

A Little Piece of Humanity

by M. Barns

It wasn't meant to happen like this— the shutter, the feeling of breathlessness when he touched her shoulder, even after he had pointed out all of the things she had done incorrectly throughout the day. They had been married for five years in February, and as far as the rest of the world was concerned they were happy. They hiked and ate out, posted pictures on their respectable social media pages, and played the game that everyone thought was their life.

When she started losing weight people thought it must be because she was happy— most of her sorority sisters knew that she had an unhealthy relationship with food during college and would often binge before exams and after bad breakups. It had continued into her adult life and she would often go to the same small pizza joint in her college town before and after big job interviews to order a large pie, two cannoli, and a two liter of Pepsi *with four place settings, please* she would always remember to tell them.

That is where she met him.

He was taking his softball team out for pizza after their final game. She thought that he must be amazing, *one of the great ones*, if he was hanging out with kids for fun. It wasn't until two months after they had been married, three and a half months after they had met, that she found out it was court-appointed community service that his father had talked the judge into giving him, instead of prison time for his fourth DWI. That was also the first night that she ever realized he was a drinker.

It started with a few drinks after dinner, then a few before. After a few months he was coming from work later and later, stopping at a few local places to *meet with the guys* before he came home. She never said anything, there never was anything to say. She hadn't been able to find work when they first met, and he convinced her it was OK. Soon after that she was moved in and living with him, married to him, and then pregnant. Now he didn't know that she went to the free clinics once a month while he was at work to get

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birth control. That she kept it buried in the flour jar in the cabinet. That she was terrified to bring another person into this house, and even more terrified to be attached to him in anymore ways that she already was.

After a few months they must have realized that the baby weight had dropped off, and that she wasn't just losing weight because of her happiness. That she wasn't so happy she, simply, forgot to eat. No one knew that she had been waiting for him to acknowledge her: see that she had been crying throughout the day, or comment on the fact that his work clothes were pressed and waiting for him, again, like they were every morning. She kept telling herself *this will be the day. Today he will notice me, and today I will eat.* But that day hadn't come yet, and she no longer got hungry.

At first it was a challenge. Feed the baby, but don't feed yourself. It was a matter of willpower, who could hold out longer. But eventually she lost count of the days she had gone without eating. Eventually the control she had over not eating was the only thing she had left.

When she fell in the kitchen, no one found her for hours. She laid there, with pain in her back so strong that she couldn't move and listened to the baby cry. She assured herself that one of the neighbors would come over and save her, even if she kept to herself. That one of them would realize that her husband didn't want her to socialize with people, and that it wasn't her being snobby. But no one came, so she waited, wondering if he would finally notice her when he came home— wondering if she would finally get to go back to whatever she thought was normal a week ago, a month ago, five years ago.

But he didn't come home that night, instead she heard the phone ringing over and over, and eventually a voicemail from the city correctional facility informing her that he needed to be picked up in the morning. By then she was able to move some, but her heart and back still ached, horribly. She pulled herself to the chair and dialed the number she remembered her mother teaching her as a child. The number her mother said would always save her.

But they didn't save her. They simply checked her into the hospital, called her sister to take her daughter and handed her leaflets with titles like, *Heart Attacks in Females*, *How to Prevent Heart Attacks*, *How to Stop Stress In Your Life*, and lastly one about abuse, that she was sure was put in there for a reason, but no one asked her about it. She vowed if they did she would tell them. Tell them how she hadn't eaten in weeks that she wanted to be noticed. Tell him about the first time he had hit her, bound her, and turned her around forcing himself on her even though she would have let him have her either way.

How the reason she really didn't want to have another daughter was because she was afraid he would do to their first one what he did to her. She was afraid he would have a second person who wanted to kill him.

Poison was the way she decided to do it. It was something small, and she didn't mind if it was traceable, but she knew that she could fit it into her grocery budget, which would give her the time she needed. It didn't have to be much; she didn't want him to die right away. She wanted to watch as he lied on the floor, unable to move, like she had while he was stuck in jail. But the night she planned to do it he came home drunk again. Angry again. Hit her and tied her up again.

That was the time that he broke her.

he next morning she woke up, made him breakfast and fed the baby before sitting down to a plate of pancakes. She decided that no one had to die, since she was sure she was already in hell. She vowed to try and make things better, laugh more, cry less, and stop caring so much about him and that damn baby she never wanted. It was the laughter that finally broke him. When he hit and, and punched her, and told her how worthless she was she would laugh. Laugh like someone who wasn't afraid of laughing, like someone full of joy, or on drugs, or panicking in a way that can only cause laughter.

Six years later the laughter would be the reason he killed her, or at least the reason he told the cops. That she wouldn't stop, that she

must have been mad, that it couldn't have been his fault. He would leave out going into his daughter's room in the middle of the night after he had been out drinking with the boys. He would leave out that was the night she finally walked in on him. What he didn't know is that she always knew, and she was grateful for someone else to take his burden from her. That she was thankful for the child she had always considered a burden— the one that kept her from leaving him.

So she laughed— she laughed at the pain of another, the pain that was once her own before she was burnt so much that she could no longer feel. He laugh was loud, and breathy, and eventually turned into a sob as she realized that nothing would ever change. Things like this would always happen to girls like her, girls like her daughter, and there was no one out there to save her.

When the trial came and passed he had cited temporary insanity. It was three years before he was reunited with his daughter for temporary visits, and another four before she was returned to him for good. No one questioned why a man like that should be without a daughter. And no one questioned when the truth came out, and they found him on the floor with a peeler sliced into his neck seventeen times.

Things like this would always happen to girls like her. Things like this would always be caused by men like him. *It's a little piece of humanity*, as her mother would say. For all the evil in the world there will always be good.

But girls like us learn to embrace the evil. Girls like us can never be happy with, just, good.

