

Invisible Boy

I hate it when she ties into me in front of the kid. He just stands there all bug-eyed while she reams me out.

“I won’t—WILL NOT—have you smoking that shit in *my* house, in front of *my* son. Are you listening to me? Do you understand what I’m saying? You’re not only screwing up your life, what about ours’? There are other people around here, y’know. What’s he supposed to think?” She points at Jeff but he just hangs his head.

“What’s the big deal, Sal? It’s only a joint for Chrissake. What about all the times he’s seen you so drunk you hardly recognize him? I don’t hear you talking about that.”

“Don’t you *dare*—” she starts to say.

“I’m just telling it like it is,” I fire back.

“—insult me in front of my son. Don’t do it again, Ray. *Ever*. You’ll be making the biggest mistake of your life.” She puts her hand on Jeff’s head; he looks up at her in surprise, not used to her *touching* him, showing actual affection.

“Oh, I see. Now he’s *your* son. What about all those long, windy speeches about how we’re one big, happy family?”

“Ted would never have—”

And then I really blow my stack. “Ted, Ted, Ted. That fucker practically permeates this place. You still got pictures of him hanging up, still gotta call him once a month, rain or shine. But, hell, that’s fine with me. I love helping Ma Bell out with a few long distance phone calls. *Jesus Christ*, Sally, you’ve been separated three years now. When are you gonna cut the cord? The guy’s a *jerk*.” I see Jeff flinch when I say it but it’s said so I keep right on plugging. “He’s doesn’t want to help support Jeff, doesn’t want any pictures of him...he never even sends a bloody Christmas card. And here I am, busting my hump to keep the fridge filled week in and week out and not getting any credit—”

“Jeff, go to your room,” Sally says, cold as ice.

“He tried going to his room!” I bellow and Jeff twitches again. “But you decided to use him as a prop in this little show you’re putting on.”

She gives me THE LOOK. Yup, I’ll be sleeping on the couch again tonight. Shouldn’t have let the dope do the talking.

God, I feel bad for that kid. I go out of my way to avoid getting into scraps with Sally but she just keeps picking at me and picking at me like I’m an itchy scab. And every time we fight she manages to get in a few good ones under the belt. Like that crack about Ted.

The dope was nothing. Hey, we’ve shared a joint lots of nights after Jeff’s gone to bed. She really likes the stuff. Except that every time she gets high she has these wild cravings and we have to order out for pizza or Chinese food.

I got home from work and neither her or Jeff was around so I decided to roll myself a doobie, just to help me unwind. I was finishing it off, listening to some BTO on the radio (cranked *wayyyy* up) when they walked in.

WHAM!

She'd had a rough day too and seeing me standing there with a roach burning between my fingers was enough to set her off. You should never sneeze in avalanche country, right?

On the way to his bedroom Jeff digs some comic books out of one of the shopping bags they carried in. As he shuffles down the hall his nose is already buried in the latest issue of *Spiderman*. Poor little bugger. Spidey's probably his best friend in the world. I'd like to go in and sit on the end of his bed and talk to him, maybe read through his comics with him—some of them are really good, y'know—but right away Sally starts yipping at me and I yap back and by the time we wear ourselves out it's after eight.

As soon as there's a break in the action I go and look in on Jeff. He's got all of his sheets and blankets wadded up in the middle of the bed. He's under that pile somewhere, I can hear him singing away to himself. I ask if he's okay, is there's anything I can get for him but I don't think he hears me. I close the door and leave him to his soundproof sanctuary.

Jeez, I wonder if Sal has seen this latest trick. I mean, I'm thinking this can't be a good sign. The kid is pulling back from us, maybe developing some kind of, you know, problem because of—of what goes on around here. That isn't right. What we're doing to that boy isn't right.

I wish I could spend more time with him. I work during the week and on weekends it's Sally I have to pay attention to or else there's hell to pay. Now and then we're alone together. I'll take him along when I go to the store or I'll swing by and pick him up after school. He barely says a word the whole time we're together. Just "yeah" or "no" and lots of shrugging. I wonder what he thinks of me living at the house, sleeping in the same bed as her. Even at his age kids know that grown-ups aren't playing checkers in there.

I keep buying him presents. I know it looks bad, like I'm trying to buy his love but I can't help myself. So every once in awhile we have to act out this ritual: I push a model or some toy across the table to him and try to decipher his mumbles as he picks it up and looks it over. I know he likes my presents, I see him playing with them all the time. I think he's afraid to show too much enthusiasm because then she'll have something to use against him. She's constantly threatening to take his toys away if he's not good. And the thing is he *is* good. Too damn good. He's like a well-trained pet. He fetches when she wants him to and speaks when she wants him to but most of the time it's like she just wants him to play dead.

When I come back into the kitchen everything's pretty much back to normal. Whatever that means. I ask Sally what the plans are for the weekend and get a funny look.

"Same as always," she says. Like it's final.

Every weekend it's the same thing. We buy groceries, pick up some booze and a couple of movies and stay cooped up like parakeets until Monday. I've tried to

get her to go to the beach or the park at least. I tell her we can roast some wienies, chuck a frisbee around, have ourselves a great time. Y'know, like a real family.

She doesn't want the hassle of packing a lunch and hates the long, hot drive and the smelly bathrooms and the bugs and the people and the loud music...so we end up sitting on our butts doing nothing.

I wonder if she'd ever let Jeff and me go off by ourselves. Take a week and go camping and hiking. I'm almost scared to ask. I know she hates the idea of being alone. The woman is incapable of entertaining herself. She says that's what men are for. One of these days when I'm good and drunk I'm gonna ask her: wassa matter? Ted run out of jokes?

She'll cut me off for a whole fucking year for it but it'll be worth it. Every time she brings that guy up it just galls me. Her first love. Her high school sweetheart. The man she gave her virginity to. What a crock. I think he's done more damage to Jeff than anybody. How would I have felt if my old man had turned his back on me? Like I was worthless. And I'm sure that's exactly how Jeff feels.

Saturday morning Jeff and I are watching some old "Tom and Jerry" cartoons and yukking it up and she comes storming in and starts yelling at him 'cause his room's a mess. I mean, what kid's isn't, right? But she just shits on him, calls him lazy and stupid and irresponsible. He's cowering like a sick puppy. Me, stupid ass that I am, I sit there like a bump on a log and say nothing. He shuts the TV off and goes meekly to his room. Sally stations herself at the table, drinking coffee and smoking, glaring at me, daring me to say something. I wait until she takes her shower

and then go in to lend Jeff a hand—but he’s already finished and escaped outside. I tidy up some of what’s left, straighten the covers on his bed.

I can hear Sally singing away in the bathroom; she sounds as happy as a lark. As I walk past she comes out and gives me big kiss, making her way singing and dancing to the kitchen to start breakfast. When it’s ready I call out the back door to Jeff—

And here he comes, walking out of his bedroom like some kind of zombie and sitting down at the table. His face looks puffy and he’s pale and all sweaty. I want to say something about him playing hide and seek on me but he’s acting so weird that I skip that and instead lean over and ask if he’s okay—and he nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Uncle Ray asked you a question, Jeff,” Sally prods him.

“Everything all right?” I’m smiling at him, trying to keep it nice and friendly but I can see his bottom lip start trembling and I know, I *know* that if I keep pushing it he’s going to start blubbering. So I change the subject, start telling Sally about something that happened at work. But I keep an eye on him all through breakfast. Something is definitely bugging him. I can tell he’s not hungry but he’s forcing himself to eat because if he doesn’t she’ll get p.o.’d and not let him have any dinner or supper. He chews carefully because she hates noisy eaters.

When he’s finished he wipes his mouth with a napkin, pushes his chair back, puts his plate in the sink. Then he asks to be excused, gets his jacket and shoes on and goes outside. Don’t ask me what he does.

“What do you think about going out to a movie tonight?” I’ve waited for the right moment before popping the question, hoping to catch her off guard.

“Is there anything good in town?” Already she’s frowning, sensing that her monotonous routine is in danger of being disrupted.

“Yeah, *Pinocchio* is playing downtown at the Coronet. Man, I loved that show when I was a kid. Jeff will—”

“Don’t be stupid,” she snaps. “I don’t want to see that crap.”

“But, like I said, Jeff would really get a kick out of—”

“It’s another stupid cartoon!” She’s getting steamed and there’s nothing I can do about it. “That’s all he ever watches. When is he supposed to get a dose of reality?”

“I think the trouble is he gets too much reality for his own good, especially around here.” I could bite my tongue off as I say it.

“YOU GO TO HELL!” She yells and tramps off to the bedroom. *Slam!*

Ray, old buddy, you’ve done it again...

That night there are no movies, no going out and when Jeff asks about watching TV, she sends him off to bed without any supper. I try to step in and veto that but Sally looks at me all calm and cool and tells me to go fuck myself.

Jeff trudges off. As he passes me on the way to his room I try to catch his eye. But it’s like he’s looking right through me. His face is completely blank, nothing registering, too beaten down to care.

That's when I start thinking about, y'know, just saying "screw this" and taking off. It's *so* tempting. Escape this crazy woman and take up with my riff-raff friends again, get drunk, get stoned, do whatever I want—

And then I remember the times when she's soft, when she fixes herself up and talks sensibly and laughs and gives me sexy looks. I love that person more than anything. More than I love myself. And there's Jeff. Some part of me deep and secret connects with that boy. I think we'll be close some day, him and me. I'm almost positive about that.

I stay.

I must be nuts but I always end up staying.

Later on I go to the john and, when I'm done, wander a little further down the hall, knock on Jeff's door, stick my head inside.

The room is empty.

And this time I make sure: I check the closet and even take a quick peek under the bed.

I'm about to close the door, I'm wondering where he could've gone—and I hear this little sigh. I lean into the room again but there's no one there. So, okay, I didn't hear a little sigh.

I close the door and start back down the hallway—

The bedroom door opens behind me.

And I just freeze, like, in mid-step. I turn around really slow. The doorway is empty and I think, so, okay, I didn't pull it shut all the way and it popped open again.

No big deal. I reach out to close the door and I hear a voice, a voice as small as a mouse coming from somewhere in the room.

“...please...Uncle Ray...please...”

“Jeff?” I move into the room, trying to find him.

“...help me, please...*I can't make it back...*”

My foot bumps against something. A leg, I think, although I can't be sure. *There's nothing there.* As I kneel, a boy-sized hand slips inside mine, gripping my fingers tightly.

“Please,” he whimpers, “I—I'm scared. Help me...please...”

“Okay,” I promise and the invisible boy comes to me and I hold him close.

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