

Freddy in the Future

by Elizabeth Hegwood

I only meant to run to K-Mart. By the time I realize the DJ has been playing an America album for twenty minutes and change the satellite station, I'm already four miles too far down the beach highway, almost in Biloxi. I'm on my way to buy a birthday cake, since the healthy whole-wheat one I made for Freddy this morning morphed into a black square filled with chocolate goo. Freddy is five, but acts like he's fifty-five. First I tried scraping off the burned layer, hoping I could put the jiggly part back in the oven, but Freddy walked in, quiet and frowning, as if what I was doing now was sadder than the cake itself.

"It's okay, see," I said, dropping black crumbs onto my tongue.

Freddy's whole face looked droopy. The night before, since my husband was asleep, I swirled the last drops of my glass of wine into Freddy's juice cup after he got up again. It was the second night in a row I'd done it.

Seeing Freddy pale and squinting made me feel worse. I put him in his swim trunks and walked him across the street, where Susan Gerhardt sat in a lawn-chair, wearing cropped plaid pants and a t-shirt with a matching plaid pocket. She made cheerful gasps every time her kid, Caitlin, flopped onto the Slip-'N-Slide. Freddy had insisted that we invite Caitlin that afternoon, even though I tried to talk him out of it. "Probably can't come without her mother," I said. Jonathan, my husband, cut his eyes at me and then piped up before Freddy asked me what I meant.

Freddy even says it grown-up and matter-of-fact: *What do you mean, Mom?* He says other things, too, that I don't know how to respond to. Last week I found him dangling a new loaf of Bunny Bread over the trash can. When I asked him why, he said the white kind wasn't good for him. Sometimes the way Freddy talks gives me the creeps.

Freddy blinked at the Slip-'N-Slide, then Caitlin bounced over, calling me Miss Leigh and holding a handful of grass clippings,

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swimsuit ruffle flapping around her middle. She pulled Freddy into the soft streams of water and dumped grass over his shoulder and shrieked. He rubbed his eyes and looked at me, so I smiled. "Go ahead, sweetie." Then I turned to Susan. "I have to go get some last-minute party things. Mind if Freddy hangs out here for a minute?" There was a box of Swiss Rolls at the foot of her chair. "Don't offer him any junk," I said. She stared, and the warm morning breeze blew her hairdo. It wasn't flattering.

Now I feel like a jerk for leaving my son, so I flip the XM radio — a present from my husband, instead of a new car — to a channel Freddy might like. I skip over Radio Disney. Lately Freddy's been more tolerant of my music, but only if it's "dance music." He tells me what is and what isn't. Tom Petty is dance music. The Eagles are not, which made me proud. David Bowie is dance music. Prince is, too, but it's not good. "Yes it is," I said. "When I was twenty-one, Prince pulled me onstage and we danced." It's true. He smelled nice, and I still keep his guitar pick in my wallet.

The rock stations are all playing the stale songs, so I stick with jazz and think about what's in the fridge at home. Freddy shouldn't have to ask for his own healthy food. Maybe he does need more vegetables. Maybe that's why he gets so many colds. After the bread incident, I piled his plate with zucchini and field peas and didn't give him any cheese biscuits.

"Are you happy, Mom?" he said.

"Course I'm happy, honey." I sipped my vodka tonic and watched him trying to spear the peas. "Do you think Mommy's unhappy?"

Jonathan patted Freddy's back. "Everyone's happy."

"Are you happy when I eat these?" said Freddy.

"Sure am. Mommy's happy when you eat them veggies," I said, thinking Freddy might laugh, but he didn't. He just put more peas into his shiny pink mouth.

Jonathan shot me another concerned look, and I was pretty sure it wasn't because I used bad grammar in front of our son. That night, I got in bed and flipped to a cooking show, a small woman

helping a bigger woman repair her pot roast. Jonathan stood leaning in the bathroom doorway and said, "Do you really want Freddy worrying about whether or not you're happy with him?"

I snorted. "Who taught you that? Dr. Phil?"

"You can stop with the smartass stuff, Leigh."

"Okay. Here's an answer. I think it's good that he's coming out of that completely egocentric mindset," I said. "The least we can teach him is how to think about someone else for a change." I pointed the remote at the screen.

The sky is chalky and the water is dull, but it doesn't look like rain. The volleyball nets and jet-ski stands are all set up on the beach for summer, and people keep darting across the highway, like they want to make sure a car is coming before they cross. I remember a new shopping center a couple of blocks up where my other neighbor, Molly, buys organic tofu pizzas and what she calls violence-free honey. She looks anorexic and depressed, and I've never seen her in anything but dark denim and tiny t-shirts and square glasses. She puts some kind of puffed-vegetable snack in her kids' Easter baskets, and loudly expresses her hatred for crock-pots and Kraft. I'll stop at that place, buy some responsible snacks for the kids. I'll even get myself a skirt or something at the boutique next door, if I can find one without sequins. I bet there's a window-picture in the boutique of Paris Hilton in a rhinestone bikini and strappy sandals, laughing at all of us. I glance down at my jean shorts and sunless thighs. I probably still look like I'm in my late twenties, which I am, and I don't bulge in too many of the wrong places. But sometimes when I come out of the bedroom, I feel my husband looking at my outfit. I wonder if Paris Hilton clothes come in real sizes. After all, doesn't the news keep telling us how fat we're getting?

At a red light, I see the beach park ahead on the right. The same three or four families crowd around the swings and picnic tables every weekend. Maybe they're one big family. A few of them are tossing chips or crackers, attracting a swarm of seagulls. A man

at the shore, away from the bird-cloud, is gently plunking a toddler into the foamy oyster-colored water and lifting her back out. I shake my head, then remember Freddy on the Slip-'N-Slide, hoping he won't pee in Susan's yard like he did at the end-of-kindergarten pool party. I imagine Susan and the other mothers eating salads on wicker furniture, talking about Freddy's party, deciding whether or not they'll allow their Caitlins to come. "Five years old," they say, making a disapproving sound. "And with little girls around!"

When I was pregnant, those same women flocked around me, offering advice. Belicia Rodriguez, a stocky, wide-mouthed woman with an accent, asked me how dark my nipples had gotten. "Girl, stay the same. Boy, makes 'em dark," she said. Susan, due two weeks before me, jumped in to talk about her own spreading areolas. "Like this, practically," she said, making a circle with her thumbs and forefingers. When Daphne Van Cott, the quiet mother of the younger Caitlin, leaned closer to touch my stomach. I let her.

A horn blasts behind me and I jump. The left-lane cars whiz by. I look in the rearview and see a white-haired lady with bug-eyed sunglasses beating the big steering wheel of her Cadillac. I wave at her reflection. As soon as I tap the gas, some of the seagulls swoop down a couple of cars ahead of me, and one, of course, drops his cracker in the road. I know what's about to happen, but it's too late. They all go after it, and a bird hits the roof of the pickup in front of me, then tumbles into my windshield. I scream, mostly at its size, and as I swerve into the small parking lot by the sand, the seagull rolls off and flaps into the median.

My fingers are shaking so I keep the car there, even though it's parked across several spaces. I shut my eyes before I see blood or feathers. There's a tap on the glass and I jump again.

It's the man who was dipping his baby in the water. Now the baby is straddling his hip, slapping the guy's chest with one hand and his back with the other. The man is younger than I thought, maybe seventeen, eighteen, wearing trunks with flowers on them and coral or something around his neck. I don't like his scraggly goatee.

"You all right there?" he says, and squats down with the baby. "Been telling them all day not to feed the gulls so close to the road." He motions to the rest of the group, who are looking back at us.

I nod. "Someone could get hurt."

He turns back to me. "You look kind of upset. Want something to drink?"

"Only if it's real." When I see his expression, I say, "Never mind, just a joke."

"Oh," he says, and laughs. "I'd have to be sneaky. Dad gives me a little lecture when I drink, but I could snatch you one if you want." He's still squatting, and he shifts the toddler to his knee. I look at his freckled shoulder, then I wonder if Freddy's starting to burn.

"I'll get out a minute," I say. "I probably need to breathe some air."

He stands, lifts up the girl. She giggles, and he pretends to eat her chubby fingers.

I get out, shut the car door, and lean against it. "I saw you down there a minute ago. You're a good father." I say, watching the ropy muscles in his forearms as he glides the girl up and down in the air. I stick out my hand. "Leigh."

He stops swinging the girl and takes it. "Chad. But nah. Girlfriend isn't ready for marriage, kids, none of that. This one's my cousin's." He sets the girl on the ground. "Go on back to Mama, Rosie." She runs, arms outstretched, back to the people, who are saying her name and cheering her on.

The man, or boy, I don't know, is leaning over, looking in my car windows. I wonder if he's trying to find my purse. His hands are cupped around his face.

"I can hear your music," he says. "Sounds cool."

"Satellite radio," I say. He's still bending over, and I can see a line of whiter skin above his waistband. I imagine running my fingers down his smooth back, watching him freeze up as my hands move to his hipbone. "I'm surprised a kid your age would like jazz," I say.

He straightens and gives me a strange look, like what I said was funny. "Mind if I check it out?" he says, and walks around to the passenger side.

I get in the car, crank it so the power comes on, and watch Chad flip the stations. "This is awesome," he says. He pauses on several songs. After a few minutes of this, my hand really is on his arm, fingers moving up toward his elbow. He looks freaked out. Right when I'm about to apologize, he grabs my thigh. His wet mouth gets close enough for me to see the hairs in the sad goatee, but his head jerks back again. I turn around and see a police car pulling someone over behind me. "You should get out," I say, but his hand doesn't move. "Go on." Then I really do panic. "You can't try anything with a cop right there."

"*Me* try anything," he says, the laughs a little. "You're fucked."

I want to say yes, yes I am. But instead of waiting for me to answer, he gets out and slams the door. I glance at the policeman, who's busy chewing out the guy he pulled over. Chad is treading across the dry sand, already on his way back to Rosie and the happy people. I watch his pale skin, the knotted small of his back. Freddy in the future, upright and sure. He walks faster as the traffic hums past. Everyone is moving.

