

Another bed time story

"You put him to bed tonight, sweet heart." Linda pouted, passing frothing Tommy over to me from her moist chest.

I sighed, taking the little turd monster from her outstretched arms, "I remember when you used to fight me to be the one to do this."

"And I will again." she smiled, wiping at her chest- mostly late night spilled Weetabix, "Tomorrow. But after two years, I have to admit that some of the thrill has gone."

"Where's Bill gone?" Tommy asked, snapping awake from his doze and looking from me to her, his pale blue eyes piercing her with worry, concern, accusation, wind, who knew what? "Where's Bill?"

Linda sniggered, and I nearly dropped him as I failed to stop from laughing. All ears and some vocabulary...

"Not *Bill*...Bill's upstairs, waiting for you. Don't worry Cave boy."

Bill the Bunny. *Hobbes* to our freaky little boy's *Calvin*.

"I thought he was out for the count. Honestly babe." Linda said, and I almost believed her.

Almost.

"Come on kiddo, time for bed," I said, hugging him into me as I got up out of the couch, "Kiss nasty mummy goodnight."

She smacked him on the lips, and he giggled, briefly, and then, almost shyly waved at her.

"Goodbye."

Linda laughed, "*Goodnight*. See you in the morning munchkin." And then under her breath, "Or in about three hours' time..."

I hoisted the gremlin to the other side of my body, showing an infant ambidextrousness that I wouldn't have believed possible a couple of years ago, and leant over and kissed her myself; tasting the last transported remains of some sticky toffee type remnant he'd just shared with her.

I popped him around, in a medium level skilled parent sling shot to face me, "You're gross."

He chortled, and slapped me across the face with some more transference of squelchy liquids.

Ten minutes later I laid him down, the small table lamp by his bed side just strong enough to keep the monsters from the wardrobe door.

Teeth cleaned and face and hands washed he was as clean as he was going to get.

"Ok, champ, time for sleep." I said, kissing him on his neck, him giggling as my bristle tickled him.

"Story" he gasped.

I shook my head, "Too late for a story. We said- *"stay up and watch another Blue's Clues or have a story."* What did you choose?"

He pouted.

I shrugged, "We did deliberate on this to some degree. I did point out under section three of our agreement that you would, to use an old secular term, *welch* on this particular deal, and I think my point has been well made here. You are, indeed sir, a *welcher* and shall be dealt with as such..."

I heard Linda snicker from the doorway, and then mutter as she walked away, "I married an idiot."

But by then I was far too busy making the welcher pay for his actions. Using my stubbly beard to the utmost.

But only so far- not enough for stubble rash or hysterically induced wet nappies- especially as we were looking for the first elusive dry night.

Tommy grabbed my face and held me away, "No more Daddy."

And it was one of those weird things that, even as a two year old, he seemed serious about.

Not a helpless, gasping, *'No more, no more (do it more!)*', much more of a *'we've had ourselves some laughs now, but time for that is over. We need to be serious...'*, if you can get that from a two year old's admonition.

I nodded. "Ok, you're right, enough."

The average 2 year old apparently speaks around 50 words. I hadn't counted specifically, but I estimated Tommy was at around 300. Not full sentences in most cases, but stringing words together in a scarily logical order. Every day it seemed like a quantum growth.

I know, I know. Every parent thinks their little snowflake is unique, and special and gifted.

We weren't those sorts of parents.

We were reasonably smart- college educated, and a little successful, not world beaters, but both doing okay. And we laughed at our 'friends' from National Child Trust classes ("If you don't breast feed you're a monster" badges available- to be worn mentally if not physically) and their pretensions around how smart *Ellie* or *Lucy* or *Sam* were (I noticed, the frequency of Linda meeting up with any of the other mums was decreasing at a rapid rate)...but despite everything I've said ...there was something special about Tommy.

It's not the fact that he was starting to put his first words together at around six months. We accepted that as just fortunate gabbling at first, and then a happy advancement as we realised he was using words and, increasingly phrases, in context. I was an English Major and Linda was a History graduate. (She used words, but they were old I had suggested once. Only once.)

No. With Tommy, it was more the inert intelligence...and I know... back to the 'every parent thinks their child is a genius' bullshit.

One example.

I was sitting with Tommy; him snuggled in my lap, both of us watching television and me almost falling asleep because it had been my turn to do the early morning shift.

We were watching some kiddie programme on TV, the presenters gingerly leading on a horse, and me perking up to watch a little bit, convinced it would shit all over the place like that old *Blue Peter* episode with the elephant.

“Horsey fall” Tommy gurgled. One year and one month old.

Sure enough, the horse, being led in on an obviously overly polished studio floor, lost its’ footing under itself and went ass over the proverbial.

Tommy started bawling, and wouldn’t stop.

Not even when Linda staggered downstairs from her interrupted contractual long lie in, taking him off me.

“What the hell is he watching?” she asked, with sleep deprived anger.

I shrugged, “I can’t believe they’re showing this stuff on repeat. That poor fuc...”

“Shhh.” she hissed.

I sighed, “He doesn’t understand...the point is- why show *that* on repeat. Traumatise the bloody kids...”

Linda stared at me, “What do you mean *repeat*?”

I shrugged, “It’s like *Blue’s Clues*, isn’t it? Repetition is the best means of education?”

Linda shook her head- pointing towards the television which had gone to an uncomfortable jump to a *Pinky and the Brain* cartoon. “That was live honey- why would you think it wasn’t?”

I couldn’t answer- I just stared at my son, whose eyes didn’t turn red, and didn’t give me any kind of a knowing satanic glare. He just snuffled and groped for my wife’s breasts.

I could understand-when I was confused that was what I tended to do to.

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I tucked Tommy into bed, and handed him Bill.

Normally he pulled the bear right into him immediately, hugging him to within an inch of his Taiwanese polyester body’s life.

Tonight he held him at arm’s length for a moment, appraising him. After a moment he gently pulled him into his chest.

Twenty years ago, when I was a fourteen year old boy, I was present when my father met up with his old army regiment; half of them dead by that point, and the others in various stages of advanced

ailments. When they got together that day, for the first time in thirty odd years at that point, they held and released each other in a way I saw in my infant son at that moment.

I think that was the moment I first started to get the first shivering understanding of what was coming.

And why I've tried to play the funny up in all of the descriptions so far.

Because that was the last time I really ever felt funny.

"Are you okay, son?" I asked, unconsciously speaking to him in as adult a manner as I had playfully done a few moments before.

He smiled at me.

Beatific.

But tired.

And not the 'stayed up later than I said I would and now want a story' tired.

Very tired.

"Goodbye Daddy."

I smiled, although I was feeling very cold, and put my hand on his pudgy little cheek, "It's not *goodbye* Kiddo. Didn't you hear Mummy? We say *goodnight*."

He smiled back at me, and it looked the oldest smile I'd ever seen, "I know."

I started to reach for the bed side light when he spoke again, "But *this* time, its goodbye."

He took my hand from his cheek and held it for a second, before rolling over.

I could have stopped him from going to sleep, but for a minute. Maybe. Five? Possibly. But I don't think any longer.

I watched him fall asleep.

Peaceful.

It was the longest night of my life.

And yet I still fell asleep eventually.

That's what I wake screaming at now, ten years on.