

A Small Measure of Anxious Grace

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Smashwords Edition

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I shifted the small paper cup from my right hand to my left as I greeted my daughter's new teacher.

"Hi." She grasped my hand and pumped it enthusiastically as she introduced herself: "Ms. Moran."

Her smile was warm and genuine. She projected an aura that made me wish I were nine years old all over again.

"Hi. Karen Delfy," I offered. "Emmella's mom." I tipped my head toward a huddle of giggling girls.

"Oh, I just *love* her hair." Ms. Moran exclaimed.

I nodded as I watched my daughter brush the curly blond corn silk out of her face. "Yeah, me too. She keeps asking me to straighten it, though."

Ms. Moran tilted her head and squinted. "Of course, she does. She's female. Don't we always want what we don't have?"

I took a sip of fruit punch and shrugged.

"Before you know it, she'll be stealing everything black out of your wardrobe and sneaking out to see some wannabe Goth rocker." Ms. Moran shook her head and then sighed dolefully before changing tack.

“Anyway,” she folded her hands in front of her homemade craft apron. “Do you have any questions?”

“Well,” I gently cleared my throat. “I do have one small concern.”

Her easy smile encouraged me to continue.

“Emmella has some anxiety issues.” I had practiced this speech in the car on the way over, yet the words still felt awkward. “Nothing too serious. She’s just a very literal person. She tends to over-think things, obsess over the smallest details. She can get quite intense.”

Ms. Moran smiled and nodded.

“Not to worry, Karen.” Her tone was kind and reassuring as she whispered: “I was the same way—a *very* serious little girl. Sometimes, I think I still am.” She winked.

I sighed and chuckled with relief, confident that I had made the right choice in switching schools. I reached for a bowlful of candy on the short table next to us just as my daughters voice broke behind me.

“Mom! Don’t take any of that! It could be contaminated. You’ll get sick if you eat any of it.”

Ms. Moran arched her brow as I turned and gave her my standard expression:
See? Classic Emmella.

Before I could respond to my daughter’s concern, her teacher squatted and gave her a hug while defending the candy.

“Honey, I brought that candy in. The package was sealed when I bought it and I opened it myself. I think it’s perfectly safe to eat. See?” She scooped up a handful and popped a few colorful pieces into her mouth.

Emmella’s face paled with fear and disbelief as she watched her new teacher chew through a wide smile. Judging by the look on her face, I seriously thought my daughter would retch right there. I tensed and reached for Emmella’s shoulder, unsure what else to do.

“But it’s also okay if you don’t want to have any.” Ms Moran said, gazing at me slyly and winking. “You always have a choice in my class, okay Em?”

My daughter simply stared at her new teacher like she just ate a pile of slimy, mucous covered bugs. I felt an old familiar pall of mortification sweep over me.

“*Mom?*” Emmella whispered.

“Yes, hon?”

“Just promise me *you* won’t eat any of that candy.”

I sighed. “Okay. I promise.” I mouthed *I’m sorry* to her teacher and then let Em lead me by the hand out of her new fourth grade classroom.

I could feel Ms. Moran’s condolatory stare fall on the back of my neck.

~*~

“She did it again.” I announced when there was a break from the music on the radio. Scott frowned and gave me a vague look.

“Who did what?” He asked.

“Em.” I glanced in the rearview mirror and changed lanes. “She did the clairvoyant thing again. At school.”

“What? Like at the airport?” Scott’s tone turned mildly derisive.

On our last trip together, Emmella had insisted that we not board our scheduled flight for very nonspecific reasons. Over the years, I had learned it was best to sympathize with her insecurities and abided her wishes. So, much to Scott’s dismay and fueling his impatience, we elected to rebook a later flight. We wound up avoiding a nine-hour weather delay and another six-hour mechanical bungle, ultimately arriving an entire day ahead of our previously scheduled flight. All Scott would say was that it wasn’t like we avoided a mid-air collision or anything.

But, sometimes, I wonder...

“No,” I responded tersely. “This is much bigger.”

“Hmm.” Scott remained skeptical.

I frowned at his disdain. It was really his only ugly side. He loved Em almost as much as he loved me, which I knew was a lot. But that didn’t change the fact that she wasn’t his and he had little to no tolerance for her idiosyncrasies.

Yet, he was in-tune with me enough to instantly recognize my disappointment and also smart enough to attempt a recovery.

“Okay, well...” He fell back into his seat. “What did she say?”

I gave him a stern look, reminding him how much I disliked his passive condescension and then flipped today's newspaper onto his lap.

"Front page." I directed as I turned my attention back to the road.

I felt his eyes probe me for a tense moment and then heard him unfold the paper.

"What am I looking for?" He asked.

"It should be obvious."

After a few seconds he spoke:

"What? This piece about food poisoning at Lakeside?"

I allowed my silence to serve as my response. Scott sighed and read aloud.

" 'Seventeen students and three adults were hospitalized yesterday after consuming what officials now verify as tainted candy at the school's open house. Nine of the children remain in critical condition while investigators race to identify the source of the contaminant that may have caused the victims to become violently ill'."

Scott paused and shifted in his seat. I felt his gaze upon me but refused to acknowledge. Eventually he continued reading:

" 'Doctors suspect the powerful hallucinogenic ketamine mixed with a high dose of MDMA (also known as the designer drug, Ecstasy) may be to blame. As a result, Federal DEA investigators have mobilized to uncover just how this could've occurred at the elementary school'."

He stopped reading and refolded the paper, placing it carefully in his lap. The silence in the car had become something of recurring chasm between us recently. It saddened me because I loved him so much.

“She called it, Scott,” I broke the stiffness between us. “She warned me not to eat the candy. And she was right.”

I began to tear up.

“She knew...”

~*~

“What about this one?” Scott pointed at the swinging pendulum arms of the amusement ride. “The Rockin’ Rocket!” He chuckled at the silly name. “We used to call it The Salt and Pepper Shakers. Remember that, Karen?”

“Hmm,” I was aware of Emmella’s eyes growing wide with each downward sweep of the giant arms. She flinched at the hydraulic dinosaur sneezes that swept the steel-mesh pods of passengers screaming by. We were buffeted by the wind created with each pass. She was terrified. I was able to catch Scott’s eager eye and gave him a small look that said *No way*. Scott frowned and looked down at Emma with a brief glint of disappointment in his eyes.

“All right,” he ventured. “How about the Tilt-a-Whirl? Or... or the Scrambler?”

Emmella firmed her jaw and looked off into the distance, choosing to avoid conflict altogether.

“Hon, let’s just play some games or get something to eat.” I suggested.

“C’mon,” Scott pleaded. “We’re at the fair, for Chrissakes. We have to ride something.”

“No, we really don’t.” I gave him another look, this time harder. “Emmella doesn’t want to and I’m not going to force her.”

Scott knelt down and turned my daughter to face him.

“What is it, Em? You loved all of these rides last year. Remember?”

Emmella sighed and shrugged weakly. Scott was trying to win her over, but I knew she would simply clam up and withdraw.

“Scott, you’re just making her anxiety worse. Give her a break, okay.”

He mumbled as he stood. “And you’re just enabling her. As usual.”

I cocked my head and glared at him.

“What?” He shot back. “You are. Look, let’s please ride something, okay? How about the Ferris Wheel?”

“I hate heights.” I returned coolly.

Scott shook his head and looked around impatiently. The lights of the midway glared, leaving multicolored halos lingering in my peripheral vision. Club music blared from speakers strung onto wooden poles by frayed wires. The air smelled of grease and cigarettes and cotton candy.

“Okay—there! Look. The Swinger! Em, you love the swings.” Scott clapped his hands together. “Let’s do that and then grab something to eat.” He squatted back down and faced Emmella. “What do you say, beautiful? You and me, side by side. Just like last year.”

My little girl looked up at me beseechingly and I shrugged in mild surrender. I was beginning to feel that if we just rode this one ride, maybe Scott would ease up on the tough love campaign. But Em wasn’t about to relent. Her eyes sharpened and held mine with their urgency.

“*Mom*,” she whispered. “Do not get on that ride. It’s not safe.” She was nearly sobbing and the intensity of her voice froze my blood.

She was doing it again.

I bent down and hugged her around the shoulders.

“Okay, baby. We won’t, we won’t.”

At that, Scott rose and stood simmering with agitation before snorting indignantly.

“Okay, you know what? I’m going to ride the Swinger. Anybody want to join me? No? Fine!” He stepped away while muttering to himself. After a few steps he turned to us and spoke in a tight voice. I could hear the compunction threatening to burst through.

“You’ll see, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that ride.” Then he gestured toward Emmella. “And her visions—or whatever they are—are not going to continue to rule our lives.” He breathed heavily for a few uncomfortable seconds and then spun

around and walked to the end of a short queue for entry onto the Swinger.

I gave Em a squeeze and then stood. Taking her hand, I led her away from the midway. She soon had me in a death grip and began resisting as we approached the fence that circumscribed the orbit of the swings. I paused and turned to her.

“What is it, sweetie?”

“We are *not* getting on that ride, Mom.” Her eyes were wide and shining with terror.

“No, of course not. Scott is. We’ll just watch from here, okay? Is that okay?”

Emmella shrugged indifferently.

A thought suddenly occurred to me and I felt I had to pursue it.

“Em, Honey,” I bit my lip. “What exactly is wrong with this ride? Why are you so scared?”

Another dispassionate shrug followed by a pout.

“It just isn’t safe, that’s all.” She murmured.

“What do you feel is wrong? Will something bad happen?”

“I don’t know.”

I swallowed and then asked, “Honey, is Scott safe? Should we get him off that ride?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was barely audible.

The engine at the center of the ride moaned and then whined as it ramped up. The large spidery arms trembled, the chains from which the chairs were suspended rattled and clanked. With a loud creak, the operator released the clutch and sent the forty-odd single seat swings into orbit. I could see Scott spinning in his chair, his feet dangling and his hands loosely clasped around the galvanized chains that cradled his seat. His face was pale and sad in the fluorescent lights. He never looked lonelier than in that moment.

Please hang on tight, babe. Just hang on!

I watched Scott's chair spin along its arc. My heart thrummed in the hollow of my throat as I counted each revolution, waiting for something...

Emmella stood very still at my side.

~*~

The ride squealed to a stop. The chairs swayed and bounced at the end of their chains as the ride's momentum slowed and the passengers were lowered to the pavement. I breathed a sigh of salvation when Scott lifted the bar and slipped out of his seat. He followed the other riders out of the fly-zone and walked around the fence to join us. He smiled as he approached and I was glad to see an abashed look of contrition on his face. My heart was still racing, but my mouth was no longer dry.

"You see," He spread his hands. "Still in one piece." He ruffled Emmella's hair. "But it just wasn't the same without you, kiddo."

Em hugged me closer and buried her face against my hip. Scott frowned, obviously hurt. I placed a hand on his shoulder and offered him a smile that signified a

temporary truce. He reached up and cupped my hand in his.

The Swinger was gearing up for the next round of fliers while all around us the midway coughed and belched with carnival life. The setting wasn't perfect but I had to remind myself that neither were we. Scott certainly wasn't a perfect man, but I loved him anyway and I knew he loved us. Our little family was a bit odd to him, yet he was trying in his own way and that's why, in that moment, I forgave him and reaffirmed to myself that I loved him.

The swings whisked over our heads, the breeze tussled our hair. We smiled at one another and then took a step toward elephant ears and corn dogs.

But we never made it.

~*~

A horrifying, inhuman shriek shattered the moment. Reflex forced us to turn toward the sound just as a tangle of shadows soared over us, at us and around us. Time slowed to a crawl as I heard the mechanical wail of gears surrendering pent-up torque, the hellish clang of chains snapping and the peal of humans screaming in terror.

The four nearest streaking shadows became four bodies, still trapped within their plastic chairs and trailing broken lengths of chains as they soared straight for us, flung from the ride's broken arm like some medieval weapon system. I recognized my own terrified voice among all of the cries just as a crushing blackness engulfed me. There was no time to register pain.

Before I spiraled into darkness, I saw Scott take a direct hit to the face from one

of the human projectiles. All I can recall of Emmella in that moment was the top of her blond head as she clung desperately to my waist.

I could only hope I was enough to shield her.

~*~

“We’ll have to keep him in a medically induced coma. Until the brain swelling goes down.”

“But he’s alive?” My voice sounded alien to me. I felt sedated. Heavily sedated.

“Yes. Amazingly. But, by no means, are we out of the woods.”

I nodded and closed my eyes against the headache that had awakened and was beginning to gnaw at the backs of my eyes.

“There are a few more things we need to discuss.” The doctor seemed younger than me, yet he sounded so wise—so experienced at these sorts of things.

“In traumatic accidents such as this, we typically run a series of routine tests: blood work, etc... In case there’s any reason to go to surgery.” He paused, cleared his throat and then continued. “Karen, your blood work came back positive for pregnancy.”

I opened my eyes and stared at the young physician through the fog of medication.

“Really?” I slurred.

“I thought you should know as soon as possible. I checked for heart tones and

everything sounds normal. I hope this is positive news, even if it is a surprise.”

“Huh?” I had been told I would be lucky to ever conceive again. *Well, what do you know.*

“We also performed routine CT and MRI scans of your heads.” Again he paused.

“And?” I asked weakly.

“I have some bad news about your daughter’s MRI.”

~*~

I cradled Emmella’s head in my lap, pulled my fingers through twists of her blond hair and tried not to think about the seed of fate that was growing inside of her brain.

A six-millimeter lesion. A tumor about the size of a kernel of corn. Non-operative, they insist, but also asymptomatic. At least for now.

But, again, I wonder...

How might symptoms manifest? Could this thing be the cause of her visions? Hallucinations?

I sighed and fought back another wave of tears as Scott stirred in bed across the room. The three of us were quite a sorry sight: All bandaged and bruised, my left arm in cast, Scott in a coma. But alive. Still alive...

And how?

Emmella.

Again, she knew. Somehow, she knew that ride would fail and tragedy would ensue. I've been asking myself for hours now why she didn't insist that Scott not ride as well. Did she care little enough for him to actually be indifferent to his safety? Did she even understand that?

Perhaps. But as I held my daughter in my arms, knowing her as I do, I felt that wasn't quite right. She has a better soul than that.

Instead, I'm starting to think it has more to do with saving me. At all costs. I reflect back on all of Emmella's precognitive episodes and I realize that they all have one thing in common:

Me.

She's been looking out for my safety. And while that thought certainly warms my heart, I still feel unworthy of that focus. Even guilty.

But then Em turned on my lap and faced my stomach. Still apparently fast asleep, she placed both of her hands on my abdomen, pressed lightly and kissed my belly. Twice.

Then she smiled and sighed.

It was at that moment I realized exactly whom she'd really been protecting from harm.