

We Can't Be Good at Everything

The balloons have been blown up, the cakes frosted to within an inch of their lives¹. An inflatable bouncy castle has been erected in a corner of the yard, and napkins and wet wipes have been laid up in their thousands for the inevitable clean-up operation. The boy – the sweet, wondrous, confounding² boy with his downy hair and inexplicable sorrows – is the ostensible³ reason for the gathering. It is his third birthday. But the boy's father, Miles Warden, has only agreed to host the party because it offers the rare occasion to be in the presence of a celebrity: his own mother, Fenella Warden.

"Most of the other parents said yes just so they could gawk at your mom," his wife, Jill, comments wryly as they put the finishing touches on the house. "We should set up a book-signing stand for her near the pizza table." [...]

Jill comes and drops a kiss on the crown⁴ of his head, tweaks the tops of his ears with casual spousal affection. She is wearing a vintage floral dress that rustles when she presses herself against the back of his chair. "Let's make it fun. For William."

"Of course." He raises his face up for a kiss. "Sorry."

"She'll say yes," Jill assures him, in the soothing, wise-beyond-her-years way that used to act as a salve on his inflamed spirits⁵ but seems recently to have lost all its power. "He's her only grandchild. Don't worry so much."

She may as well caution him not to breathe. He is worried all the time, with an anxiety that has been with him ever since he was the age his son is now; an anxiety that ticks in his chest like a bomb. Ridiculous to be so nervous about asking his own mother a favor. [...]

His mother arrives late, of course, and with a retinue in tow⁶: her assistant and the assistant's assistant; and her husband, Miles's father, who isn't officially an employee but may as well be. It's her hair you see first, that familiar gleaming mass that sweeps her shoulders, the golden highlights a special tone Miles knows all the women use because it looks good on camera. [...]

"Fenella," he says, moving to greet her.

His lips touch the skin of her cheek, which is still smooth and unlined, even at age sixty-two. He assumes she's had work⁷ but if so, it's discreet enough to allow her to engage in the illusion of agelessness. She smells exotic and expensive. Everyone else calls her Fenny, but Miles has always preferred the formal term. He can't recall ever having called her Mom, but that in itself isn't unusual among his circle, where the parents all tend to be of the progressive type whose greatest longing is for their children to regard them as chums rather than authority figures.

"Miles, darling," she says, leaning in to receive the kiss. *Miles*: Even his name feels like a yearning, her desire to put some distance between herself and home. They are almost the same height. When she wears heels, she towers over him, over everybody. "Where's my beloved boy?" she asks. For a moment, he might imagine she's talking about him, her only son. Her bright, dark bird's eyes dart around the yard, searching. "Ah, there he is!"

And she strides to gather William up in her arms. Heads turn. Conversations trickle to a halt. She is wonderful at performing love, he'll give her that. And naturally the little boy loves her with a single-

¹ *to within an inch of their lives*: (her) så det næsten er for meget

² (her) gådefulde

³ umiddelbare

⁴ toppen

⁵ *inflamed spirits*: (her) indre smerte

⁶ *with a retinue in tow*: med tjenere på slæb

⁷ *she's had work*: (her) hun har fået lavet sit ansigt

mind ed madness: She is like one of his fairytales come to life, a swashbuckling⁸ adventurer and fairy queen rolled into one. Even Miles can't deny they seem to have a special bond. [...]

40 Miles and Jill had William when they were both twenty-two, which makes them the youngest parents in their neighborhood by at least a decade. He knows everyone thinks it was a mistake, a failure of contraception, because who in their right mind would choose to be a parent so young? He never bothers explaining that it was a pregnancy of choice, that he had long ago sworn he'd never be
45 an old parent like his mother and father were, that he'd be there for his children in a way only a young father could be. He hadn't had to talk Jill into it, at all: as a child of a particularly ugly divorce, she was even more eager than he was. They were in full agreement about giving William a sibling as soon as possible. [...]

They watch Fenella holding and cooing⁹ to her grandchild. William is clutching the string of a balloon in his grubby fist. [...] It had been a mistake to let him get so attached to a specific one, Miles
50 realizes, even before the string loosens in his son's hand and the balloon lifts and floats into a tree where it is promptly punctured by a branch and bursts. The sound is like gunfire and a few people jump and then laugh when they see it is only a balloon, just a deflated piece of rubber like a crumpled condom. William is, predictably, inconsolable. Miles starts to go to his bereft¹⁰ son, whose wails pierce the shimmering summer air, but then he decides to watch his mother for a moment to see how she'll
55 handle it.

Fenella jiggles William up and down, puts her lips to his pink ear with its fringe of golden hairs and whispers something into it, strokes his damp hair, but nothing works, and Miles tries not to feel triumphant that in this one area she is as helpless as anyone. Maybe more helpless. Jill hurries over to retrieve William's writhing body from Fenella's arms, mouthing apologies as she moves swiftly towards
60 the house [...].

Once William's cries have been absorbed into the depths of the house and the chatter has resumed, Fenella's assistant lugs a huge cooler over to the gas grill, and Fenella pulls an elaborate array of containers out of it, then proceeds to chop and squeeze and marinate and grill several pounds of fat blue shrimps, all while animatedly talking and taking long sips from a tall-neck bottle of beer. A
65 small audience gathers. [...]

Fenella is attending to the last of the shrimp when Miles makes his move. She is alone at last after having fed the masses, humming to herself the same meandering¹¹ tuneless tune he remembers from childhood. [...]

"Ah, there you are, Miles," she says, brandishing¹² the greasy tongs in his direction. "I saved you
70 some."

"Thanks." He accepts the plate but doesn't eat anything: it feels as though there's a large creature crouched on his sternum¹³ squeezing the breath out of him. [...]

"Your shrimp was a big hit," he says quickly.

"Pfft." She gives a dismissive wave with her tong hand, as uncomfortable with compliments as he
75 has always been. "But you and Jill have done a fabulous job, as always. She's a remarkable young lady."

"Yes." He touches his chest nervously. "So, I wanted to ask you something." Rushing on before she can react. "I got offered a promotion at work. They want me to move full-time into the marketing position."

⁸ fändenivoldsk

⁹ pludre

¹⁰ (her) tomhændede

¹¹ (her) usammenhængende

¹² mens hun peger med

¹³ (her) brystkasse

80 "Ah, mazel tov¹⁴, darling." She lifts her wine glass and tilts it towards him. "That's wonderful." [...]
 "And I think I told you Jill is thinking about going back full-time as well next month, so... we both
 wondered whether, um, whether you might be interested in looking after William a couple of days a
 week."
 His mother removes her sunglasses and stabs a forefinger at the bridge of her nose where the
 85 glasses have left a painful divot¹⁵, and he notices for the first time how tired she looks, a fretwork¹⁶ of
 tiny sunbeams radiating from the corners of her eye. [...]
 "Oh, Miles."
 "I suppose that's a no then."
 "You know I adore William. It's just... I'm not really the stay-at-home grandma type, darling. You
 90 know that. And besides, I'm contracted to do another season of *the Banquet*."
 "Fine. Don't worry about it." [...]
 Somehow, in all his reckonings¹⁷, he hadn't factored in¹⁸ Fenella saying no to the chance to bond
 with her grandson. He'd thought he was offering her the chance to make amends, to take another shot
 at motherhood, but instead of accepting that chance she has graciously rejected it again. [...]
 95 He's sure his mother will take this opportunity to leave with the others, reverting to her natural
 state of always being on deadline, always flying away. So he's surprised when he walks back through
 the house (passing his father snoring softly on the couch, neck twisted at a painful angle that makes
 him look like the victim of a car accident) and into the yard to find Fenella sprawled in a butterfly chair,
 drinking wine and gazing around her with great contentment, her phone face-down on the grass
 100 beside her like a child in time-out. She looks up at his approach with a smile and pats the chair next to
 her. [...]
 "You know the hardest thing to come to terms with when I first started shooting the show?"
 "I have no idea."
 "It was the ease with which men move through the world. I naively assumed my experiences would
 105 be the same as the men, the heroes of mine, who did this kind of food and travel and adventure show.
 I didn't realize how many spaces there are in which women are unwelcome." [...]
 "Society's reaction to women who choose non-traditional motherhood is not exactly admiration,
 believe me."
 "You never seemed to care too much what people thought," Miles says, not caring in turn how
 110 bitter he sounds. "You did your best." [...]
 "Did I?" Fenella says, her dark eyes fixing on his face for a moment. She shifts her wine glass from
 one hand to the other. "If it was my best, it wasn't very good, was it? But I'm sure you see, now you're
 old enough, that we can't be good at everything in this life."
 Miles finds it typical that the thing he's craved for the last five years – for her to admit she hadn't
 115 been a good mother – is, having arrived, distinctly without the sense of triumph he might have
 expected. This feels of a piece with¹⁹ the life lessons he has learned over his quarter-century on this
 earth so far.
 "I never felt guilty because your father was such an excellent parent."
 "Oh cool, that's so nice you didn't feel guilty. But sometimes I would have liked to have had two
 120 parents, you know?"

¹⁴ *mazel tov*: til lykke (jiddisch)

¹⁵ (her) fordybning

¹⁶ fletværk

¹⁷ overvejelser

¹⁸ *factored in*: medregnet

¹⁹ *feels of a piece with*: passer sammen med

"I know. And I'm sorry. But was it really so different from all your other friends? Didn't most of them have a primary caregiver and another parent who just sort of flitted²⁰ at the sidelines of their childhoods?" [...]

"Well, didn't they?" she pressed.

125 "I suppose. But..."

"That's all most people get, darling." He could tell they were collectively arriving at the end of her patience. He could always hear it in her voice, the way it hardened at the edges. "One full-time parent. The genders were just reversed in our case." [...]

"I'm sorry I failed your test, Miles." [...]

130 He shakes his head with a little laugh and hauls himself out of the chair for real this time, and when he is upright again he turns to look down at her. Her face is tilted expectantly towards him, the only face he has never had any trouble placing in a crowd, and on an impulse, he leans down and places his hand on the crown of her head, feeling the silky weight of her bright hair beneath his palm. It is like he is granting her benediction²¹, before turning away and starting to collect the paper plates, lying
135 skewed at odd angles around the lawn like abandoned spacecraft.

(2019)

²⁰ flagrede

²¹ velsignelse