? I thought we'd be here for a bit."

"Well, she's tired and needs to rest."

You see, this is the sort of rubbish Candice pulls all the time. She has me jumping through hoops, making me feel like the bad guy, when she didn't even see if her mother wanted visitors.

"Right. Why is she in again?" That was something Candice never filled me in on. I never cared for Susan, but I don't wish her ill. Also, Candice is taking up the hallway, blocking Miss Dwyer—er, Millie's path. I take Candice's arm and gently pull her toward me so Millie can pass.

"She had a vaginal rejuvenation."

I drop her arm as if touching her would burn me. If I could figure out a way to scream at Candice without Piper hearing, I would. I hiss, "Are you kidding me? This is no place for a child to be. I thought it was something vital to her health, which is the only reason why I even agreed to bring Piper on my lunch hour."

How am I supposed to explain this to my daughter? She'll want to know—she *always* wants to know. I don't think she even knows what a fanny—vagina is, let alone all the reasons why her sixty year-old grandmother would need it rejuvenated. Frankly, the mental picture makes me want to bleach my brain.

As an aside, despite the fact that I've lived in America for longer than I ever lived in Britain, I will never get used to the term 'fanny' meaning bum. A fanny is a vagina, rejuvenated or not. That's all there is to it.

But it doesn't matter. Candice storms off.

Millie's still shuffling past, moving slower than molasses. She definitely lost momentum when Candice blocked her path. I feel the need, like I do so often, to apologize for my daughter's mother.

"Millie, Sorry to hold you up. Are you okay?"

I glance down to see the same concern on my daughter's face. Perhaps her teacher's condition will be a good distraction, and I won't have to answer questions about fannies and why they need to be rejuvenated.

*Gross.*

"And I'll be fine. Eventually." Her voice tells me she's anything but fine. I've never heard such sadness before. "How's your summer going Piper? Doing anything fun?"

Even through her obvious pain and malaise, I can hear that soft teacher voice come through. No wonder Piper had such a great year this past year.

"I'm going to have a water balloon fight at camp this afternoon!"

Miss—Millie—laughs. "That does sound fun. I'd love to do that."

"Do you want to come, Miss Dwyer? Connor is at camp too. You could probably hit him with a balloon, and no one would care. You know, pay him back for all the times he didn't listen in class."

We've finally made it back to Millie's room. She gingerly sits down and the nurse helps her get settled. Pillows are moved, blankets adjusted, IV's restarted. I wait, hoping to finish the conversation. Millie finally looks up and nods at us to come in.

"Where were we?" Her voice is sleepy.

My concern for this woman has grown exponentially over the past few minutes. She's a right mess, and I've got a terrible feeling that she's quite sick.

Piper doesn't seem to notice. "My water balloon fight. Wanna come?"

Her eyes fill with tears a bit. "Oh, that does sound like fun, Piper, but I'm afraid I can't. I have to stay here for another day or two, and then I'll be recuperating for a while. I'm afraid I don't have a very fun summer planned. You'll have to have the fun for me."

This is concerning. So concerning. It occurs to me now that Miss Dwyer was out the last month of school. And now she's here, obviously recovering from some sort of surgery. "Piper, I need to talk to Miss Dwyer for a minute. Can you go sit down over there?"

We watch as she scampers over to a couch, her crooked ponytail swinging down her back.

"Miss Dwyer—"

"Millie," she corrects.

"Millie, I don't mean to pry, but is everything okay? I mean, are you going to be okay in the long run."

Tears fill her eyes. "Yes, in the long run I'll be fine. I should be back to school in September, good as new."

"Is there anything I can do?" I don't know why I ask this. She looks so vulnerable. So fragile. I feel an overwhelming urge to do something to help. I'm not sure what that is though.

"No, thank you. I'm getting tired. This is the longest I've been up since ..." She trails off. "I'm supposed to go home tomorrow."

"Okay, well, if there's anything I can do, please let me know."

"Just tell Piper I said 'bye' and to bean Connor for me. He really was a pain in my behind." Her hand flies to her mouth. "Oh my, I can't believe I said that out loud. I'm on a lot of heavy-duty pain meds right now. Don't tell her I said that. I'm so sorry. That was unprofessional."

I laugh. "Listen, I've heard Piper's stories about that Connor kid. If I were you, I'd keep a Nerf gun in my desk and routinely shoot the kids like him who were getting on my nerves."

"I believe shooting your students, even if it is with foam bullets, is frowned upon."

"Yes, well, you know what I mean. And it's why I'm a numbers bloke instead of a teacher." I wink at her. "Do you need anything else?"

She blinks back at me, almost stunned. Perhaps her medication is kicking in. "I'm okay. Thank you anyway. Have a nice summer. Piper, have a wonderful time. You will have to stop in my room in September and tell me all about the fun things you did. I want a great list."

You'd think Millie just gave my child a prize instead of an assignment for all the enthusiasm Piper showed. "Really?"

"Yes. I'm not going to have much fun, so I need you to have it for me. Promise?" Piper nods solemnly.

Then, this teacher who definitely goes above and beyond for her students, does the most meaningful thing a seven-year-old can dream of. She binds her.

"Pinky swear?"

My child commits to this promise, absolutely beaming when her teacher links pinkies and says, "I can wait to see your list."

I swear, she's asleep before we even leave the room. But for the rest of the day, I can't stop thinking about her. No doubt about it, Millie Dwyer is still on my mind.

