# No Time For Goodbye

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Extract

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# TWO

Grace's eyes were pleading, but her tone was stern.

'Dad,' she said. 'I'm. Eight. Years. Old.' Where had she learned this? I wondered. This technique of breaking down sentences into individual words for dramatic effect. As if I needed to ask. There was more than enough drama to go around in this household.

'Yes,' I said to my daughter. 'I'm aware.'

Her Cheerios were getting soggy and she hadn't touched her orange juice. 'The kids make fun of me,' she said.

I took a sip of my coffee. I'd only just poured it but it was already verging on cold. The coffee maker was on the fritz. I decided I would pick up a cup at the Dunkin' Donuts on the way to school.

'Who makes fun of you?' I asked.

'Everybody,' Grace said.

'Everybody,' I repeated. 'What did they do? Did they call an assembly? Did the principal stand up there and tell everyone to make fun of you?'

'Now *you're* making fun of me.'

OK, that was true. 'I'm sorry. I'm just trying to get an idea how widespread this problem is. I'm guessing it's not *everybody*. It just feels like everybody. And even if it's only a few, I understand that can still be pretty embarrassing.'

'It *is*.'

'Is it your friends?'

'Yeah. They say Mom treats me like I'm a baby.'

'Your mom's just being careful,' I said. 'She loves you very much.'

'I know. But I'm *eight*.'

'Your mom just wants to know that you get to school safely, that's all.'

Grace sighed and bowed her head defeatedly, a lock of her brown hair dropping in front of her brown eyes. She used her spoon to move some Cheerios around in the milk. 'But she doesn't have to walk me to school. Nobody's mom walks them to school unless they're in kindergarten.'

We'd been through this before, and I'd tried talking to Cynthia, suggested as gently as possible that maybe it was time for Grace to fly solo now that she was in fourth grade. There were plenty of other kids to walk with, it wasn't as though she'd be walking all by herself.

'Why can't *you* walk me instead?' Grace asked, and there was a bit of a glint in her eye.

The rare times when I had walked Grace to school, I'd fallen behind the better part of a block. As far as anyone knew, I was just out for a stroll, not actually keeping an eye on Grace, making sure she got there safely. And we never breathed a word of it to Cynthia. My wife took me at my word, that I'd walked with Grace, right alongside her, all the way to Fairmont Public School, and stood on the sidewalk until I'd seen her go inside.

'I can't,' I said. 'I have to be at my school by eight. If I walk you to school before I go, you have to hang around outside for an hour. Your mom doesn't start work till ten, so it's not a problem for her. Once in a while, when I get a first period spare, I can walk you.'

In fact, Cynthia had arranged her hours at Pamela's so that she'd be around each morning to make sure Grace was off to school safely. It have never been Cynthia's dream to work at a women's clothing store owned by her best friend from high school, but it allowed her to work part-time, which meant she could be home by the time school let out. In a concession to Grace, she didn't wait for her at the school door, but down the street. Cynthia could see the school from there, and it didn't take her long to spot our often pigtailed daughter in the crowd. She had tried persuading Grace to wave, so that she could pick her out even sooner, but Grace had been stubborn about complying.

The problem came when some teacher asked the class to stay after the bell had gone. Maybe it was a mass detention, or some last-minute homework instructions. Grace would sit there, panicking, not because her mom would be worrying, but because it might

mean that she, worried by the delay, would come into the school and hunt her down.

'Also, my telescope's broken,' Grace said.

'What do you mean, it's broken?'

'The thingies that hold the telescope part to the standy part are loose. I sort of fixed it, but it'll probably get loose again.'

'I'll have a look at it.'

'I have to keep a lookout for killer asteroids,' Grace said. 'I'm not going to be able to see them if my telescope is broken.'

'OK.' I said. 'I'll look at it.'

'Do you know that if an asteroid hit the earth it would be like a million nuclear bombs going off?'

'I don't think it's that many,' I said. 'But I take your point, that it would be a bad thing.'

'When I have nightmares about an asteroid hitting the earth, I can make them go away if I've checked before I go to bed to make sure there isn't any coming.'

I nodded. The thing was, we hadn't exactly bought her the most expensive telescope. It was a bottom-of-the-line item. It wasn't just that you didn't want to spend a fortune on something you weren't sure your child was going to stay interested in; we simply don't have a lot of money to throw around.

'What about Mom?' Grace asked.

'What about her?'

'Does she have to walk with me?'

'I'll talk to her,' I said.

'Talk to who?' Cynthia said, walking into the kitchen.

Cynthia looked good this morning. Beautiful, in fact. She was a striking woman and I never tired of her green eyes, high cheekbones, fiery red hair. It was no longer long like when I first met her, but no less dramatic. People think she must work out, but I think it's anxiety that's helped her keep her figure. She burns off calories worrying. She doesn't jog, doesn't belong to a gym. Not that we could afford a gym membership anyway.

Like I've mentioned, I'm a high-school English teacher, and Cynthia works in retail – even though she has a family studies degree and worked for a while doing social work – so we're not exactly rolling in dough. We have this house, big enough for the

three of us, in a modest neighborhood that's only a few blocks from where Cynthia grew up. You might have thought Cynthia would have wanted to put some distance between herself and that house, but I think she wanted to stay in the neighborhood, just in case someone came back and wanted to get in touch.

Our cars are both ten years old, our vacations low key. We borrow my uncle's cabin up near Montpelier for a week every summer, and three years ago, when Grace was five, we took a trip to Disney World, staying outside the park in a cheap motel in Orlando where you could hear, at two in the morning, some guy in the next room telling his girl to be careful, to ease up on the teeth.

But we have, I believe, a pretty good life, and we are, more or less, happy. Most days.

The nights, sometimes, can be hard.

'Grace's teacher,' I said, coming up with a white lie about who Grace wanted me to talk to.

'What do you want to talk to Grace's teacher for?' Cynthia asked.

'I was just saying, when it's one of those parent-teacher nights, I should go in and talk to her, to Mrs Enders,' I said. 'Last time, you went in, I had a parent-teacher thing at my school the same night, it always seems to happen that way.'

'She's very nice,' Cynthia said. 'I think she's a lot nicer than the teacher last year, what's-her-name, Mrs Phelps. I thought she was a bit mean.'

'I hated her,' Grace concurred. 'She made us stand on one leg for hours when we were bad.'

'I have to go,' I said, taking another sip of cold coffee. 'Cyn, I think we need a new coffee maker.'

'I'll look at some,' Cynthia said.

As I got up from the table Grace looked at me despairingly. I knew what she wanted from me. Talk to her. Please talk to her.

'Terry, you seen the spare key?' Cynthia asked.

'Hmm?' I said.

She pointed to the empty hook on the wall just inside the kitchen door that opened on to our small backyard. 'Where's the spare?' It was the one we used if we were taking a walk, maybe a stroll

down to the sound, and didn't want to take a ring loaded with car remotes and workplace keys.

'I don't know. Grace, you got the key?' Grace did not yet have her own house key. She hardly needed it with Cynthia around to take her to and from school. She shook her head, glared at me.

I shrugged. 'Maybe it's me. I might have left it next to the bed.' I sidled up next to Cynthia, smelled her hair as I walked past. 'See me off?' I said.

She followed me to the front door. 'Something going on?' she asked. 'Is Grace OK? She seems kind of quiet this morning.'

I grimaced, shook my head. It's, you know. She eight years old, Cyn.'

She moved back a bit, bristling. 'She complains about me to you?'

'She just needs to feel a bit more independent.'

'That's what that was about. She wants you to talk to me, not her teacher.'

I smiled tiredly. 'She says the other kids are making fun of her.'

'She'll get over it.'

I wanted to say something, but felt we'd had this discussion so many times, there weren't any new points to make.

So Cynthia filled the silence.

'You know there are bad people out there. The world is full of them.'

'I know, Cyn, I know.' I tried to keep the frustration, and the tiredness, out of my voice. 'But how long are you going to walk her? Till she's twelve? Fifteen? You going to walk her to high school?'

'I'll deal with that when it comes,' she said. She paused. 'I saw that car again.'

The car. There was always a car.

Cynthia could see in my face that I didn't believe there was anything to this. 'You think I'm crazy,' she said.

'I don't think you're crazy.'

'I've seen it two times. A brown car.'

'What kind of car?'

'I don't know. An average car. With tinted windows. When it drives past me and Grace it slows down a bit.'

'Has it stopped? Has the driver said anything to you?'

'No.'

'Did you get a license plate?'

'No. The first time, I didn't think anything of it. The second time, I was too flustered.'

'Cyn, it's probably just somebody who lives in the neighborhood. People have to slow down. It's a school zone up there. Remember that one day, the cops set up a speed trap? Getting people to stop speeding through there, that time of day.'

Cynthia looked away from me, folded her arms in front of her. 'You're not out there everyday like I am. You don't know.'

'What I do know,' I said, 'is that you aren't doing Grace any favors if you don't let her start fending for herself.'

'Oh, so you think, if some man tries to drag her into that car, that she's going to be able to defend herself? An eight-year-old girl?'

'How did we get from some brown car driving by to a man trying to drag her away?'

'You've never taken these things as seriously as I do.' She waited a beat. 'And I suppose that's understandable, for you.'

I puffed out my cheeks, blew out some air. 'OK, look, we're not going to solve this now,' I said. 'I have to get going.'

'Sure,' Cynthia said, still not looking at me. 'I think I'm going to call them.'

I hesitated. 'Call who?'

'The show. *Deadline*.'

'Cyn, it's been what, three weeks since the show ran? If anyone was going to call in with anything, they'd have done it by now. And besides, if the station gets any interesting calls, they're going to get in touch. They'll want to do a follow-up.'

'I'm going to give them a call anyway. I haven't called for a while, so maybe they won't get so pissed off this time. They might have heard something, figured it wasn't important, that it was some crank, but it might be something. We were lucky, you know, that some researcher even remembered what had happened to me, decided it was worth a look back.'

I turned her gently, lifted her chin so that our eyes could meet. 'OK, whatever you want to do, do,' I said. 'I love you, you know.'

'I love you, too,' she said. 'I – I know I'm not easy to live with about this stuff. I know it's hard on Grace. I know my anxieties, that they kind of rub off on her. But lately, with that show, it's made it all very real for me again.'

'I know,' I said. 'I just want you to be able to live for the present, too. Not always fixate on the past.'

I felt her shoulders move. 'Fixate?' she said. 'Is that what you think I do?'

It was the wrong word. You'd think an English teacher could come up with something better.

'Don't patronize me,' Cynthia said. 'You think you know, but you don't. You can't ever know.'

There wasn't much I could say to that, because it was true. I leaned in and kissed her hair and went to work.