

Contract Love

by Jennifer Donnell

Illyana once had George, her big brother, sign a contract. It promised he'd be her slave for a day. A rambunctious twelve year old, he was none the wiser and when she said, "Sign here." simply did. Her laughter at the victory cascaded down the narrow hallway of our beach duplex and she giggled so hard her dirty blonde hair fell out of her bun. She's blonde with some red mixed in, like her daddy has in his beard. She never redeemed it, but appreciates that she could.

I wanted to be with her father forever. It sounded good at nineteen and such monogamy still sounds hunky dory, in theory. Telling someone I've been married twenty or thirty years would sound more loving and stable than, "We divorced a year ago." Or, eventually, five years, or ten. It would sound better than her father saying he'll always hate me for leaving him, or that I'm the worst person in the world. It would sound better than my children being upset that he has a twenty four year old girlfriend. It might not be better than his moodiness or the low grade depression, which I initially thought was his calm personality.

I like the concept of one great love but I also liked the concept of Santa Claus, and look how that turned out.

More recently, when Goose left, Illyana said it was okay because we'd have more space in the car. Kids are like that, practical. She was concerned as the van only seats seven and there were two adults, four kids- with his daughter included- and one on the way. She was worried they'd all argue, endlessly, if displaced from their favorite spot in the car. I'm sure they would have.

The week he left, I'd finally added him to their school emergency cards. It was a casual act of trust, as I knew he'd be a good person

to call if the school couldn't reach me. He worked close and their dad is often out of town. Plus, the baby is coming soon. Even if the term of "step dad" wasn't official, we thought it close enough- as I felt his love for me hovering my planet like the rings of Saturn, there at all times.

Then he left and it didn't take long before we began talking again, casually. Perhaps working on forgiveness and reconciliation, or at least some clarity as to why he panicked and left without warning.

Illyana came home from school, Thursday, a week ago, and announced that she wasn't sure she could ever trust him again. She brought up that if he's *done this already*, what's to stop him from doing it again. I didn't tell her that my therapist and female friends have asked me the same thing.

"If you guys ever get back together, I'd make him sign a contract." she thought, out-loud.

I smiled, supportively, but cautioned, "Not sure that would work, sweetie."

"Ohhhh," she answered with emphatic confidence, "You haven't seen how good I am at writing contracts!"

So we met at the mall today, all of us- our mini soccer team, the whole family. It was the first time I'd seen his daughter, Sarah, in two and a half weeks. She wore her purple hippo shirt, leggings, and sturdy shoes. When she saw me, she reached out her tiny two year old arms and held me as the minutes ticked by, clearly having missed me and confused as to where I'd gone without warning. She soon went into busy toddler mode and ran about the aisle ways of the stores, playing a game of chase. She laughed with the

forgiveness and innocence you have at that age. I wish I had more of that.

When we said goodbye, a tear welled up in her eye.

As she and Goose walked toward their exit, I realized he'd parked somewhere new. Each time we'd ever gone to the mall, he insisted on one specific parking garage. However, this time, he'd parked right outside the entrance where his ex girlfriend works. Not only that, but I saw him glance at her storefront, to see if she was working, when he walked from the bathroom. I thought it was natural curiosity, until I realized he parked there as well.

After he left, I regarded her pale, skinny frame helping customers, as my children ate their snack on a nearby bench and Goose's baby kicked inside me. I thought about the seductive half nude images of her, which he took six months to delete from his phone.

I remembered how, before we found out I was pregnant, he said he wouldn't want to move in together for a while, though he later changed his mind. I thought of how he's never said he wants to marry me and how he's half disappeared five times in one year.

I thought of what a child I am, myself. I'm still hoping and waiting for Santa Claus, still hoping I'm loved as much as I love.

If I had a contract, it wouldn't talk about forever as that's too illusive, but it would sure as hell talk about now. Right now, how much can you love? How much can you give? Why should I choose you over everyone else in the world?

And it would be fill in the blank, not multiple choice.

