

AFTER DINNER Conversation

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“Think your mom’s pushing too hard.” Hamish and Miriam were in the park, sitting at a picnic table, eating tuna sandwiches. Hamish was looking at his mother-in-law pushing their daughter Isabelle on the swing at the playground some distance away.

“No, she’s not. Bella’s laughing. She’s having fun.” Miriam wiped a speck of tuna from the side of her mouth. “She doesn’t laugh like that with me anymore. Now, every time I pick her up, she screams.” Miriam tossed her balled-up napkin into the garbage bin a few feet away from the table. For a split second, she imagined the crinkled paper was Bella. “I don’t think she likes me anymore,” said Miriam.

“Don’t be silly. Bella adores you,” said Hamish, gently tapping the tip of her nose with his finger.

Miriam smiled weakly and squeezed the back of his hand, but she knew he was wrong.

She’d been warned that the first two years would be the

hardest. But they weren't, not for her anyway. Sure, the pain from her sutures had been hell, and the lack of sleep made her feel like a zombie, but every time that beautiful, soft, sweet-smelling infant gripped her fingers and stared into her eyes, Miriam just knew—Bella was a part of *her*, her forever person. When Bella had latched on to her and suckled, Miriam felt the way she did when she had her first crush in her tweens—overwhelmed, excitedly anxious, overly eager to please. Looking after her baby made her feel more a part of this world, like a participant rather than a bystander in her own life. When Bella was about twenty months old, she uttered her first word—“Mama.” At that moment, Miriam understood exactly what people meant when they talked about the miracle of motherhood.

But then, things started to change.

On Bella's second birthday, Miriam threw a big party. She had hired a caterer and covered the house with streamers, balloons, and flowers. She was looking forward to showing off her pride and joy to her friends and neighbors. As Hamish chatted with their guests in the living room, Miriam and her mother were in Bella's bedroom, trying to get the child to wear a peach-colored frock Grandma had bought her. Bella refused to wear it. She pulled at the frilly thing angrily, and her face turned tomato red. “Waaaahhhh” She howled. She would not stop. Miriam carried her and rocked her gently. “Shhhh... it's okay, my darling girl. Shhhh... it's such a pretty dress. Your grandma bought it specially for your birthday. You look so pretty in it. Why won't you wear it?” “Argggghhhhhh...” Bella screamed, then wrestled herself out of her mother's grasp and plopped onto the carpeted floor. She continued crying and

punched the air with her little fists. Each time Miriam tried to comfort her, she shrieked, so Miriam gave up and stepped back. Miriam's mother tried to calm the child down but got the same reaction. Then Bella rolled onto her belly and wriggled like a worm in an attempt to peel off the dress. The fabric bunched up above her pudgy waist, but she didn't know how to get her arms out of its puffy sleeves. She pounded the floor with her arms and legs. Nothing could calm the child down. Every soothing word Miriam said made the girl cry even louder and pound the floor more violently. Then the crying turned into retching; a weird hacking, gurgling noise came out of Bella's little mouth. Her chubby cheeks took on a purplish hue, and she looked like she was vomiting, but there was no vomit, only a pool of drool on the floor. Miriam looked at her child in horror and wondered if she should take her to the hospital. But as soon as Miriam pulled the dress off her, the noise stopped.

“Mama,” Bella sat up and simpered, then reached out to hold Miriam's hand. For the first time, Miriam noticed an expression on the girl's face that she did not like, an expression she could only describe as self-satisfaction. Studying the knowing smile on Bella's teary, snot-covered face, she understood what her child was saying—“You lost, Mama. *I* won.”

As if she had discovered the secret of exercising her own will—or so it seemed to Miriam—Bella decided she didn't want to have afternoon naps with her mother anymore. She stopped reaching out to touch Miriam's hair, stopped wanting to play *Itsy Bitsy Spider*. She no longer grabbed Miriam's breasts, no longer nuzzled in the curve of Miriam's neck, looking up at her as if she were the most necessary person in the whole world. Now, Bella squealed and pulled away whenever Miriam tried to

hold her. Last week, she slapped Miriam's hand during a feeding. Pureed pumpkin flew onto the walls and Miriam's favorite blouse. Three days ago, she bit Miriam's cheek when Miriam tried to kiss her.

Miriam didn't tell anyone about any of this. She didn't want anyone thinking she couldn't manage her own child. *It's not supposed to be like this*, she had thought. *What went wrong?* She watched Bella more closely, trying to find her answer. One afternoon, while Bella was braiding the hair on one of her dolls, Miriam noticed her eyes looked a little crossed; her left eyeball seemed skewed ever so slightly toward the tip of her nose. She took Bella to the pediatrician and asked if anything could be done. The doctor said strabismus—misalignment of the eyes—was totally normal in young children and the eye would right itself once her ocular muscles become stronger. Miriam was not assured by the doctor's prognosis. Wait-and-see was not what she wanted. She wanted the eye *fixed*. She wanted the problem *solved*. Every time she looked at Bella's crossed eye, she felt angry, like she had bungled up and put too much butter or not enough sugar in a cake she was baking.

Hamish was oblivious to what was happening, but Miriam knew—their child was turning into a beast. Like a cub developing sight, Bella was beginning to actually see Miriam. With her wonky eye, perhaps Bella could see the woman beneath Mama, and Miriam suspected that Bella did not like what she saw. Now, when Bella looked at her, Miriam no longer felt flooded with oxytocin; she no longer felt like a mother, all-powerful and adored. Instead, she felt judged, insecure, like an imposter.

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Overhead, bruise-colored clouds gathered. The sun had disappeared. Grandma helped Bella off the swing, and they crossed the playground—the old woman trudging, the little girl skipping—and made their way back to the picnic table. When Bella was a few feet away from her parents, she stopped, looked right at Hamish, grinned cheekily, then charged toward him with a hug. “Da, Daaaa... me swing.”

“Yes, I watched you on the swing,” said Hamish, lifting her into his arms. “I saw you. You are bee-u-tee-ful.”

“Da, Daaa... make fly.”

Hamish raised her above his head and swung her around, up in the air in a circular motion.

With her eyes tightly shut, Bella giggled uncontrollably.

When the flight ended, Hamish cradled Bella in the crook of his arm and kissed her on the nose.

Miriam walked toward them and leaned in to kiss Bella. Bella made a mewling sound, pouted, wrapped her arms around her father’s neck, and buried her face in his left cheek to shield herself from Miriam’s gaze.

“See what I mean, Hamish?”

“Oh, she’s just testing you. Give your Mama a kiss, Bella. Be a good girl.”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Come on, Bella. Your Mama wants a kiss too.”

Reluctantly, Bella raised her head and gave Miriam a peck on the cheek.

Miriam smiled and was about to kiss her back when she noticed the ferocious gaze. *Don’t you dare*, the girl’s eyes said. Miriam turned away.

The four of them sat together at the table, picking away

at grapes and pretzels, half hoping the rain cloud would pass, half hoping it would crack open so they could all leave.

Miriam's mother edged closer to Miriam and offered her a bottle of water.

"I'm good. I had a Coke earlier."

"Coke's not the same as water. You have to stay hydrated. Drink, drink."

"I'm *not* thirsty."

"You know your cousin Dan died of kidney failure because he only drank Coke. It runs in our family, kidney problems. It's important to stay hydrated."

"Dan was overweight and diabetic. I'm pretty sure he was hydrated. And no one drinks *only* Coke. You're generalizing again, Mom," Miriam could feel her jaw tensing.

"Well, *I* only ever saw him drinking Coke."

The old lady continued talking about Dan's wife and kids, what a loyal wife, what a fine mother, what a good Christian she was, how she held everything together after Dan died. Miriam watched her mother babble on about this cousin's wife whom Miriam had only met a few times when she was a teenager and thought, *Does she actually think I give a shit?* She looked at her mother's wide eyes and breathless exclamations and wondered what it must be like to be someone who could get so enthused about a relative's unremarkable life, how small one's mind must be to be so easily entertained by such trivialities. And she wondered how it was possible she came from the womb of such a person.

Claire was smart to have left, Miriam thought, though initially, she had resented her older sister for moving to Italy for work. But Miriam knew she couldn't really hold it against Claire.

After all, Claire had already done her time with mom in Tucson in the years after their dad died. It seemed fair that Mariam stepped up now.

If Claire hadn't taken the job in Milan, Miriam and Hamish would still be in their rented loft in San Francisco. Miriam would still be a creative director at Ogilvy. But because Claire left, Miriam had to return to Tucson because Mom was all alone and getting old. *Someone* had to keep an eye on her. It was the right thing to do.

The upside to the move was that in Tucson, she and Hamish could actually afford to buy a modest, ranch-style house in Green Valley, not far from where her mother lived. The transition was easy enough for Hamish. The POS software company he worked for had a satellite office in Arizona that needed a new head of sales. It wasn't so easy for Miriam. She had to say goodbye to her glamorous job at Ogilvy and work part-time, from home, as a graphic designer for a small Tucson advertising start-up. The best thing that came out of the move had been Isabelle. If Miriam hadn't found Tucson and her new job so soul-crushingly boring, she probably wouldn't have thought to get pregnant to begin with.

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The cloud finally burst, and a deluge of rain darkened the wooden picnic table. Miriam packed all their picnic things into her backpack, Hamish carried Bella, and they all ran toward the car. They dropped Grandma at her home, then drove two blocks down to their own home.

Bella had fallen asleep in the car, and Hamish carried her inside and placed her on her couch. He grabbed two cans of cold beer from the fridge and went out to the porch, where Miriam

was sitting on one of two rockers. Hamish sat on the other and handed his wife a can. Miriam cracked it open and sucked the foam overflowing from the top. “I don’t think my mom can look after Bella for the whole week. A few hours a day is fine, but once her pain kicks in, she takes her meds, and she’s out. We can’t leave Bella with her for an entire week. She won’t be able to manage.”

“Shorten your trip, then,” Hamish said. “Make it three days rather than a week, maybe? I mean it’s Cancun. I’m sure Jen and Holly will understand. You girls can always do a longer trip when Bella’s older,” he said.

“Are you serious? I haven’t had a holiday in two years. Why don’t *you* cut *your* trip short?”

“I’m going for work. I have to lead the team. Marty’s not gonna let me get out of it.”

“Well, then, let’s get a babysitter,” said Miriam, already aware of what would come next.

“We’re *not* doing that. I’ve told you, I’m not leaving her with some stranger.” Hamish’s voice rose.

“You’re paranoid. Everybody else hires babysitters. Why shouldn’t we?”

“Because you can’t just trust *anyone* with kids,” he replied. “One wrong action, one wrong word, one wrong touch, and they can get all messed up.”

“You’re crazy, you know that.” She shook her head and took a few gulps of her beer. “Then maybe we drive to Phoenix and leave her with your sister?”

“No. Jim drinks too much. And Cory and Kim, they’re... weird,” said Hamish, shaking his head.

Miriam looked at him with incredulity. “What are you

saying? That your brother-in-law and teenage niece and nephew might be pedos?” She giggled.

“No! Fuck, Miriam. I’m just saying, you never know. It’s better to be safe than sorry. Little kids can bring out things in adults, not always warm, fuzzy things. There’s, there’s a fine line between being close and being *close* with kids, you know. Some adults just don’t have proper boundaries.”

Miriam looked at him teasingly, with a mock sad face. “Were you fondled as a boy?”

“Fuck, no! It’s just, you hear about these things all the time—priests, aunts and uncles, teachers, soccer coaches, the people we’re meant to trust.”

“And dads,” said Miriam, searching his face.

“Yes, dads. And moms too. It’s a scary world out there for kids,” said Hamish.

“And parents,” said Miriam. “But you can’t protect her forever. She’s not going to be your little angel for much longer. She’s already acting like a little shit with me.”

“So what do we do then? About next week?” he asked.

Miriam chugged what was left of her beer and crushed the can. “I can get a refund on the hotel. I’ll just cancel Cancun.” She sighed, rolling her eyes in resignation. It was the right thing to do.

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Miriam wasn’t happy about not having her holiday, but as consolation, she would have Bella’s undivided attention for a whole week. Without *Dada* around, Bella would have no choice but to depend on Mama for everything, to love Mama the way she used to.

But it didn’t work out that way. The more Miriam tried to

be affectionate and entertain Bella, the nastier she became. Throwing tantrums, refusing to eat, spitting her food, drawing on the carpet with her magic markers, breaking Miriam's costume jewelry, stuffing peanuts up her nose, biting off a chunk from a bar of hand soap, and always scowling when Miriam said "no"—as nicely as possible—to something she demanded but was not allowed. Bella would shriek and stomp over the slightest thing, in a way she never did when Hamish was around, in a way that made Miriam want to pick her up and smash her head against the wall again and again and again. Miriam thought all this and felt at times like every nerve in her body would conspire to make it happen. She never lifted a finger, of course. All she could ever manage was, "Noooo, Bella. *Plee-ase* stop it, Bella, just sto-op!"

Bella refused to be pleasant, and Miriam could not figure out what she was doing wrong. When they were alone together, Bella kept insisting on being with her grandma. This made Miriam feel unlikeable as if she were boring and Grandma was more fun. So, on the week Hamish was away, they spent most afternoons at Grandma's. Miriam would sit at the dining table, attempting to get work done on her laptop while listening to her mother drone on about her latest ailments and attending to her daughter's wishes for crayons, food, and play.

When Hamish returned, Bella's behavior improved, and she acted obedient and sweet. Miriam studied the child and became aware of how unchildlike she was.

On the weekend, they all went to the park. Hamish and Grandma ate mortadella sandwiches and played a game of Crazy Eights at the picnic table. This time, it was Miriam who brought Bella to the playground. Bella hopped onto the merry-

go-round, and Miriam grabbed the handrail and pushed hard twice. “Faster, Mama, faster. Why you so sloo-oooow?” She mocked. Miriam stepped back, then lunged forward and pushed again with all her might. She did this a second time, pushing even harder. The disc spun so fast that Bella slipped and was flung off it. She fell, face down, onto the sandy ground, scraping her chin and knees. Sand coated her cheeks. Blood flowed from her wounds. Her face contorted into a look of shock and pain, and her mouth turned down, ready to cry.

Miriam stood with her arms crossed tightly around her chest and studied the child. From the bottom of Bella’s little lungs came the start of a cry—a long, animal-like moan. Still on her knees on the sandy ground, Bella looked up, her eyes searching Miriam’s face, pleading for help, for rescue, for tenderness.

Miriam knew what she ought to do. She ought to go to Bella, embrace her, soothe her. That would be the right thing to do. Instead, she stood there, statue-like, her eyes as glassy as a toad’s, watching her daughter, savoring the distress the girl was experiencing. *Serves her right for being so rude to me*, she thought.

Then slowly, satisfied that Bella had suffered enough, she walked toward the child, took her hand, and helped her up. “Shhhhh... it’s all right. You’re a big girl now, Isabelle. It’s just a little scrape. You’ll be okay. Trust me.”

Still sobbing, Bella clutched her mother’s hand helplessly. As they walked slowly back to the picnic table, Miriam’s mind returned to what she’d been contemplating all last week. She decided she would talk to Hamish about it tonight. She would do it better the second time so the bond wouldn’t fray. She was ready, she was certain. She wanted, she *needed*, another child. A

good and loving child with straight eyes that stay focused on
Mama.

* * *

Mama

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Prey

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