

George the Coward on Staying Home

by Cerrid Wynn

George the coward was at home one evening. His wife, the witch, was in the kitchen concocting some sort of nonsensical brew, some dreaded conglomeration she referred to as “Hamburger Helper,” because she was too lazy to cook a decent meal. He hated the way her hair always looked scraggly, wayward curls jutting out from where she pulled it back from a severely angled face. He hated the weight she'd put on, and the stretch marks left after giving birth to their kids, and the tired hollow look she had every night he came home. Watching their children wasn't nearly as hard as she said it was. It couldn't be compared to the bullshit at work. Everyone was always talking about him, trying to get him fired, or trying to get him demoted so they could have his job. None of them could be trusted. The witch in the kitchen was cooking an awful concoction even though she knew he hated it. She'd actually had the gall to tell him if he didn't like it, he could fix his own supper, but that's what she was cooking. Damn it, he earned the paycheck in the house, how dare she tell him she would not cook something more decent? He'd have to put her in her place about it later.

He typed away furiously on his computer, engaging invisible people on the other end in rants and arguments, telling them of how the government was trying to kill us all and keep us mindless while they did it, with antidepressants in the water supply, and mindless entertainment on television. He even went so far as to claim the government orchestrated 9/11, and on and on and on. He called women stupid cunts, and demeaned them as the weaker sex. He told men they were brainwashed pansies, too blind to see the truth. He took delight in calling them names, making them angry. He giggled with glee to watch them deteriorate into mindless ranting.

He was interrupted by a knock on his office door. "What do you want, Sarah?" he growled at the witch.

"The landlord is at the door. He wants to know about the rent."

"Why the hell did you answer it?"

"It's the land-lord," she replied flatly. "I don't know what to tell him and he's asking to talk to you."

"Stupid bitch, next time just don't answer the goddamn door. I don't know what to tell him either."

The sting was apparent in her eyes, tears she stubbornly tried to refuse to let him see brimming at her lids. She bit her lip. That was always her tell. But she shrugged and walked back towards the kitchen.

George lifted his heavy frame from his office chair, and made his way to the front door of their little run-down rental. The place was a hell-hole, and the slum-lord never fixed anything. He should only be charging them half of the rent he was, although Sarah always said they were lucky to find such a cheap place, and it wouldn't kill them to make a few repairs on their own.

"Hi there, George!" the landlord said with feigned cheerfulness. The man was so fucking fake. "It's been a few weeks since you paid your rent, and I was wondering when you'd be able to get some money to me."

"I don't know," George said trying to be pleasant, even though he'd rather punch the landlord than talk to him.

"Well when do you get paid next?"

"Next Friday."

"Do you think you can get a little money to me then?"

"Yeah I'll see what I can do."

"O.k. I appreciate it."

He walked back in, not even bothering to say goodbye to the man. Stupid fake son of a bitch. He didn't care about George or his family. All he cared about was making money off of the property.

"Dinner's ready," the witch called from the kitchen. His children sat like drones in front of cartoons, being good little mushrooms, because Sarah couldn't be bothered to actually take care of them.

He looked around at the run down little house, with the holes in the floor, and the cockroaches scuttling for cover, and his children watching television instead of being read a book by their mother, and Sarah cooking utter shit for dinner instead of making a decent meal. He hated his fucking life.

He walked into the kitchen. "I already told you I'm not eating that stupid shit. I hate it."

She shrugged. That damned medication she was on kept her from getting her ire up too quickly. He was going to have to work at picking this fight, but he was itching for one now. "I guess you'll have to find something else then," she said lightly. He could hear the edge of tension in her voice.

"Why should I? All you fucking do is sit on your ass all day. You don't fucking clean, you plop the kids down in front of cartoons, and play on your stupid computer all day. Why the fuck can't you be bothered to cook a god damned decent meal!?"

She didn't respond. He opened the fridge, sitting nearly empty of any groceries. "There's nothing else to fucking eat in this house."

"I suppose that's my fault too!" she finally snapped back. "Why the hell do you think I'm cooking this?!"

"Well if you'd get off your damned lazy ass and get a fucking job, we might have some fucking groceries in the house and be able to pay our rent."

"Who do you propose will watch the children?"

"Anyone would do a fucking better job than you!"

"Do you want to stay home and watch them? Do you want to try to keep this place clean? You act like I don't do a fucking thing, and you have no fucking idea what I take care of every day!" Right then their middle child began shrieking, and the baby started crying. Tears came unbidden to Sarah's eyes.

"Oh now you're going to start crying, you big fucking baby," George accused.

"Just leave me alone, George," the witch replied, and started towards the children to try to calm them, and redirect them with dinnertime.

“WA WA! That's right, run away. Stupid bitch.” He stirred the slop in the skillet with a wooden spoon, and then threw the spoon down into the pan in disgust, watching as cockroaches scurried from the scalding splatters. Let the stupid witch clean up the mess later. She was trying to settle the children at the table so she could get them fed.

He stomped past them in a storm. “Tomorrow you're going out and looking for a fucking job when I get back. It's not fair that I go to work and have to manage all the bills by myself, while you sit on your stupid fat ass all day. I want this fucking house cleaned too.” Their middle child dumped her plate of food onto the filthy floor, and Sarah began sobbing.

She got them fed, and sat them back in front of the television. Typical. He imagined any moment he'd hear her in the kitchen furiously scrubbing the dishes. She always seemed to go wash dishes when she was pissed off at him. He lost himself back in the Internet chat rooms, calling people idiots and threatening to kick their asses, feeling quite tough behind a computer screen.

It wasn't long after his oldest child tugged on his sleeve. “Hungry, Daddy.”

“Go tell your mother,” he murmured, not taking his eyes off of the screen.

“Mommy not here.”

“What do you mean?” He looked down at the little girl, her face strikingly similar to way the witch had looked in her youth.

“Mommy not here. Hungry, Daddy.”

He got up in a panic. He searched the house, and the witch was nowhere to be found. The baby smelled like he'd pooped, their middle child had overturned a flower pot, the ivy was wilting and she'd smeared herself with potting soil. He looked around at the filthy run down house, the cockroaches scurrying for cover, his children in need of baths, and he panicked.

He needed the witch. He couldn't take care of all this. It was her job. How dare she leave? He walked over to the door and threw the deadbolt. If she came back, he'd make sure there was hell to pay, so

she'd think twice about leaving again. He changed the baby, and he began calling all of their friends and relatives, telling them Sarah had left, and he had no idea where she was, and he was so worried. None of them had heard from her, but he had them all upset. It would be her job to call them and tell them she was alright when she got back.

A few hours later he heard a knock at the door. He opened the curtain, and there was Sarah demanding to be let in. "No," he shouted. "You fucking abandoned your children. Why the fuck should I let you back in?"

"I went out to get job applications," she said wearily. "Look, I don't have anywhere else to go, and you don't have anyone to watch the kids tomorrow."

"Go the fuck away," he said barely keeping his smile at bay. She was near her breaking point, and it would be a beautiful thing once she finally broke.

"Come on, George, just let me in."

"Fuck no, you stupid cunt! How could you leave your kids unsupervised like that. You didn't even fucking tell me you were leaving."

"You son of a bitch! You know you wouldn't have let me leave!" She was shrieking at him. She looked utterly insane to anyone who might happen by.

"God damned right! How fucking stupid does it look to be going in and asking for job applications this fucking late at night?!"

"When the hell else am I supposed to do it, you're gone to work all day! God damn it, let me in!" She began pounding on the glass window, continuing to shriek at the top of her lungs, and the children began wailing about wanting their mom. The next thing George heard was the unmistakable sound of shattering glass.

He released the deadbolt, and yanked the door back. Sarah stood in shock, her hand raised as if she were ready to knock on the pane of glass again, blood trailing down her arm where she'd cut herself. Glass littered the ground. She looked completely stunned, and then utterly ashamed. "God damn it, Sarah. Now see what the fuck you've

done! We can't fucking afford to replace that!" She broke down bawling right there. "Get the fuck in here, and I'll see if I can board over it."

She walked in, her head hanging, tears streaming down her face. The two oldest children ran to her and clung to her legs, and the baby began reaching for her. George grabbed her arm and turned it so he could inspect the cut. "That was fucking stupid. You're lucky that cut wasn't worse."

She didn't respond. She just kept crying, as she pulled the children from her and went to the bathroom to clean it up. George found a board to put over the window, dreading what the Landlord would have to say about it.

Sarah didn't talk the rest of the evening, just cuddled with the children, silently picking up the potted plant, and giving all three of them baths before tucking them into the cleanest sheets she had in a house with no washer or dryer, and no tub to be able to wash them in effectively. George grabbed the job applications and threw them in the garbage can, dumping the remainder of the Hamburger helper on top of them to insure she would not be able to fill them out.

The witch wasn't totally useless in the house he supposed. Maybe she did the best with what she had. He'd get paid Friday, and appease the Lord of the land like a good fucking Serf, and all would resume as normal. He went out and gently talked to her, and told her her biggest job was the home, and that he'd had a bad day. He told her there was no way he could stay home and care for the children the way she did. Really it just mattered to him that she and everyone else knew he was the man of the house, the breadwinner, but he told her he didn't really want her to go to work, he was just frustrated by the bills.

She sat in silence, holding back tears. She barely said two words to him before she blew up the air mattress she slept on every night, while he slept on the couch. She'd bandage her arm, the large band aid a garish dark shade of flesh against her pale skin.

The next morning he got up and didn't disturb Sarah or the children. He'd have to leave her be for a few days. She would be tender to poke at. But give her a couple weeks of compliments and praise and she'd be ready to pick a fight with again. Maybe she'd do something even stupider this time that he could lord over her. He'd certainly have fun with the broken window in the next fight, accusing her of being the violent and destructive one in the relationship. He knew she'd spend the day furiously scrubbing the best she could too, despite the hot house in the middle of a Southern Summer, and despite no matter how hard she tried, the place would always look filthy.

He went to work in a good mood. He had no doubt he'd have a clean house tonight, and something besides Hamburger Helper for Dinner. The Witch would scrounge something decent together, and she would be exhausted and easy to coax a lay out of. It would be a good day. It was great, right up until his manager tapped him on the shoulder and asked to see him in the office. "I'm sorry George, your work has not been up to par, and you don't have a well developed sense of teamwork. I have to let you go."

"Well fuck you very much too!" George exclaimed before waltzing back to his desk to gather his things. Security arrived to escort him out, and his co-workers clapped as he left.

Sarah looked up with a dust cloth in hand, as the children shouted, "Daddy!" when he walked through the door.

"I was fucking fired," he announced.

Sarah closed her eyes as if she couldn't believe it. Or perhaps she was tossing up a prayer. "What are we going to do, George?"

"Fuck those mother fuckers. I've got an idea to start my own business. I don't have to put up with stupid bosses or backstabbing co-workers."

Sarah walked up to him and put the dust rag in his hand. She pulled the clip out of her hair and let it fall, a beautiful billowing mass that seemed to transform her from a witch into a beauty. She pulled on a light cardigan to cover the bandage.

“Where the hell are you going?” George demanded as she turned the knob of the front door.

“To find a job, George. One of us has to work. This is the third job you've been fired from . You promised the landlord a payment on Friday.”

“I thought we agreed you would stay home and watch the kids.”

“No. You agreed to that. I didn't. It's your turn.”

She was out the door before he could say anything else. He looked at the dust rag in his hand, and the children clapping and singing about having daddy home, and he was terrified.

