

# Father's Day

by Ron Earl Phillips

“What the hell, bitch?”

The words rolled out of my aching jaw. I twisted my legs around, kicking Lila out of the bed. She screamed, crashing to the floor. All I heard was barking. I threw a pillow at her.

“Shut up!”

I wasn't sure if I was completely asleep when Lila's hand slammed into my face, but I knew I wasn't entirely awake. What the fuck was that barking? Rolling over, I dug into the sheets. The barking got louder.

Lila yelled something about my damn phone. Eyes opened, there's my Blackberry barking. I couldn't make sense of it. Barking?

As I flip the phone without thinking, panic swept across my chest. Tightening. Shit. Should I answer it? I already had. So I played it cool.

“Damon. My man. I haven't even gotten out of bed yet. What time is it?”

My Ex, a primo bitch, started barking in to my ear. I glared over to Lila, who was lifting her bone-thin naked ass off the floor. She gave me a snarl.

“Are you fucking high? You better not be high. Not today.”

In the five years we were married, Eva never once saw me wasted. After the arrest for possession with intent, she would accuse me of being fucked up whenever I didn't tow the line. She'd seen too many movies with junkie cowboys.

“I don't use. All the mandated tests come back clean. You know that.”

“Whatever.”

“What do you want?” I saw the time on the alarm clock. “At 7 AM?”

Asleep maybe an hour. Damn it, she knew I worked nightshift over at the Walmart.

I rubbed my jaw.

"Mom's in the hospital, Ty. I need you to watch Alex. I can't take him down to Cincinnati."

"Alex."

I said his name, letting it drift out there for a moment. I wasn't allowed to be alone with my boy since the divorce.

"Alex. Our son." Eva barbed. "Sure you're not high?"

"I know who Alex is. I'm just tired. Long night. Cut me some slack."

"So, can you do it?" she pushed.

"Sure. I'm his father. What about the legal shit?"

"It's just one night. If I had any other choice, I would. So?"

"Yes. Yes."

We set up a time to meet. Over at the McDonald's near my work. I'd buy my boy a Happy Meal.

Eva handed Alex off with his overnight bag. Still looked good. Then she opened her mouth, giving me a Ten Commandments of Dos and Don'ts.

"Don't worry, Eva. I remember how to take care of my own son. You're going to have a good time with Daddy? Aren't you Alex?"

Alex stared at the ground, swayed back and forth. I could do this. I knew how to take care of Alex. My son.

"Don't fuck it up."

She left me with those words.

During our lunch, Alex didn't talk or look at me. He ate five chicken nuggets, ate oranges, no fries and refused to drink soda. Almost nine and he hadn't really changed.

Afterward, I took him to meet up with Lila at Walmart. She'd picked up some games and food for tonight.

All smiles, Lila was excited at the chance to play house.

"How you doing, Alex? I'm Lila"

Alex tucked his face into my body and swayed. Lila's face wilted.

"Is he retarded?"

I wanted to smack her. Hard.

"Alex is Autistic, mostly non-verbal, but very smart. Right Alex!"

Her frown didn't lift.

“It takes time to adjust.”

In the car both Alex and Lila were silent most of the ride back to my apartment.

“ I wanna do laser!”

Alex was looking out the window. Smiling. I almost skidded the car off the road. Alex could speak. Single words, but I'd never heard him say a sentence. I wanted to stop the car and hug him.

Out the window, I saw what he saw. Royal Sports Center. A large indoor sport and gaming facilities. Eva must have taken Alex before. Played laser tag.

I frowned.

“Maybe next time champ.”

Alex wouldn't understand that Lila had spent all our extra money on toys and food for him. I kept driving. He settled back into silence.

Lila did a surprisingly good job cleaning up the apartment I noticed when we got home. Putting away the food, I found my snubnose setting in a drawer. Shit. Had I put this here or Lila? Not the time confront her, so I slid back to extra bedroom to lock it up. I caught Alex watching me, smiling, after I opened my small safe and hid the revolver away.

“Don't touch Alex. Bad. Dangerous.”

I tried not to yell, but I did.

The rest of the day we tried to engage Alex, play games, but he brooded away, sometimes staring off at Spongebob on the TV.

That night I put him to bed on the couch, where he just stared blankly at the ceiling. Not saying a word when I told him goodnight.

Sleep was interrupted for us again when there was a crash in the living room.

“Alex?”

I jumped from the bed. Lila stirring, I told her to stay put and crept down the hall.

I didn't see Alex on the couch. I reached for the light.

“Alex?”

“Nope!”

A bat crushed into my stomach, doubling me over.

“Where's my fucking money, Ty?”

I looked up from the floor. There was Damon standing over me. I tried to back up, get some room, but he was on me.

“Money!”

“I told you, I get paid tomorrow. I needed a day. I'll pay.”

“Too late.” Damon lifted the bat to brain me.

“I wanna play laser.”

Behind me Alex stood pointing the S&W that I had locked up.

Before I could yell, a boom filled the apartment.

Damon collapsed. The gun dropped. Alex covering his ears, began rocking on the floor, chanting, “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy.”

I held him tight. Tears streamed down our faces.

“Daddy's here.”

