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(2,200 words)

Marion

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"Well, thank you so much. That's very helpful." Marion Dorn slammed down the receiver, removed the telephone from the wall jack, and shoved it in a box marked "Kitchen Stuff." She then folded the cardboard flaps one under the next and stretched two pieces of packing tape crosswise over the top with the careless haste of a woman who is utterly exhausted from three full days of harried packing.

Talking to her mother-in-law, in person or on the phone, had always been unpleasant to her. She had always played nice and nodded in agreement politely, and it was a relief now not to have to pretend they got along. Over the last few months, she'd found a great deal of courage not to pretend, not just with Lillian but with anyone--their friends down at the Officer's Club, very few of whom she really liked or actually felt a connection with, and even with Alan. Just the other week, in

fact, a woman had cut her off with her grocery cart in the cereal aisle, and without thinking anything of it, Marion had given her a piece of her mind right there in front of God and Toucan Sam. It was as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, one that a year ago she had no idea was dragging her down. These days she felt more confident, more independent, and--it almost surprised her to say--happier than she could remember being in quite some time.

"Dawny!" she shouted as she lifted up the box she'd packed and carried it toward the front door. A little voice yelled something back from upstairs to acknowledge the summons. "Why don't you come down and put Puddles out back for me for a while. We're gonna leave soon, and I don't want him to pee-pee in the car." The miniature poodle ran from the living room, its nails clicking on the naked floor, and danced around Marion's feet in excitement at having heard its name. She scooted him aside with her foot and set the box down on top of several others crowding the foyer.

"Did you hear me?" she yelled. There was no answer.

Walking upstairs, she found her eleven-year-old daughter sitting quietly on the bare carpet of her bedroom. "What are you doing?" asked Marion.

"Sitting," said Dawn, jutting her blond head forward to punctuate the obviousness of her answer.

"Well, come on and let the dog out, please. We have to go soon."

"But I don't want to leave my room," Dawn said sadly. "I like my room."

"Well, you'll have an even better room at grandma's. Now come on."

"I don't like that room. That room smell like mothballs."

"Well, grandma doesn't want her dolls ruined, right?"

Marion watched Dawn pull at the strap of her shoe. "Where's your brother?"

"He's in the bathroom. I think he's pooping..." Dawn grinned a little evilly.

"You didn't scare him again, did you?"

Dawn giggled and stood up to run into the hall. She stopped outside the bathroom door and cupped her hands to shout, as deeply as she could in her little girl's voice, "Beware the spiked poop!"

Inside a little boy shouted angrily, "Shuddap!"

"Come on," said Marion, guiding her daughter away from the door. "Let the dog out."

"OK, Mommy." And Dawn ran away down the stairs.

"Teepee!" shouted Daniel from behind the door. "Teepee!"

"Hold on, Daniel!" Marion laughed. She walked to the end of the hall and opened the linen closet. For just a moment she

felt a tinge of surprise at finding it empty. "Just a sec," she shouted. "I think there's some paper towels downstairs."

Dawn was in the kitchen looking in the empty refrigerator. "Don't we have any juice?"

"We'll get some on the way," said Marion. "Did you put the dog out back?"

"Yes."

"Well, make yourself useful and bring these up to Daniel." She handed Dawn a roll of paper towels. The girl ran upstairs. "And no more spiked poop business!" Marion shouted after her.

Marion began to walk slowly around the first floor of the house, looking for things she might have forgotten. She made a quick mental catalogue. In the living room, the TV and the chairs would stay. The movers would get the couch. The boxes in the foyer--they'd get those too, and the curio cabinet and table in the dining room. The kid's clothes and her stuff were already in the car, and she'd checked their rooms and hers that morning. "That's it," she said aloud to herself. "That's really it."

She went to the sliding glass door and let the dog back in the house then locked it and put the stick in the track. "Oh, shit..." she muttered. She ran into the foyer and pulled the "Kitchen Stuff" box off the pile and set it on the floor. Then she went to the desk in the hallway and found Alan's pocketknife, which she used to cut it open. For a moment, she

paused and looked at the knife in the palm of her hand--examined the initials engraved on its side--then pocketed it.

She pulled the phone out of the box and took it back into the kitchen, plugged it into the wall jack, and dialed her mother's number.

"Hello, Mother... Yes, everything's set. We're about to leave... No, I know. I wish we'd gotten out earlier but there was still some stuff-- No, I'm just gonna leave the keys in the mailbox... No one will find them. This is New England, Mother, people don't just go digging around in other people's mailboxes... All right, Mother... All right. Listen, we'll be there late. It's what, three now? After midnight, I guess... We can just stay in a hotel if-- Are you sure? I don't want to wake you up... OK, well, I have the key, anyway, so don't get up. We'll just bring in the important stuff and get the rest tomorrow... All right. I love you, too." Marion hung up and returned to the foyer to pack up the phone again.

Daniel appeared behind her. "When's Daddy gonna be home?" he asked. Dawn came tromping down the stairs behind him.

"He'll be back when he usually comes back," said Marion, looking away. "But we're leaving now."

"But I wanna see him," Daniel said.

Marion crouched down to his level. "Daniel, we've been through this, OK? You'll see him next weekend in Maryland."

"That's when the papers'll get signed," Dawn added sagely.

Marion gently pushed Daniel toward the foyer. "I think we're ready. You guys need to go potty--or I guess... Dawn?" Dawn shook her head. "OK, then," said Marion. She grabbed her purse off a hook by the door and checked to make sure she had her keys, her wallet, and her cigarettes. "Puddles!" she shouted. The little dog ran to her at once. Marion scooped him up under one arm and threw her purse over her shoulder "Let's hit the road..."

They stepped outside, and Dawn and Daniel walked slowly toward the station wagon. There was a light dusting of snow on the ground from the night before, and they could see their breath.

Marion took one last look at the house from the doorstep and then closed the door decisively behind her.

Throughout the long drive, Marion thought the thoughts a mother typically thinks when driving from the Northeast to the near South to resettle and rebuild her and children's lives. A looped cycle of What will it be like? Can I really do this? Stop worrying--it will all be fine... She was sure of herself.

Of course, the idea of having a job again made her mildly nervous. She hadn't been employed in almost five years (Lillian wouldn't have a daughter-in-law of hers working like the wife of

some lower-class slouch), and Marion worried a bit that being in an office again would feel a little strange. But she was confident that her interviewers thought she was qualified for the position. More worrisome to Marion was the idea of living near her mother, Dell, again--being at ground zero in the family strife between Mother and Alison and Rosy. But even that would be--in an inconvenient, painful, torturous kind of way--a welcomed reconnection with them all.

Her train of thought was broken by the sound of Dawn and Daniel squabbling in the back. "What is it now?" Marion asked with a sigh.

"Daniel cheats at Uno," Dawn yelled. "He's a big fat cheater, Mommy!"

"Am not," Daniel whined.

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Dee two!" said Daniel, feeling himself terribly clever.

"Stupid head," said Dawn, noting how clever he wasn't.

"Please, you two, be quiet! Mommy's trying to drive."

Marion looked in the rearview mirror with a disapproving scowl she hoped they both would see. They did, and they grew quiet. Marion rubbed her temples and reached into her purse for a cigarette.

They rode along in silence for several minutes. Suddenly Daniel peeked his head between the seats. "Mommy?"

"Yes, honey?" she said calmly.

"Before we left... Before we got in the car before we went..."

He spoke with the childish breathlessness of a five-year-old.

"Yeeees?"

"When I was in the bathroom..."

"Uh-huh."

"I think... I think I forgot to flush." He flung himself back into his seat, as though he'd just wanted to get it off his chest and, that being accomplished now, he was done with all thoughts of it.

Marion smiled and took a drag from her cigarette. She winked at him in the rearview mirror. "That's fine, sweetie," she said. "That's just fine!"

She'd escaped. She had really escaped, and she could hardly believe it. They were almost to Delaware, and she was almost home. It felt good. It felt very, very good.

Getting the kids their Happy Meals had slowed them down a little, and now it was more likely to be almost two by the time they made it to her mother's house. But despite being tired, Marion felt so light and free it hardly mattered to her when they would arrive.

Dawn and Daniel were asleep in the backseat, Uno cards scattered all around and Puddles stretched out belly-up between them. They'd been out for a few hours, and for a while Marion had just been listening to their little breaths, their sleepy little sighs. Unlike her, they were deep sleepers, both of them, and Marion loved to look at their little angel faces while they slept, or pick them up and rock them while they softly snored. But she herself was getting tired, and their breathing was becoming almost too hypnotic. Marion needed something to wake her up.

She yawned and lit another cigarette, cracking the window to let the smoke out. The cold December air against her face woke her up a little. She reached down and turned on the radio.

"--inger, songwriter, former member of the Beatles, was shot and killed earlier tonight outside the Dakota in New York City. The shooting occurred at about eleven p.m., Shortly afterwards, he was declared dead on arrival at Roosevelt Hospital."

She turned it up, glancing in the rearview mirror to check that her son and daughter were still asleep. Then she concentrated on the glowing FM dial, trying to take in the news she was hearing.

The announcer sounded like he was choking back tears. "All night, we'll be paying tribute to a man who is--who was--perhaps

the greatest revolutionary figure of music in the twentieth century. John Lennon, you gave us so much... We'll miss you."

Beneath the announcement, the somber, resonant opening chords of "Imagine" grew louder.

Marion's eyes began to sting as she drove onto the Delaware Memorial Bridge. She listened to the song as she never had before--paying attention to each note, each word. Her head tingled and, as the headlights and break lights of the other cars became a watery blur, she blinked to see more clearly. By the time she reached the far shore, the song was nearly over. Immediately, Marion pulled the car onto the shoulder of the highway and reached into the glove compartment to retrieve a small pack of tissues.

As the song ended, something seemed to break inside her, a water main of tears. Marion rested her head against the steering wheel and cried harder than she had cried since she was a little girl. Tears poured freely down her cheeks, and she could barely catch her breath between convulsive sobs. Her knuckles were white, she was gripping the steering wheel so hard. But it felt better to cry than not to cry.

Dawn opened her eyes. She looked around, surprised to find they had stopped. She poked her little blond head between the two front seats and turned to her mother with that child's look

of concern that combines curiosity and fear. Marion continued to cry without looking up.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Dawn asked. Her voice shook a little. "What's a matter?"

Marion shook her head. She'd never even really liked the Beatles.