



# Little Children

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## BAD MOMMY

The young mothers were telling each other how tired they were. This was one of their favorite topics, along with the eating, sleeping, and defecating habits of their offspring, the merits of certain local nursery schools, and the difficulty of sticking to an exercise routine. Smiling politely to mask a familiar feeling of desperation, Sarah reminded herself to think like an anthropologist. *I'm a researcher studying the behavior of boring suburban women. I am not a boring suburban woman myself.*

'Jerry and I started watching that Jim Carrey movie the other night?'

This was Cheryl, mother of Christian, a husky three-and-a-half-year-old who swaggered around the playground like a Mafia chieftain, shooting the younger children with any object that could plausibly stand in as a gun – a straw, a half-eaten banana, even a Barbie doll that had been abandoned in the sandbox. Sarah despised the boy and found it hard to look his mother in the eye.

'The Pet Guy?' inquired Mary Ann, mother of Troy and

Isabelle. 'I don't get it. Since when did passing gas become so hilarious?'

*Only since there was human life on earth*, Sarah thought, wishing she had the guts to say it out loud. Mary Ann was one of those depressing supermoms, a tiny, elaborately made-up woman who dressed in spandex workout clothes, drove an SUV the size of a UPS van, and listened to conservative talk radio all day. No matter how many hints Sarah dropped to the contrary, Mary Ann refused to believe that any of the other mothers thought any less of Rush Limbaugh or any more of Hillary Clinton than she did. Every day Sarah came to the playground determined to set her straight, and every day she chickened out.

'Not the Pet Guy,' Cheryl said. 'The state trooper with the split personality.'

*Me, Myself & Irene*, Sarah thought impatiently. By the Farrelly Brothers. Why was it that the other mothers could never remember the titles of anything, not even movies they'd actually seen, while she herself retained lots of useless information about movies she wouldn't even dream of watching while imprisoned on an airplane, not that she ever got to fly anywhere?

'Oh, I saw that,' said Theresa, mother of Courtney. A big, raspy-voiced woman who often alluded to having drunk too much wine the night before, Theresa was Sarah's favorite of the group. Sometimes, if no one else was around, the two of them would sneak a cigarette, trading puffs like teenagers and making subversive comments about their husbands and children. When the others arrived, though, Theresa immediately turned into one of them. 'I thought it was cute.'

*Of course you did*, Sarah thought. There was no higher praise at the playground than *cute*. It meant harmless. Easily absorbed. Posing no threat to smug suburbanites. At her old playground, someone had actually used the c-word to describe *American Beauty* (not that she'd actually named the film; it was *that thing with Kevin what's-his-name, you know, with the rose petals*). That had been the last straw for Sarah. After exploring her options for a few days, she had switched to the Rayburn School playground, only to find that it was the same wherever you went. All the young mothers were tired. They all watched cute movies whose titles they couldn't remember.

'I was enjoying it,' Cheryl said. 'But fifteen minutes later, Jimmy and I were both fast asleep.'

'You think that's bad?' Theresa laughed. 'Mike and I were having sex the other night, and I drifted off right in the middle of it.'

'Oh, well.' Cheryl chuckled sympathetically. 'It happens.'

'I guess,' said Theresa. 'But when I woke up and apologized, Mike said he hadn't even noticed.'

'You know what you should do?' Mary Ann suggested. 'Set aside a specific block of time for making love. That's what Lewis and I do. Every Tuesday night at nine.'

*Whether you want to or not*, Sarah thought, her eyes straying over to the play structure. Her daughter was standing near the top of the slide, sucking on the back of her hand as Christian pummeled Troy and Courtney showed Isabelle her Little Mermaid underpants. Even at the playground, Lucy didn't interact much with the other kids. She preferred to hang back, observing the action, as if trying to locate a seam

that would permit her to enter the social world. *A lot like her mother*, Sarah thought, feeling both sorry for her daughter and perversely proud of their connection.

‘What about you?’ It took Sarah a moment to realize that Cheryl was talking to her.

‘Me?’ A surprisingly bitter laugh escaped from her mouth. ‘Richard and I haven’t touched each other for months.’

The other mothers traded uncomfortable looks, and Sarah realized that she must have misunderstood. Theresa reached across the picnic table and patted her hand.

‘She didn’t mean that, honey. She was just asking if you were as tired as the rest of us.’

‘Oh,’ said Sarah, wondering why she always had so much trouble following the thread of a conversation. ‘I doubt it. I’ve never needed very much sleep.’

Morning snack time was ten-thirty on the dot, a regimen established and maintained by Mary Ann, who believed that rigid adherence to a timetable was the key to effective parenting. She had placed glow-in-the-dark digital clocks in her children’s rooms, and had instructed them not to leave their beds in the morning until the first number had changed to seven. She also bragged of strictly enforcing a 7 p.m. bedtime with no resistance from the kids, a claim that filled Sarah with both envy and suspicion. She had never identified with authority figures, and couldn’t help sensing a sort of whip-cracking fascist glee behind Mary Ann’s ability to make the trains run on time.

Still, as skeptical as she was of fanatical punctuality in general, Sarah had to admit that the kids seemed to find it

reassuring. None of them complained about waiting or being hungry, and they never asked what time it was. They just went about the business of their morning play, confident that they'd be notified when the proper moment arrived. Lucy seemed especially grateful for this small gift of predictability in her life. Sarah could see the pleasure in her eyes when she came running over to the picnic table with the others, part of the pack for the first time all day.

'Mommy, Mommy!' she cried. 'Snack time!'

*Of course, no system is foolproof,* Sarah thought, rummaging through the diaper bag for the rice cakes she could have sworn she'd packed before they left the house. But maybe that was yesterday? It wasn't that easy to tell one weekday from the next anymore; they all just melted together like a bag of crayons left out in the sun.

'Mommy?' An anxious note seeped into Lucy's voice. All the other kids had opened Ziploc bags and single-serving Tupperware containers, and were busy shoveling handfuls of Cheerios and Goldfish crackers into their mouths. 'Where my snack?'

'I'm sure it's in here somewhere,' Sarah told her.

Long after she had come to the conclusion that the rice cakes weren't there, Sarah kept digging through the diaper bag, pretending to search for them. It was a lot easier to keep staring into that dark jumble of objects than to look up and tell Lucy the truth. In the background she heard someone slurping the dregs of a juice box.

'Where it went?' the hard little voice demanded. 'Where my snack?'

It took an act of will for Sarah to look up and meet her daughter's eyes.

‘I’m sorry, honey.’ She let out a long, defeated sigh. ‘Mommy can’t find it.’

Lucy didn’t argue. She just scrunched up her pale face, clenched her fists, and began to hyperventilate, gathering strength for the next phase of the operation. Sarah turned apologetically to the other mothers, who were watching the proceedings with interest.

‘I forgot the rice cakes,’ Sarah explained. ‘I must have left them on the counter.’

‘Poor thing,’ said Cheryl.

‘That’s the second time this week,’ Mary Ann pointed out.

*You hateful bitch*, Sarah thought.

‘It’s hard to keep track of everything,’ observed Theresa, who had supplied Courtney with a tube of Go-Gurt and a box of raisins.

Sarah turned to Lucy, who was emitting a series of whimpers that were slowly increasing in volume.

‘Just calm down,’ Sarah pleaded.

‘No!’ Lucy shouted. ‘No calm down!’

‘That’ll be enough of that, young lady.’

‘Bad Mommy! I want snack!’

‘It’s not here,’ Sarah said, handing her daughter the diaper bag. ‘See for yourself.’

Fixing her mother with an evil glare, Lucy promptly turned the bag upside down, releasing a cascade of Pampers, baby wipes, loose change, balled-up Kleenex, books, and toys onto the woodchip-covered ground.

‘Sweetie.’ Sarah spoke calmly, pointing at the mess. ‘Clean that up, please.’

‘I . . . want . . . my . . . snack!’ Lucy gasped.

With that, the dam broke, and she burst into piteous tears, a desolate animal wailing that even made the other kids turn and look, as if realizing they were in the presence of a virtuoso and might be able to pick up a few pointers.

‘Poor thing,’ Cheryl said again.

*Other mothers know what to do at moments like this,* Sarah thought. They’d all read the same book or something. Were you supposed to ignore a tantrum and let the kid ‘cry herself out’? Or were you supposed to pick her up and remind her that she was safe and well loved? It seemed to Sarah that she’d heard both recommendations at one time or another. In any case, she knew that a good parent would take some sort of clearheaded action. A good parent wouldn’t just stand there feeling clueless and guilty while her child howled at the sky.

‘Wait.’ It was Mary Ann who spoke, her voice radiating such undeniable adult authority that Lucy immediately broke off crying, willing to hear her out. ‘Troy, honey? Give Lucy your Goldfish.’

Troy was understandably offended by this suggestion.

‘No,’ he said, turning so that his body formed a barrier between Lucy and his snack.

‘Troy Jonathan.’ Mary Ann held out her hand. ‘Give me those Goldfish.’

‘But Mama,’ he whimpered. ‘It’s mine.’

‘No backtalk. You can share with your sister.’

Reluctantly, but without another word of protest, Troy surrendered the bag. Mary Ann immediately bestowed it upon Lucy, whose face broke into a slightly hysterical smile.

‘Thank you,’ Sarah told Mary Ann. ‘You’re a lifesaver.’

‘It’s nothing,’ Mary Ann replied. ‘I just hate to see her suffer like that.’

Not that they would, but if any of the other mothers had asked how it was that Sarah, of all people, had ended up married, living in the suburbs, and caring full-time for a small child, she would have blamed it all on a moment of weakness. At least that was how she described it to herself, though the explanation always seemed a bit threadbare. After all, what was adult life but one moment of weakness piled on top of another? Most people just fell in line like obedient little children, doing exactly what society expected of them at any given moment, all the while pretending that they’d actually made some sort of choice.

But the thing was, Sarah considered herself an exception. She had discovered feminism her sophomore year in college – this was back in the early nineties, when a lot of undergraduate women were moving in the opposite direction – and the encounter had left her profoundly transformed. After just a few weeks of Intro to Women’s Studies, Sarah felt like she’d been given the key to understanding so many things that were wrong with her life – her mother’s persistent depression, her own difficulty making and keeping female friends, the alienation she sometimes felt from her own body. Sarah embraced Critical Gender Studies with the fervor of a convert, taking from it the kind of comfort other women in her dorm seemed to derive from shopping or step aerobics.

She enlisted at the Women’s Center and spent the second half of her college career in the thick of a purposeful, socially aware, politically active community of women.

She volunteered at the Rape Crisis Hotline, marched in Take Back the Night rallies, learned to distinguish between French and Anglo-American feminism(s). By senior year, she had cut her hair short, stopped shaving her legs, and begun attending Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual dances and social events. Two months before graduation, she dove headlong into a passionate affair with a Korean-American woman named Amelia, who was headed for med school in New York City in the fall. It was a thrilling time for Sarah, the perfect culmination to her undergraduate voyage of self-discovery.

And then – suddenly and with astonishing finality – college was over. Amelia moved back to Westchester to spend the summer with her family. Sarah stayed in Boston, taking a job at Starbucks to pay the rent while she figured out what to do next. They visited each other twice that summer, but for some reason couldn't recapture what had so recently been an effortless rhythm of togetherness. On the day before Sarah was supposed to visit her in her new dorm, Amelia called and said maybe it would be best if they didn't see each other anymore. Medical school was overwhelming; she didn't have the space in her life for a relationship.

Sarah had nothing in her life but space, but she didn't get involved with anyone else for almost a year, and when she did it was with a man, a charismatic barista who did stand-up comedy and said he liked everything about her but her hairy legs. So Sarah started shaving again, got fitted for a diaphragm, and spent a lot of time in comedy clubs, listening to tired jokes about the difference between men (they won't ask for directions!) and women (they want to talk after sex!). When she tried to explain her objections to humor based on

sexist stereotypes, Ryan suggested that she extract the metal rod from her ass and lighten up a little.

Along with dumping Ryan, applying to graduate school seemed like the perfect solution for escaping the rut she was in – a way to recapture the excitement of college while also making a transition into a recognizable version of adulthood. She cultivated an image of herself as a young professor, a feminist film critic, perhaps. She would be a mentor and an inspiration to girls like herself, the quiet ones who'd sleepwalked their way through high school, knowing nothing except that they couldn't possibly be happy with any of the choices the world seemed to be offering them.

Within a couple of weeks of starting the PhD program, though, she discovered that she'd booked passage on a sinking ship. There aren't any jobs, the other students informed her; the profession's glutted with tenured old men who won't step aside for the next generation. While the university's busy exploiting you for cheap labor, you somehow have to produce a boring thesis that no one will read, and find someone willing to publish it as a book. And then, if you're unusually talented and extraordinarily lucky, you just might be able to secure a one-year, non-renewable appointment teaching remedial composition to football players in Oklahoma. Meanwhile, the Internet's booming, and kids we gave C pluses to are waltzing out of college and getting rich on stock options while we bust our asses for a pathetic stipend that doesn't even cover the rent.

Sarah could see that it was all true, but she didn't really mind once she adjusted her expectations. Graduate school didn't have to lead anywhere, did it? Wouldn't it

be worthwhile just to spend a couple of years reading and thinking, reawakening her mind from a long stupor induced by too many espresso drinks and lame one-liners? She could just get her master's, maybe teach in a prep school after that, or join the Peace Corps, or even figure out a way to climb onto the Internet gravy train like everybody else.

What did her in was the teaching. Some people loved it, of course, loved the sound of their own voices, the chance to display their cleverness to a captive audience. And then there were the instructors like herself, who simply couldn't communicate in a classroom setting. They made one point over and over with mind-numbing insistence, or else they circled around a dozen half-articulated ideas without landing on a single one. They read woodenly from prepared notes, or got lost in their muddled syntax while attempting to speak off the cuff. God help them if they attempted a joke. The faces looking back at them might be bored or confused or hostile, but mostly they were just full of pity. That's what she got from her two semesters of teaching: enough pity to last her a lifetime.

Broke and demoralized, Sarah quit school and landed back at Starbucks, this time with a seriously diminished sense of herself and her future. She was a failure, a 26-year-old woman of still-ambiguous sexuality who had just discovered that she wasn't nearly as smart as she'd thought she was. *I am a painfully ordinary person*, she reminded herself on a daily basis, *destined to live a painfully ordinary life*.

As if to illustrate this humbling lesson, her old lover Amelia walked into Starbucks one chilly afternoon that fall. She looked absolutely radiant, with a strong-jawed

Korean husband standing proudly beside her, and a plump, wide-eyed baby strapped to her chest in a forward-facing contraption. The two women recognized each other right away. Amelia froze in the doorway, exchanging a searching look with Sarah across the length of the floor.

Sarah smiled sadly, trying to acknowledge the strangeness and emotional richness of the moment, but Amelia didn't smile back. Her face – it was fuller, less girlish, with a touch of fatigue around the eyes – didn't betray the slightest sign of desire or regret or even simple surprise. All Sarah could find on it was a familiar look of pity, as if Amelia were just another bored freshman who didn't know what the hell the teacher was going on about. She whispered something to her husband, who cast a quick, startled glance at Sarah before mouthing the word, *Really?* Amelia shrugged, as if she didn't understand how it was possible that she even knew this pathetic woman in the green apron, let alone that they'd once danced to Aretha Franklin in their underwear and collapsed onto a narrow bed in a fit of giggles that seemed like it would never stop. At least that's what Sarah hoped Amelia was remembering as the perfect little family retreated out the door, leaving her to fake a smile at the next person in line and explain for the umpteenth time that there was no such thing as 'small' at Starbucks.

*That*, she would have explained to the other mothers, *was my moment of weakness*. Except that it wasn't really a moment. It lasted all through that winter and into the following spring, which was when Richard stepped up to the counter one tedious morning – he was a regular, a middle-aged man with a neatly trimmed beard and an air of

quiet authority – and asked if she was having as bad a day as he was, which for some reason felt like the first kind thing anyone had said to her in years. And that was how she'd ended up at this godforsaken playground.

Sarah knelt down and began slowly gathering up the vast assortment of crap that had been disgorged from the diaper bag. She knew she should have asked Lucy to help – at three, a child was old enough to begin taking responsibility for the messes she'd created – but asserting this principle was hardly worth the risk of provoking another tantrum.

Besides, the less help she got, the longer she could stay on the ground, away from the accusatory faces of the other mothers, letting the sharp edges of the woodchips dig even deeper into her kneecaps, inflicting a dull pain Sarah thought she probably deserved and might even begin to enjoy in a second or two.

Her copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* was lying cover down, on top of *The Berenstain Bears Visit the Dentist*, and the sight of the two books filled her with an odd sense of shame. She felt a sudden burst of kinship for those medieval flagellants who used to walk through town, publicly thrashing themselves to atone for their sins. Pretty soon she'd be packing a whip in the diaper bag.

'Maybe you should make a checklist,' Mary Ann told her. 'Tape it to the door so it's the last thing you see before leaving the house. That's what I do.'

*I am not long for this playground*, Sarah thought. She looked up and forced herself to smile.

'Thank you,' she said. 'That's a really helpful suggestion.'