

## Tough Breaks and TLC

November 2022 – Commission

Wow, what on earth is going on now? First off, the kitchen smells absolutely amazing. But why's my wife lying back there on the living room floor? With nothing on her lower half except one of those pull-ups?

Whatever – one thing at a time. It's been a long day at work, and I'm pretty beat. Off come the boots at the door, and in I pad in my sweaty-stained socks, curious to know what's been unfolding here since my departure this morning. Corinne's car was in the driveway when I came in – an increasingly common sight these days – and so it's hardly a surprise when she appears in the kitchen doorway with a smile on her face and a spoonful of something appetizing in her hand.

"Welcome home, Henry," she beams, and I obligingly open as she offers the spoon for me to taste. "Thought you might enjoy a nice warm soup after such a cold day. How is it? Too much spice?"

God, Corinne is something else! Here she is – a beautiful, capable, friendly young woman who owes us literally nothing. And yet day after day she gives her time and energy to help out. She's been so sweet to us both, and particularly to Amy. Especially ever since, well, you know...

"Good," I nod, and I can hardly help the smile breaking across my tired face. "Damn, that's good. Perfect amount of spice!" But all she does is beam appreciatively and, before I can thank her, she gestures toward the living room and my prone wife whose sock-clad feet and bare legs I can see aimlessly kicking in the air. "Oh, Amy's in there – with a few therapy toys I brought over. Maybe you'd better go check on her... say hi, you know. Oh, and let her know supper's ready..."

She's lowered her voice, and I draw closer. "How's she been today? No more accidents, I hope?" Oh, yes. Accidents. A casual listener might think I'm talking about a three-year-old, but no – I mean my twenty-five-year-old wife. My wife who, much as I love her, has been trying my patience over the last few months with her unaccountably childish regression.

"Well..." Corinne shrugs her blond head and gives me a wry smile. "At least she *tried*. But we had two more wet pull-ups today – not counting her naptime diaper, of course – and the second was a pretty bad leak. Which is why we had to lose the pants..." Well, shit – or rather, pee? I can only sigh and shake my head as I head for the living room, thanking my stars internally that Corinne has not only the medical know-how of a nurse, but also the patience of a veritable saint.

Amy glances up from her prone position on the smooth laminate floor as I enter, stepping cautiously through the astonishing clutter of items around her. She's got an open coloring book before her – dozens of crayons lying scattered about – a half-finished Lego mermaid set in the corner – and to top it all off, a large stuffed kitten staring benevolently over it all. Again, I almost feel like pinching myself as I survey the scene, feeling not for the last time that I no longer have a wife but an irresponsible child.

Nothing for it, I suppose. I glance down at the half-colored unicorn before her. "It's great, sweetie!" I enthuse, trying not to focus on the clear slips of the crayon outside the lines – nor on the guilty flush of embarrassment on her cheeks, nor the way she hurriedly flips it shut as if in anxious mortification. "Very pretty! But honey, listen – Corinne says supper is ready, so you really need to clean this mess up. Come on, you don't want her yummy soup to get cold..."

Sure, I've deliberately pitched my words as if to a toddler. But I am most certainly not prepared for the look of peevish anger that crosses her face at those words. "Corinne's stupid!" she exclaims, and now she's sitting up, her pink pull-up crinkling amiably beneath her. "She's been so mean to me today! Look, she took my pants-"

"Well, that's because you peed them," I interject – and now she's really mortified, I can tell. And angry. "Nuh- no, you- you're just saying that 'cause she *told* you!" she exclaims, her voice rising to a near-shout. "She made me play with these *baby* toys! An' she's making me wear these stupid, dumb, *embarrassing*-" "Look, Amy," I cut in, and as she rises to her feet I place a firm hand on her shoulder, wondering suddenly what Corinne would suggest I do here. "I don't care what Corinne says. But she brought these nice things over for you, and I am telling you to be decent and clean them up. *Now*."

"Screw you," she mutters – and as I watch, she wheels and stomps her way toward the Legos. But whether with the intent of tidying them away or of smashing them into pieces, we may never know. For her path takes her directly through the chaotic jumble of crayons... and before either of us can react, her stockinged feet are slipping – she tumbles forward – and with a high-pitched yelp and shuddering crash, she smacks heavily down onto the floor.

As her bloodcurdling wail of pain quavers through the room, even I know that something is very, *very* wrong. It's not the sudden, visible expansion of her pull-up, nor the muffled burble of her bowels emptying into it. It's certainly not the wet hiss of her bladder flooding out once more into that juvenile padding. It's the crazy angle of her right arm... and the way her one foot is now splayed out to the side at the most nauseatingly unnatural angle.

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"It's called a simple fracture," Corinne explains later that night as we gingerly guide my sedated but feebly whimpering wife out from the car and into the house. "Broken, sure. But it's not protruding through the skin – which is definitely a good thing. Much less risk of infection..."

We're inside now, and as we gingerly maneuver her down the hall and into our bedroom, I eye the thick plaster casts that now adorn not only Amy's left leg and ankle, but also her right arm and wrist. "Is it really so common to break bones that easily? I mean, it wasn't that big of a fall-" "All in the way they tumble," Corinne readily supplies, and Amy moans softly as we set her down on the bed. "She might have a genetic tendency toward weak bones, or a calcium deficiency. Or maybe it was just a super unlucky fall. We really won't know until we learn more from the doctor."

But shaky and tired and nervous as I am – for who wouldn't be, after seeing their sweet wife shrieking in pain and having to rush her to the hospital with broken bones? – I just want to do the right thing. "Hey, it's late, I know," I begin, and without thinking I put my arm around Corinne in an awkward half-hug. "And I'm so sorry to have kept you here so late. But before you go-"

"Go?" Her grave smile and shaking head take me aback. "Henry, please. Listen to me. I'm literally a nurse. I know about this stuff. I know what else Amy is going through, and she's one of my best friends ever. Please..." And her low whisper catches a tiny bit with sudden emotion. "Please, let me stay here while she's laid up, okay? You can't get off work for an entire six weeks, Henry, and she's going to need someone to help her when you're away. Please, I don't need much. I can sleep on the couch..."

Oh, Corinne. She's so... so incredible. So mature, and sweet, and kind. And though I hate to feel so needy, exhausted as I am I can't help but sigh and slowly nod. "If- if you're really sure. You don't have to, you know. But god, it would help so much..." "Then it's done," she smiles, and even in the darkened room I can see the delight shining softly in her eyes. "We both love Amy, Henry. We both want what's best for her. And now more than ever, she needs someone to care for her."

"Ahem," I clear my throat quietly, trying to shrug away the sudden wave of tingly emotions welling through my tired self. "Speaking of- you know, care..." I poke gingerly at the ugly green medical diaper around my wife's waist. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to teach me the ropes of changing one of these things? You and she have always been doing it, and I suppose I at least ought to learn how...right?"

"Definitely," she nods, and before I know it she's rummaging in that drawer where Amy keeps those nighttime diapers she's been wearing the past while. "Here, let's do it right while we're at it..."

So that's how it comes about that I'm up at ten minutes to midnight, standing side by side with Corinne in my dimly-lit bedroom, letting her guide me through the surreal experience of changing my heavily medicated wife's diaper. It's going to be up to the two of us, she acknowledges as we liberally apply powder and lotion to those delicate regions that most husbands only touch during their most intimate moments. Poor Amy's going to be basically bed-fast for the next six weeks at least. She's already been having such problems with her stress and the potty and everything. Far better to just take away the pull-ups entirely. If she really, really needs to go and we're both there, of course we can help her to the toilet. But Amy shouldn't even think about touching them herself. She just needs a lot of love and firmness and TLC: to be forced to relax and recover, with set naptimes and mealtimes and bedtimes...

Corinne is one hell of a woman, I find myself thinking as we finish and she plants a wryly sweet kiss on Amy's forehead. She's already taking so much of my worries away. She wants what's best for my wife, and she knows so much about everything. So compassionate. So mature and confident... so sweet and strong and capable...

So very different from poor Amy, I suppose. Very, *very* different indeed.