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About 3,000 words

Double Dog Daring

I felt spent when I pulled back into my driveway. The house still covered in decorations. An enormous sign reading “Congratulations Skye” stretched across the front yard. My daughter, Skye, had just completed her time in preschool and, like all big kids, was moving on to bigger and better things in kindergarten. A few party favors on the grass and bags of trash collected around the curb was the price to pay for that achievement.

Besides yesterday’s decorations and a messier than average lawn, it was a beautiful day. The sun was shining bright with not a cloud in the sky. The traffic usually packed on our street was clear and our house on the hill was blossoming bright red roses from my wife’s garden. The only ugly image that could be found in our little garden of Eden was the stench coming out of our dumpster.

The blue plastic container had a harder life than most. It had been there for my wife and me when Skye was born. It had taken the brunt of all the good birthing juices from Skye’s home birth and all the subsequent years of Skye’s childhood. The dumpster had experienced the horrors of potty training, with non-disposable diapers bouncing in and out on a regular basis. But the dumpster hadn’t seen its worst day until my brother’s gift to my daughter, a puppy and her self-proclaimed best friend in the world, had found a plate of chocolate cake left out for me.

I kept quiet as I pulled roses from Tasha’s Garden. The thorns pricked at my fingers as I attempted to tie them into a bouquet with a ribbon from Skye’s décor. Another prick came to me in the form of an almost identical black and white pit-bull puppy. The ball of fur nibbled at my ankle, shaking from side to side at my sweats.

“Hey stop that Barb...”

I stopped before I said something untrue. The imposter came from the same litter of puppies and shared the same gender, breed, and colors as Barbie did. The only key difference which I spent most of the morning covering up was a blink and you’ll miss its birthmark on her belly. The difference was slight, but still noticeable. I dirtied the puppy’s underbelly good enough to conceal this.

The windows out in front of our house captured the perfect image of my shame. An imposter being passed off as my daughter’s best friend and a father so deceitful that instead of telling the truth would try to replace it. After I took a deep breath, I made the choice to enter my once peaceful home.

I slammed the door shut, nudging the doppelganger forward. The living room was still in disarray from the party that had preceded the night before. A valley of drink cups and torn gift-

wrapping paper buried our furniture. The only saving grace came from the aroma of breakfast coming from the kitchen.

I sauntered over to the kitchen but before I could out came Tasha. Tasha, my wife, was the vision of loveliness. She pulled her hair into a dread locked ponytail and her clothes were mine. The odd appearance did little to throw me off my game.

“Hey Baby, what is for breakfast?” I asked.

She didn’t acknowledge me. Her motions were entirely her own, moving from one side of stove to the next, setting up plates on the glass dining room table in the living room.

The puppy hadn’t taken the hint that Tasha wasn’t in the best of moods and pursued her into the kitchen where skilletts were in overdrive frying bacon, eggs, and French toast. A stainless-steel saucer pan, another gift from my brother labeled Barbie, laid in the corner. The dog going full method ran to the bowl and drove its face in the food meant for its dead sibling.

“Hey, get out of there,” said Tasha, finally noticing the puppy. Her demeanor changed when she looked at me.

“Roland,” she said.

I held out the roses until a few droplets of blood fell to the carpet. She shook her head at either them or me, but I couldn’t be sure which.

“Roland, what happened to Barbie’s collar?” she asked

My face contorted. I felt my heart sinking in my chest.

“What collar? Don’t you like the flowers?” I asked, playing the part of a dimwitted husband while the faux puppy played the part of Barbie.

Tasha turned off the stove and scooped what was left in the pan onto plates. I could hear in the distant sound of Disney Princesses harmonizing from Skye’s room. Tasha snatched the roses out of my hand and put them on the counter. I stood, catching my reflection off the surface of the table. My peace offering didn’t work.

“Where is the dog’s collar?” she asked again.

My head slouched down to the puppy as if I were inspecting it and I hoisted the charlatan in the air. I checked it from every angle.

“What? What happened to your collar, little buddy? What did you do? What did you do?” I said playfully.

Tasha smirked and gave a little punch to my side.

“Stop being silly. Wherever that collar is, we need to find it. The last thing we want to do is piss off the homeowner’s association with a collar less dog,”

I nodded my head and placed the dog down. Tasha smelled her roses and smiled.

“Skye, breakfast is ready,” said Tasha, fixing portions for each of us and a tiny plate of bacon for the pretender.

I took a sigh of relief and took my seat at the table. Tasha brought over a plate for me with a fresh bottle of syrup. The smell of french toast blessed my nostrils and assuaged my guilt. I prepared to dive in until Tasha pulled out a white kitchen bag. The puppy ran over to the front door, frightened, as if she knew the fate destined for her. I shot out of my seat to grab her.

“Tasha, you’ve been cooking ever since you got up. Let me take care of the trash,”

Tasha, without a thought, handed me the bag and went to pick up the puppy.

“Hey girl, come here,” she said.

My chest tightened.

“Tasha, leave her alone. She has been up under everyone all week since the party,”

Tasha ignored me and picked up the puppy, anyway. She held the dog close to her cheek and felt the smear of dirt streak down the side of her face.

“What the hell? Roland, what the hell have you been doing out there with this dog?”

She grabbed the puppy and stomped up the staircase. I attempted to stop her, but before I could, another threat entered the room, making more noise than her size should allow.

Skye, covered in a load of pink and blue stickers, barged into the living room, plopping down at the table.

“Morning, Daddy,” she said

“Hey, sweetie,” I said.

The feeling of dread intensified inside me. My attention remained on the staircase where I could hear running water and paws clawing on laminated floors upstairs. I took my seat.

“Where is Barbie? I want to show her my new pjs,” said Skye, spooning a portion of eggs into her mouth.

“Upstairs. Mommy is washing her off,”

“She was outside?”

“Yeah, I took her outside to play,” I said, attempting to convince a six-year-old that I was a good father.

“I can’t wait to go play with her. You should come too.”

I traced my dirty hands along my face and my head wandered over to a painting hanging over the window. My mother’s prized possession, The Head of Christ, sat judging me. The painting’s hands clasp in prayer and the eyes burned into me. The painting was a reminder of my mother and always instilled in me the values of being a good father. I shifted in my chair away from its judgmental gaze while Skye ate at her breakfast.

Skye took another big bite of her breakfast, then made her way over to the peace offering on the counter. Pedals had fallen to the floor and a wet puddle formed next to it.

“Whose roses are these? Can I have them?” she asked.

Before I answer, Tasha’s loud stomps came back down the stairs. I was so ashamed my head stayed at the table. The glass table stole another reflection from me and providing a better visual of my disgrace.

“Thanks for breakfast, Mom. Hi Barbie.” Skye said, running to greet the puppy.

I only listened to the chatter between Tasha and Skye. I heard the puppy yelping and the wagging of flinging bathwater. Skye let out a joyful shriek.

“Roland,” said Tasha.

My head lifted. Tasha had in her hand the dog with its underbelly in full view. Skye looked confused. Tasha appeared angry, and Jesus was still praying for all of us.

“Yes,” I said.

Tasha put the dog on the carpet.

“What happened last night?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“You woke up early and when I get up this morning, you’re outside with Barbie picking roses and playing in mud. What is going on with you? You look like you’ve been up all night,”

I rubbed my eyes and conveyed the appearance of an exhausted parent.

“It was just a lot, you know. Party. Puppy. You know what I’m saying?”

Tasha walked over to me and cradled my head against her chest. She kissed the top of my head and gave me a firm embrace.

“Thank you for being such a great about all of this,” she said.

I nodded. I reached for a fork to eat, but Skye’s face still hadn’t changed.

“This is not Barbie?” she said

Tasha and I sprung to attention. Skye knelt over the excited puppy and gave her a good once over. She gripped at the dog, and it pulled away from her.

“What do you mean, Skye? Of course, she is your puppy,” I said.

Skye did not flinch in her convictions. She moved away from the fake and pointed at the puppy.

“This is Ravenna. Barbie’s sister. Uncle Aaron showed me her first. I don’t like her, she bites.”

Tasha leaned over to the dog, dropping her face to mirror Skye’s.

“How do you know that?” asked Tasha, moving closer to Skye and further from me.

Skye pushed Ravenna over and showed her mother the dog’s birthmark. Tasha studied Ravenna. I nervously rubbed my hands together. The image disgusted me so much to watch my scheme be undone.

“What happened, Roland?” asked Tasha.

I finally stopped. I sucked in a good gust of courage, then knelt next to Skye, unable to conceal the secret any longer. I felt my knees buckling from the pressure. I clasped my hands together around Skye’s confused face and offered something true.

“Skye, your dad made a mistake last night. I tried to fix it, but I could not. Remember what I told you about dogs and chocolate?”

Tasha rolled her eyes. Skye nodded her head.

“Well, I was supposed to clean up last night and the piece of cake that was left out for me ended up being left out for Barbie.”

Skye’s eyes watered. She put on a tough face, but she couldn’t hold it.

“I’m so sorry, Skye. Barbie died.”

My eyes followed her in sadness. Tasha stood over Skye, consoling her. Ravenna, the pretender, just wagged her tail and bit at the heels of my boots, the little shit. I felt an immense weight being lifted off my shoulders, but shame for the lie.

“I’m sorry, Skye. I’m sorry I lied to you, and I promise never to do it again.” I said, trying to keep from crying myself.

Skye stopped crying long enough to give me a hug.

“You’re going to be OK. Ravenna may not be Barbie, but do you want to keep her?” I asked.

Skye shook her head as Ravenna defecated on the carpet.

“Dad?” said Skye.

“Yes.”

“Is Barbie in Heaven?”

At that moment, I heard the garbage truck pulling into our driveway. The loud contraption lifting the dumpster and violently shaking it. I looked up at scornful eyes of Tasha and the tearful eyes of Skye. I couldn't tell another lie.

“Of course, she is.”