

A Fire on the End of A Stick

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Graham

Chapter 1

The sticky little puddle, black and grainy, is evidence of god knows what disaster. I roll my eyes at it. I start to plot and plan, trying to work out the best way to find out which of the kids is responsible for the mess.

I swing open the cupboard under the sink. There are yellow bottles, green bottles, blue bottles, all full of strange chemicals with potent smells. I grab the yellow bottle and twist off the childproof lid. I grab a scrubbing pad from next to the sink and return to the strange stain in the middle of the kitchen floor.

The stain is uneven: some parts are dark and solid and some are patchy and indistinct. It smells like week old socks. The liquid I pour out of the bottle is a thick gel. All it takes is a couple of swipes from the pad and the stain dissolves. The cream tile shines and shimmers in the light coming in through the back door.

I put the lid back on the bottle and chuck it under the sink. I place the scrubbing pad on the back edge of the sink next to the tall, curved, tap. I twist the knobby handle on the tap and clear water gushes out, splashing on the metal bottom of the sink with a tinny sound. Water splatters all around the point of impact making the sink look like it was caught outside in an unexpected shower of rain. I put both hands under the stream of water and scrub until the slimy residue from the foul liquid has disappeared. When I am satisfied I turn the tap off and turn to the table. There is a small blue and white chequered towel hanging over the back of the nearest chair. As I am going for the towel one of the little monsters bundles into the room: it is Graham, the youngest. He is four years old. His dirty blonde hair is messy and his green eyes are wide. His little fingers are permanently chubby, so chubby I sometimes worry that he needs to lose a bit of weight. He is wearing a green and white striped t-shirt and light green shorts. All of his clothes are covered with slashes of bright colours - reds and blues and purples. Most of his exposed skin is covered with these same colourful streaks. They have been playing with the felt-tips again, and again they didn't use paper as their canvas.

"Mum," says Graham. His voice is high pitched and airy. "They drew on me again."

"It's fine," I say. "Take the clothes off. I'll wash them. Go jump in the shower as well. I want all that felt-tip off your skin."

Graham disappears out of the kitchen in a kind of shuffling jog. The place he vacated is immediately filled by Simon.

"He's lying," Simon says. "He drew on himself."

"It doesn't matter who made the mess," I say. "What matters is that there is a mess."

Simon shrugs as if he doesn't really care and wanders back out of the kitchen. I glance at the clock. It is time to start preparing dinner. I get a chopping board and a couple of bowls out of the drawer and put them on the table. I get some vegetables out of the fridge and chuck them next to the chopping board. Lastly I grab a short sharp knife and a peeler with a red handle out of the grey pot to the side of the sink.

The kitchen is long and thin. The walls are white except for a small section of wall above the sink which is covered in multi-coloured tiles. The majority of the kitchen is taken up with a long table that can sit ten people easily. The table is light brown wood but it is covered with a clean white table cloth. There is an odd assortment of chairs around the table - some are black and soft, some are brown and hard. Light streams in through the wide window above the sink and the huge window which is the top half of the back door. One wall of the kitchen is all cupboards. The cupboards are crammed with vast quantities of a wide variety of food.

When I have finished peeling the bowl is full of potatoes, sweet potatoes, and parsnips. I start chopping them into small pieces one by one. When I am happy with the chunks I put them onto a large black baking tray. I squash the vegetables in next to each other so I can fit as many vegetables onto the tray as possible.

“Mum,” Graham says behind me. I turn and see he has changed into a blue t-shirt and bright green shorts. The cap on his head has a blue tongue. He is holding his old clothes, squeezed into a bundle, out to me. There are still some streaks of felt-tip on his face but I do not have time to deal with that now. I take the clothes off him.

“Thank you, Graham,” I say. “Go back upstairs. Mummy’s busy.”

“Don’t want to play with them when they’re playing with felt-tips: they’ll draw on me again.”

“You can help me with the cooking then. Jump up on a chair. You can arrange the vegetables on the baking tray.”

Graham grabs the nearest chair from its place tucked under the table and drags it across the floor to the cooker. The chair scrapes and squeaks as it slides over the tiles. When the chair is in position Graham climbs up and stands on it. The baking trays on the cooker are now at his waist height. I pass him a potato I have just chopped up and he arranges the pieces of potato on the baking tray. He approaches with task with far more care than I usually do.

His little job takes all of his focus so we work in silence. He squishes the vegetables in next to each other with their edges lined up perfectly like he is doing a jigsaw puzzle. We fill three baking trays with vegetables then all of the vegetables are gone. I wipe my hands on my white apron.

“Thank you, Graham,” I say. “Go back upstairs. They must’ve stopped playing with the felt-tips by now.”

Graham carefully climbs down off the chair, leaning all his weight on his hands and then lowering his chubby legs to the ground. He turns and waddles out of the kitchen. I grab his chair and push it back underneath the table.

Somebody opens the front door. I hear the whispering of cars rushing past the house for a couple of seconds then the door is slammed shut. I wander out into the hallway and see Steve, my husband, stood in the hallway. He is tall. Both his short hair and thick moustache are speckled grey. His big circular glasses are always polished so carefully that you can see windows and light bulbs reflected in them when you talk to him. He is wearing a black suit with a blue shirt and red tie. He dumps his briefcase on the floor and starts untying his shoelaces. I lean against the bumpy wallpaper on the hallway wall. The wall is painted white like the kitchen but we are thinking of changing the colour. There is an ornamental mirror on the side of the hallway opposite the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs is a small cupboard full of shoes. It is supposed to be neat and carefully arranged. I tell everyone it is supposed to be neat all the time. Nobody ever puts their shoes on the shelves I assigned them so the cupboard is always a mess of shoes tangled together all over the floor.

“Waste of time again,” Steve says. “Don’t know why they keep making me go in on the weekend. We’re only there in the morning. Couple of hours. Nobody gets anything done. I’m going to tell Greg that I’m only going to work weekdays from now on.”

“If they want you to go to work you should go to work,” I say. “There’s probably a good reason you need to go in on Saturdays.”

Steve shrugs but doesn’t respond. He walks to me, gently grabs my waist, leans in, and kisses me on the forehead. The touch is fleeting; the second it started it is over and he has moved past me towards the kitchen. I follow a pace or two behind him. When he gets into the kitchen he drags a chair out from under the table and plonks himself down on it. He sticks his legs out underneath the table and slouches down in the chair.

“You only just got started on lunch?” He asks as he surveys the raw vegetables on the cooker.

“Not going to be ready for an hour at least,” I say.

Steve picks up a newspaper from the pile of clutter on the side of the table. I go to the cooker and twist a knob to turn it on. I open the cooker door to check the little flame has burst into life. I see a little flame. It is small and cute now but soon it will be tall and threatening. I close the door and turn back to the food arranged all over the top of the cooker. The chicken is on a baking tray but it is still in its bag. I grab some scissors from the pot to the left of the cooker. I slice the bag all the way down one side then I drag the chicken out. I discard the useless plastic to the side of the cooker and put the chicken down in the centre of the baking tray. I hear the pitter patter of tiny feet slapping the wooden floor in the hallway. As I turn around Graham enters the kitchen. He is all white: his hair is white, his skin is white, his clothes are white. He looks more like a snowman than a person. I am immediately worried that they went into the shed and got a pot of paint.

“Mum,” Graham says. “They covered me in talcum powder.”

“Shower,” I say. “Right now, mister. If that gets in your eyes it’ll sting.”

“But mum. I showered like ten minutes ago.”

“Shower. I don’t want you spreading talcum powder all over the house. Go wash. Bring the dirty clothes straight down here.”

Graham opens his mouth as if he wants to protest. He stands there for a couple of seconds with his mouth hanging open but he can’t think of a good reason why he should not shower. Eventually he shrugs, turns, and sprints out of the room. His little feet bang on the stairs and on the landing upstairs.

“They’re always picking on Graham,” I say to Steve.

“They’re just playing,” Steve says.

I turn back to the cooker. I open the door and am greeted by a wall of heat. I slide the chicken onto the middle shelf.

“You’re only just putting the chicken in?” Steve asks.

“You got home from work early,” I say. “You’re supposed to be back at two so I was timing everything so we could eat at two.”

Steve grunts acknowledgement. He folds his newspaper and puts it down on top of the pile of clutter to his left. He stands, goes to the cupboards by the door, and opens the one with all the snacks in. After a couple of seconds of pawing through the cupboard he returns to the table with a packet of four Mars bars. He rips the packet open and dumps the chocolate bars onto the table.

“Don’t eat all four,” I say. “You’ll ruin your appetite.”

Steve shrugs but doesn't try to respond around the mouthful of chocolate. I go to the back door and slip on some crocs. The multi-coloured mat in front of the door is covered with streaks of dried mud. I open the back door and step into the garden. The garden is long. It is lined with flower beds full of flowers, bushes, and a couple of small fruit trees.

I am stood on a patio made up of irregularly sized stones. The gaps between the stones are bigger than they would be if the patio had been professionally made. Tufts of grass grow through these gaps. I seem to spend half my life pulling up the grass so the patio will look neat and tidy.

The kitchen is in an extension we added onto the side of the house. It stretches further down the garden than the rest of the house so the house is an L-shape from a bird's eye view. I walk down to the bottom of the extension. Below the window at the back of the extension is a selection of plant pots. The plant I need is growing out of a huge dark brown ceramic pot with a cream pattern on the front. The plant has thin leaves that look spiky but are in fact harmless. I tear off part of the plant and return to the kitchen.

The pile of empty wrappers in front of Steve means he ate the whole packet. I decide not to complain or tell him off. I walk to the cooker and start tearing up the leaves and sprinkling them on the vegetables.

"Government's raising taxes again," Steve says. The newspaper is open in front of him. The top flops slightly over the page he is reading.

"It doesn't matter," I say. "We've got money."

Steve snorts in indignation but doesn't respond. The paper swishes as he turns the page. As I am just finishing sprinkling the leaves over the vegetables I hear the banging of somebody stomping down the stairs. I wipe my hands on my apron and turn to the door as Graham enters. He is soaking wet and completely naked. Water drips all over the tiles. I fear they will get slippery and he will fall and hurt himself.

"Mum," he says. "They've hidden all my clothes. I ain't even got no underwear."

I shoo him out of the door and go to follow him. As I pass the chair Steve is on I grab the tea towel hanging off the back of it. I kneel where Graham was stood and carefully dry the floor. However hard I scrub the tiles remain damp and a little slippery. After thirty seconds I give up and decide that it will have to do. I dump the damp towel on the counter to my left and head off into the hallway.

The floor in the hallway is wet and slippery too, although it is nowhere near as bad as the patch where Graham paused for a couple of seconds. Tiny wet circles dot the floor. In the middle of this trail of circles are big, wet, footprints. I return to the kitchen and grab a selection of tea towels.

"It's not just playing," I say to Steve. "It's bullying."

"I'll talk to them," he says.

I dry the floor in the hallway as best as I can. The carpet on the stairs is damp as well but you can't slip on carpet so I ignore it. As I walk past the bathroom at the top of the stairs I see that the shower has been left on. It is spewing water onto the bathroom floor through the open door. I stick my hand under the stream of water to turn it off then I grab a towel to dry the floor. The puddle is so vast and so deep that all I achieve is turning a dry towel into a soaking wet one. It takes three towels for me to dry the floor to a satisfactory level.

I go back onto the landing then I take the first right into the kids' bedroom.

In one corner of the room is the bunk bed that Simon and Graham share. Both beds have bedding with pictures of cartoon characters fighting each other on. The characters are from the comics the kids love but I can never remember any of their names. Opposite the beds are bookcases

full of books that the kids never read. The floor is covered with action figures and toy cars that are never neatly packed away into the baskets I bought for that purpose.

Graham is pulling open drawers underneath his wardrobe. He is still naked. There are little puddles of water all over the bedroom floor. I watch him open the top drawer. Empty. He opens the middle one. Empty too. I do not wait for him to open the bottom drawer. I turn to Simon. He is stood by the window with a cheeky smile on his face.

“Tell them to give Graham his clothes back,” I say.

“They didn’t do nothing,” Simon says. “Graham hid his clothes himself.”

Graham turns from the drawers and looks at me. He has a sulky expression on his face: his eyes are squinting and his lips are pouting.

“They took everything,” he says. “Haven’t even got one sock.”

“Simon,” I say. I give him a glare so he knows I am being serious.

“Oh my god,” Simon says. “Fine.”

Simon drops to his knees. He raises his hands and holds them in front of his chest with the palms pressed against each other and the fingers pointing at the ceiling. He closes his eyes. His mouth starts to open and close silently. It always does that when he prays. He stays in that position for at least a minute then he opens his eyes and clambers to his feet.

“They said they’d give the clothes back,” he says. “They also said god didn’t create us clothed he created us naked.”

I roll my eyes and turn back to Graham. He pulls open the top drawer. There is a pile of neatly folded t-shirts inside it. There’s no way the clothes were folded that nicely when the angels took them. Graham shoves his clothes into the drawers all higgledy-piggledy so he spends most of his life wearing creased clothes. Graham takes the t-shirt on top of the pile out, turns to me, and holds the t-shirt up proudly. The t-shirt unfolds itself until it is flat. It is the same t-shirt they covered with felt-tips earlier. It looks like it is brand new.

“Got clothes now,” Graham says. He lowers his t-shirt and shoots Simon a suspicious look out of squinted eyes. He turns his attention to me.

“Did God really make us naked?” He asks. “Are we supposed to not wear clothes?”

“I don’t know, Graham,” I say. “The bible is long and confusing and different people say the same stories mean different things.”