

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/3

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**I'm a Good Mom**

I'm a good mom. I know it. My daughter Ali know it, and she seven. The only people who don't know it is them assholes at DSS. They think 'cause I party sometimes I ain't a "responsible parent," but I am. I love Ali with all my heart. When I told her to pee in a cup for me, she did it and didn't ask why, 'cause she a good girl.

All this bullshit start when I forgot to come home one weekend 'bout six months ago. It could'a happen to anyone. I was at my boyfriend's house, and we was pretty wasted. He couldn't find no car keys, so we went to sleep, and I just sorta forgot for a while. When I woke up and figure out it was Monday afternoon, I freaked and made my boyfriend drive me home, but when I got there it was too late. They was waiting for me.

Ali'd been pissed off at me when she went to school Monday. She started acting up, which she usually don't do. She a good girl. Anyway, they tried to call me, but my cell phone warn't charged, so they took her up to the principal's office. When the principal asked Ali why she was mis-behavin', she told them she didn't have no clean clothes to wear. They ask her why, and, praise Jesus, she told them I forgot to do the laundry.

Anyway, they was waiting for me at my front door when my boyfriend dropped me off – the principal, her teacher, and Ali. When my boyfriend saw them, he stop short at the edge of the parking lot, told me to get out, and then backed out onto the street so they wouldn't see him. As I walked to my door I was scared, and my heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my teeth, but I was angry too.

"What you doing here?" I demanded.

"I'm Principal Skinner," the older woman said, ignoring my question. "This is Ali's teacher, Mrs. Plank."

"That don't tell me what you doing here," I said.

"Ali had a bad day today," Skinner said. "Can we come in?"

I didn't want them in my house, but I knew it would be worse if I said no straight up. I thought about what was in there. I didn't *think* there was anything out, but it warn't too clean.

"I ain't cleaned up," I said. "Maybe you come back later?"

"We can talk out here," Skinner said, "but it would be better if Ali went inside. Is that okay?"

"Sure," I said. I opened the door just wide enough to let Ali through and closed it again fast.

"Ali was acting up in class today. When we asked her what was wrong, she said she was mad because she didn't have clean clothes for school today," the teacher-lady said.

"I didn't have no way to get to the laundromat," I said. "I got no car."

"Couldn't that person who just dropped you off have taken you?" the principal-lady asked. Damn. They seen him anyway.

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"He was busy," I said. "How's this your business anyhow?"

"We just want to make sure Ali is safe and cared for," the principal-lady said.

"She fine," I said. I was starting to get more angry than scared. I felt shaky and sweaty too, like I do when I'm gettin' over a hangover.

"She's a little young to be coming home by herself," the teacher-lady said. "Isn't there anybody to receive her? She told us she doesn't even have a key."

"I always home," I said. "I got held up payin' the water bill is all."

"So, you could get a ride to City Hall, but not to the laundromat?" the principal-lady asked.

"I ain't answerin' no more questions," I said. "Ali'll have clean clothes tomorrow. Is that enough for y'all?" I didn't wait for no answer. I went inside and slammed the door. I waited a few minutes and peeked outside. When I did, they was gone.

"Ali! Get your ass out here!" I shouted. She came out of her room looking like she was about to get a whipping. It broke my heart. "What you tell them?"

"I'm sorry, Mama," she whispered. "I didn't have nothin' clean. I was mad at you. But I ain't mad no more."

I knelt down and held my arms out. She came over and we hugged.

"I love you, Ali," I said. "But you can't be tellin' no stories to teachers. Okay?"

"Okay, Mama."

"Go do your homework." She went back to her room.

I searched the whole house, but I couldn't find no more than five quarters. It wasn't enough, so I put some outfits for Ali in the tub and wrung 'em out by hand. I put them over the kitchen chairs to dry. Ali'd have clean clothes tomorrow, and I hoped they wouldn't be too damp.

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Two days later I put Ali on the bus, and I was thinking about calling my boyfriend when there was a knock on the door. A knock on the door in my neighborhood ain't never a good thing. I crept up to the door and looked through the peephole. There was a man and a woman, and they warn't dressed like they lived there. They had them ID badges hung around their necks. It warn't no good sign. I could ignore them, but I knew they'd come back, maybe with the cops. I'd heard stories. I opened the door.

"Are you Mrs. Emily Johnson?" the man asked.

"Yeah. Who is you?"

"I'm John Watts. This is Lisa Fields. We're from the Department of Social Services."

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My heart sank. I wanted to kill that principal-lady and that teacher-lady too.

"We got a report that your daughter Ali is being neglected," the lady said. "We're here to investigate. Can we come in?"

"No," I said.

"Emily," said the man, "let me explain this to you. You've been accused of neglecting..."

"Ali," I said. "Don't you know her name?"

"Your daughter," he continued. "The best thing for you to do is let us in, let us look around, and talk to us. We don't want to have to take your daughter into custody."

"Custody?" I asked, even though I'd a pretty good idea of what it mean.

"Take her away," said the lady. She was a little nicer 'bout it, but she scared me enough I open the door.

"I ain't had time to clean up," I said as they stepped inside. They looked around and started writing things on them clipboards they was carryin'.

"Where does the girl sleep?" the man asked.

"Ali. Her room over there." I pointed.

He and the lady went inside and took a good look around. There was clothes and toys all over the place, and I sure that's what they was writing on their clipboards. I watched them from the doorway. Then they came back out.

"Do you have food in the house?" the lady asked.

"Course I do."

"Can we see it?"

"Sure." I opened the refrigerator. There was half a gallon of milk in a container was only a few days expired. There was half a loaf of bread. There was a pizza box, but I wasn't sure when it was from. I open the cabinets for them too. There was Little Debbie cakes and potato chips and some cans of stuff with the labels torn off. Ali likes to tear the labels off, and I couldn't remember what they was.

"Let's sit down and talk," the Lisa-lady said. I took the shit that was on the couch and threw it to the side so the busybodies could use it. I cleared off the chair and sat myself in it.

"Do you have a job?" the man asked.

"It's lookin'," I told him.

"How long have you been looking?" he asked.

"Couple a months," I said.

"Where was your last job?" the lady asked.

"Food Lion."

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"And why did you leave Food Lion?" she asked.

"They said I took something I ain't took," I said, even though I *had* took it. It was only a jar of peanut butter.

"How long ago was that?" the man asked.

"I don't know," I said. It was over a year ago, but I didn't want to tell him that.

"You weren't here when your daughter got home yesterday," the woman said. "Where were you?"

"I told that principal lady I was paying the water bill. It took longer 'n I thought it would."

"We heard you didn't come home last weekend," the man said. "We heard you were just getting back."

I knew they'd talked to Ali. It warn't her fault. They'd probably pestered her the way they was pesterin' me till she told them.

"Then someone tellin' stories on me," I said hotly, "'cause I was here."

"Do you drink or use drugs?" the lady asked.

"No!" I practically hollered.

"Would you be willing to take a drug test?"

"I ain't gonna do that," I said.

"Look," said the man. "Here's what we got. We have a report that you were gone all weekend with a seven-year-old girl in the house by herself. She didn't have clean clothes for school on Monday. You've got a house that hardly has any food in it. Do you want us to take your daughter into custody?"

"You can't take my baby girl," I said. I was good and pissed and scared.

"I'm afraid we can," the lady said. She said it like I knew she wasn't lying. "If you've got nothing to hide, come down to DSS and take the drug test. We'll drive you. It won't take more than an hour."

"I ain't got time today," I said. "I got a job interview I have to get ready for." I knew they'd like hearing that. "I come tomorrow."

"What time?" the lady asked.

"After Ali gets on the bus."

"We'll come and get you."

"I can get a ride."

"You really need to come and do this," the lady said. "It's really important that you do."

"I hear you," I said. "I ain't deaf."

They finally left. By the time they did, I had a plan.

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I ain't never taken a drug test before, but I knew people who had. Many of them had tried to sneak in clean pee. Lately, though, them nurses'd been popping a thermometer into the cup as soon as they got hold of it. If it wasn't the right temperature, they knew. You got to keep the pee warm.

That night, after Ali peed into the cup for me, I took it, a funnel, and a rubber into the bathroom. I filled the rubber halfway, tied knots at the end, and put it in my vajayjay. It took me a long time to cram it in, and I ended up having to use me a little lube, but I finally got it up in there. It was a good thing I ain't waited till mornin'. I mightn't had time to get it done. I practiced walking around with it. It was a slippery, but it wasn't nothin' I couldn't handle.

Sleeping with it in there wasn't comfortable, but I knew it was nice and warm. Tomorrow, when I had to pee, I'd pop the condom, fill the cup, and hide the rubber again.

The next morning my boyfriend took me to DSS. I asked him to wait for me in the parking lot, but he took off soon as I got out of the car. I guess the place made him scared. He might'a had a warrant out on him again. He never tell me.

I thought I just go in, put the pee in a cup, and come out again. There was a line, though. I had to give my name and wait. I guess it was pee-testing day. I sat in the waiting room with lotsa folks, some'a who I *knew* partied because I partied wit'em. Nobody talk to nobody, though. Everyone was real serious.

A woman dressed as a nurse would come, call out a name, and take that person to the back. They come out again, and she call another name. After half an hour, it was my turn. I walked to the back with the nurse. There was a bathroom with an open door. She took a cup off a counter and handed it to me. I went to the bathroom, ready to do my thing, but she was right behind me.

"I have to watch," she said.

"I ain't gonna let nobody watch me pee!" I said. I was freakin'.

"You can refuse the test," the nurse said.

"If I refuse, you gonna take my baby?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "That's not up to me."

I figured if I sat on the toilet and squeezed hard enough, the rubber would break and Ali's pee would come out into the cup. She couldn't be watching *that* close. So I went in and she followed and stood in the doorway. I sat on the stool, squeezed hard as I could, and the rubber fell out into the cup I was holdin' under me.

"That's a new one," the nurse said, looking like she wanted to laugh. It's a good thing she didn't, because I would'a torn the bitch up. "Give me the cup." I handed it over. She went out and got a new cup.

"Now pee in this one for real," she said. I didn't know what to do, so I did. Maybe they'd miss something. Maybe they'd make a mistake.

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Afterward, in the parking lot, I called my boyfriend to come get me, but he didn't answer, so I had to walk home. I was worried as could be. As I walked, though, I had me another idea. As soon as Ali got home, I'd take her and go stay with my sister. They couldn't take my baby if they don't know where she was at.

I was ready when the bus came, but Ali didn't get off. I called the school, but they wouldn't tell me nothing. I was worried sick. Then them two DSS people came and told me that they'd took my daughter.

"No you didn't," I said. "You can't do that."

"Emily," the man said, "you got all kinds of drugs in your system. You left Ali alone all weekend. You've got no food in the house. We don't have a choice. Now, is there someone, a relative, she can stay with?"

"Please don't take my girl!" I begged.

"I'm sorry," the lady said. "This is the way it's going to have to be for a while."

"I'll be good!" I cried. "I won't do no partying! I stay at home! Just don't take her!"

"If you do all those things, you'll get her back," the lady said. "But right now we need to find somewhere else for her to stay."

"She can stay with my sister," I said. I told them where she lived.

"Can you pack some of her clothes for her?" the man asked. I handed him the garbage bag I'd stuffed her thangs in.

"When can I see my baby?" I asked.

"There'll have to be a hearing," the man said. "After that, we'll see."

They left. That was that. I sat and cried and cried until I couldn't cry no more. Then I call my boyfriend. He came over, and he had crack and marijuana and a bottle too. I'd said I wouldn't do it no more, but I was so upset I couldn't resist. It made me feel better for a little while.

It took them a month for the court to have they hearing. A month without my baby. The court say she neglected, and I couldn't see her but for one hour a week. One hour. I had to go to DSS to see her too while that social worker lady watched. The last time I saw her I been partying, and they kicked me to the curb. I ain't seen her since.

The lady gave me a list of shit I suppose to do. Parenting classes. Counselling. Substance abuse assessment. Get a job. But I can't do all that. I miss my baby too much. If they'd just give her back, I know I could do better. It hurt too much for me to think about how much I miss my little girl. I love her. I'm a good mom.