

*A Long Wednesday*

*Cate Desens*

*To whom it may concern:*

*It is springtime. It is late afternoon.*

*-Kurt Vonnegut, Mother Night*

He was a father and not much else. This had, quite recently, become a problem.

He corralled his daughter into the half-bath on the main floor, and applied paste to her lip, against her will, and made himself clear.

“If you get hurt doing a prank, you’ve gone too far.”

“It wasn’t me, Daddy! It was Algie.”

A backpack was lifted onto her skinny shoulders. There was a chance yet that she would not be tardy, although he avoided the gaze of the stove clock.

“Stop, Brett.” Although they didn’t have the time, he thwarted their exit out the mudroom door and made sure he had her attention before he grabbed his orange Yeti and shook it. They both heard the thrill of pellets inside. She looked, for a moment, sick with pride. Then she remembered.

“Algie put the dog food in there.”

“Right.”

Turning the steering wheel, he played along.

“Did he bust your lip open too?”

“Yeah, he scared me and I bit it.”

He nodded thoughtfully.

“Was it Algie’s idea to play the prank?”

“No!” She was offended. “It was mine.”

Ten minutes earlier, he had careened down to the kitchen, toothbrush in hand, foam on mouth, responding to her “pain, come quick” scream, thinking she had set herself on fire.

But when he arrived, she began her second act, which, if meant to be comedy, flopped. She giggle-screamed, “I *got* you Daddy! I *GOT* you!”

That was when he had administered the Vaseline. When excited, she bit her lip, so it never healed, and she always looked dreadful. And, on top of this, her overbite. She had informed him, whispering without lips in the bathroom, that “*someting* ha-ened to your orange ‘ug, Daddy.”

A clue if there ever was one.

He waved her out of his dented Ford at the elementary school drop-off. Algebra had been their drowsy miniature schnauzer- but he was two weeks in the ground, this winter having finally proven too much for the old pooch. The dog food really should have been thrown out. Well, he wasn’t exactly on his A-game.

His daughter marched to second grade, her two hands clenched in two round fists, like buds. He heaved a sigh of relief at having gotten her to school on time. Crises be damned, he was puffy, and bewildered, and gray, and old, and why shouldn’t he be?

Relief, like everything else, lasted but a moment in what would turn out to be a very long Wednesday.

In a rush to achieve lunchtime, he crept to the office kitchenette on his floor and discreetly emptied the dog food from his Yeti into the trash.

“Ah, even emergency food goes bad.” It was Raylin, behind him. Her propensity for cat-eye liner did nothing to hide her gothic good looks, and he had always found her disarmingly funny.

“Oh!” He said. Annoyed at her eagle eyes. “Hey, Ray.”

She was the reason that everyone at Thornton knew he was a single parent now. She was a meddler, and by the standards of an accounting firm, a clown; but it was hard to hate her for it.

“Fallen on hard times, huh?”

It took him a moment to realize she meant the damn dog food.

“Oh! No.” He said. “No, no.” Raylin looked at him curiously, and his ability to improvise deserted him, just like his wife. The situation went from light to excruciating in seconds. Enter the frazzle-haired, maternal Esmé, toting a personalized hot pink water bottle.

“Good God, is he having a heart attack?” She said to Raylin.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly.

“No, no,” he said, though he felt like he was dying.

“Well, sit down, at least. Raylin, get him a chair.”

“Cancel my lunch meetings!” She said happily. “Finally, a real problem.”

“You’re in the wrong profession, honey,” said Esmé.

His phone rang the special school ringtone.

“It’s my daughter’s school,” he said weakly.

“Don’t answer it,” said Esmé

He answered it.

“Mr. Mackins.”

“Yes.”

“Your daughter has put mashed potatoes in her pockets,” said the principal drily in his ear. “She has also poked another girl’s buttocks in class. She has, also, crawled beneath the bathroom stalls to match

‘pee sound with pee-r,’ and, she was, also, just caught playing Suitcases at recess, which is strictly forbidden at Bogdale.”

“Ah,” he said. The principal’s voice had a withering effect on his panic. He waved Esmé and Raylin off. They capitulated quickly.

“Not doing a very good job keeping up appearances, is he,” murmured Esmé to the younger woman as they exited to greener pastures. “And by the way, we’re still meeting at Bailey’s for lunch? I hope you didn’t get the idea that meeting with clients can be postponed willy-nilly.”

“Of course not,” said Raylin, businesslike, thinking of her mortgage.

Suspension was, unfortunately, prescribed. Could he pick up his daughter from school? Yes, today. He always picked her up from school. But could he pick her up earlier than usual? As in, now? Sure. Be right there.

Unlike his wife, when he was at his wit’s end, he gave up. She would have fought tooth and nail for their daughter to stay in class. But the easy way out- still leads out. That he knew.

From the backseat of his cantankerous Accord she enumerated the physical characteristics of unicorns. Mystery lives on, still, in the backseat. The wet road gleamed like an eye as it unfolded uphill.

“Shiny. Very, very shiny! And long eyelashes. They’re all girls. They’re in love with the boy unicorns. But nobody ever sees the boy unicorns.” She kicked her feet in her carseat.

“I’ve seen boy unicorns.”

“No, you haven’t,” she corrected him. He gave it up, given that it was her area of focus, not his, and set his mind to correctly skidding around the hairpin turns that everyone took too fast but him.

“But, why are we going to see the lambs, Daddy?”

“Because they just got born,” he said, following blindly his phone. He was playing blues music but quietly.

“Lambs at the petting zoo?”

He shook his head. “At Margaret’s.”

“Can I tell you something?” She then continued without waiting for his reply. “I’ve seen the softest, babyest lamb,” she insisted. “And then a wolf came and howled at the moon and scared it off, that really happened. A red wolf. I heard it, Daddy.”

He nodded in agreement and changed the station and cranked the volume. A tragic man’s voice filled the backseat.

“Listen to the *words*, baby girl,” he said. “The King of Blues tells a story.”

He knew so much, yet never the right thing. He was, after all, an abandoned shrine.

“*I’m free, free, free now, baby, I’m free from your spell,*” he sang, and smiled at her solemnity in the rearview, but the happiness did not match his eyes. Her daddy was awkward in his shoulders, even when he sang: she abhorred his weakness without knowing she did.

*And now that it’s all over*

*All I can do is wish you well*

The man’s voice broke apart then and silver wisps of the song competed to hold her. She examined the gardens that pressed up to the road, the shadows between the trees promising unimaginable cities. The frowning faces in the boughs. She saw the low glow of the sodium lamps as they popped on like

mushrooms, all at once. And she cried through the haze of guitar, because of the bigness of the world, and everything was strange.

There were many hills between the Accord and success.

Fat flakes began to fall as at last they escaped the horizontal concrete. The February sky closed in around them: deeper into quiet. Quiet is where play still lives. Finding the next song lesser, he turned the volume back down. They had, perhaps, divvied too far from ordinary habits.

“When we get there, say to Margaret, what can I do to help?” said her father. “By the way, what’s Suitcases?”

He looked at his daughter in the rearview. She was asleep. Well, it had been an especially troublesome morning. He turned up the long drive to Margaret’s house, realizing just then that he had never been here without his wife.

He parked gently and, looking back at her, honked. She awoke cross. “I’ve got to stop letting you nap,” he said, “You always wake up in a terrible mood.”

He made her come with him to the front door. The two-story stucco was wreathed with trim but otherwise plain tan, somewhat boringer than Brett remembered. No front garden. He rang the bell. Margaret, wearing a blue paisley No. 1 chef apron, wiping her hands hastily, exclaimed: “Oh! It’s you two. I expected- well, I wasn’t expecting you. Sorry. What can I...?” She shoved down a barking spaniel. “Quiet, Louis!”

The well-hipped, capable farmwoman had trouble recovering from her surprise. She was his wife’s good friend. He was never her responsibility. Yet here he was, empty-handed.

“Sorry, I should have announced. We knew you’re used to strays. Came to see how the lambing’s going,” he said awkwardly.

“Oh! Well, it’s over, the lambs have arrived in full force. But it’s nice to see you,” she said, smiling pointedly at his daughter, who was lurking behind him. “Hello, Brett.”

His daughter said: “Hi.”

She ducked inside for a coat, then led them out back to the barn. “You can go inside the barn,” said Margaret, “Just remember, there are dogs. But they won’t hurt you.”

“I also came to see if you have anything for sale,” he said, once Brett was gone. Margaret looked at him without any of the pity usually afforded to single fathers. She had hard eyes and a squat, German face. She was not unkind. Nor was she pleased at the prospect of entertaining him impromptu.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I do have some off-season... produce,” She began cautiously. “Ordinarily I’d like to keep the lot,” she explained. “But it’s only February... I can’t keep track of all of them...”

They entered into covert negotiations for a wormy kitten.

“Better to think out here,” Margaret said. “It’s all breath and asthma in there.”

She opened the inconspicuous man-door on the flank of the barn, as the big barn doors that faced the house were latched shut. “Gotta keep the warmth in this time of year,” she explained.

Inside the barn was fusty and smelled like wet socks. It was patrolled by four kingly sheepdogs who insisted on cross-referencing their inspections of him. The purity of their white fur was interrupted by the filth in which they lived. On the far side of the barn was a mound of hay that stretched almost to the ceiling, and the left flank of the barn had sliding doors through which the childless ewes and rams flowed to graze on the hillside. Near the haystack were penned the lambs with their mothers.



His daughter had clambered inside the pen without asking. The ewes tolerated but did not like her. They voiced their dissent and flowed away from her passive-aggressively. She approached a dun-colored lamb lying on its side on a small wooden platform inside the pen, for some reason unguarded by its mother. She pet it. It was dirty. Its wool was hard with dirt, and something else, too, something stiff and brown. Her face was cold, and her arms. She stroked it.

The lamb, lying sweetly on its wooden structure, bit her. She stared down at her red fingers, a wail building in her.

Margaret, ruffled at such a reflex-less child, shouted a moment too late. "Watch out for that one! He's a bit too friendly- doesn't mean anything by it!"

Her father, too, was anxious to show his concern. "Did it get you?" He asked, gray eyes darting underneath his gray beard. He was, Margaret noticed for the hundredth time, so much older than his wife.

Brett stood alone in the pen, she was cold, and everything was taking on the sob of nighttime.

"You ok, love?" Asked Margaret, detaining Brett as she attempted to flee the barn. "Let me see. You aren't bleeding?"

Brett closed her eyes and screamed like a monkey. The dogs looked at her injuriously. Then she opened them.

"That sheep is *dirty!*" She proclaimed. "Can we *go* now?"

"No, you may not *go*," said Margaret, laughing. "First of all, you need to apologize to me for screaming in my face. Then you need to apologize to the animals for scaring them."

"Apologize, honey," her father repeated.

"Fine," said Brett. "Sorry."

"Now the dogs," Margaret insisted.

“Mom?” said a quiet voice at the back of the barn.

“Oh! You’re home already!” Margaret went to her daughter. “Who else is there?” said the newcomer suspiciously. Instantly both kids were behind their parent’s legs.

“What’s wrong,” said Margaret, turning around to look at her daughter, and her daughter turning too as to avoid looking at her mother.

“You know Riley. Does this have something to do with school?” Her father said to Brett.

“We played Suitcases,” Brett admittedly sullenly.

“Oh! What’s Suitcases?” Asked Margaret.

“Brett picked me up and carried me next to her like a suitcase,” said Riley, a pinch-faced, surprisingly pasty girl, for growing up on a farm. “And I didn’t want her to!”

“Ah!” Said her father. “What a clever game.”

“It’s not clever for the suitcase!” Cried Riley.

“*I HATE you!*” Brett screamed and fled to the car. It was unclear just whom she hated.

He followed her out and locked it. The Accord beeped merrily.

She jiggled the door handle.

“Don’t you want a kitten, darling?” Her father called desperately.

“*NO!*”

He realized, at the same instant as Margaret, that Brett had no coat, only a thin sweater, which was stained with bawdy marinara on the front. He comforted her and gave her the red overcoat he wore, which his late mother had given him for Christmas back in ‘99. It was ill-suited for Brett but all he could give. He turned her loose in the pen with the ewes and the rams. Margaret did the same with Riley and turned on

the yellow lights in the barn as the night came down wisely, like age to a woman. The country squirrels were crying.

“Let’s hope they discover the excitement of mud together,” she said. Then she showed him the kittens in a cardboard box in the barn. The sheepdogs sniffed it curiously, one jumped and put paws on his chest, and they deigned to let him pass. He bought a kitten from her. He missed his wife.

“Brett’s had it hard,” he told her. “Her mom just announced she’s moving to St. Paul. She’s had a rough go of it ever since winter break. We’re splitting custody, weeks and weekends, but a lot of time with me while her mom gets settled.”

“Yeah, no shit, she’s had a tough time.” Margaret said. They were sitting outside on the patio although it would have been more pleasant to go in. Luckily Margaret had a metal outdoor heater which she turned on and he didn’t miss his coat. She also brought out Louis, the house dog. The sunset flashed once like a gun and blew away.

“I hope we didn’t interrupt your afternoon by showing up unannounced.”

“Well, you did. I was to do a casserole before Riley got home.” She had run the gauntlet of divorce already. He and Ellen had visited each subsequent spring when Brett was three, four, and five. But they had missed six and seven. “Make sure you call next time. A kitten will help.” She changed the subject ineptly.

“You think?”

“It’ll help you,” she clarified.

“I suspected it wouldn’t work out,” she said, consoling Louis.

“With Ellen?” He was shocked. He always thought they had had her maid-of-honor blessing.

“Who are you to have things work out for you?” she said fiercely. “Who are you to say, for certain, that you know what will happen. And you rushed it, anyway.”

“We have a daughter,” he said quietly. “I just thought it was going to work. But now- now there’s no one to lie and tell me they love the trumpet, even after dinner. Brett screams even when I play Greensleeves.”

“Sometimes I just want to shake Riley, hard, by the shoulders, she’s taking her sweet time growing up. She’s too fragile, I feel like I have to hurt her to compensate,” she spoke in the rushed, self-righteous way that people do when they finally get to talk about what they care about.

“She’s coping well. You’ve done well.”

Margaret nodded satisfactorily. She was smoking, and the smell took him to another decade. One where he knew backseats. He felt like he was at last sitting up and taking in the ruin of his life.

“Now that I don’t have my wife to distract me, I have a lot of time to read to Brett,” he said.

“What? It’s the truth.”

“Daddy?” She said sleepily, as they finally were leaving. The car’s headlights spotlighted runty pines not worth noticing in the daylight. There was, in Margaret’s driveway, that country feeling of unboxed black sky, the mischievous possibility of wagging bear tails, and they were full at last with thick ham and eggs that Margaret, that friend, had plattered and given. “Daddy?” She said again.

“Buckle,” he reminded her.

“Can I see Mommy tomorrow?”

No, let me wake you with sausages and radio. No, let me shove away your dreams, he thought as he looked at her curled in his red overcoat, so small it made him sad. She was, like him, alone in this.

“Of course you can, honey. I’ll take you to St. Paul.”

“Ok.”

She went back to peeking in the shoebox with her kitten in it, which she was not supposed to do.

“So are you still mad at Riley?”

“No.” She said shortly, her face closed down.

“Ok. Let’s leave, huh?” He said, and turned the car on.

“Hold on a second, though,” he said, and she groaned, and he turned the car off and got out. He ran back out to the barn, where he had left Margaret, putzing and getting the sheep bedded down.

He poked his head through the mandoor. “Can I have another kitten? Two kittens is about equal to one old dog, I think.”

“Oh! You’re back. God, take the whole lot.”

“Just one more.” He inspected the box and briskly made his decision based on nothing he could name. “This one’s for me.”

“On the house,” she said.

He picked up the sad-looking gray-and-white handful.

“Bye, Margaret.”

“Bout time. Bye again! Goodnight!” She said brightly.

I’ll name it Buttons, he thought to himself idly as they drove away.

“I’m naming mine Elsa,” said his daughter.

“Buttons is a good name,” he repeated.