

Isabel

Story 1:

Pulling into the driveway, I plan what I'm going to say to my family in my head. I sit there for a while, not wanting to go in and face my wife. After 10 minutes of pep talks in the rearview mirror, I muster up the courage to step out of my car and onto our perfectly green front lawn. I drag my heavy feet up our newly laid stone front steps, nearly tripping on my son's soccer ball which his mother told him to put away this morning. What will my kids think? My two sons won't be able to look at me the same way. I'm the man of the house. I'm supposed to set an example for what it means to provide for your family. I've failed them.

Turning the big, gold door knob on our heavy front door, I can smell my wife cooking dinner in the kitchen-- her famous watery mashed potatoes and dry chicken.

"Is that you honey?" she shouts from the kitchen.

I respond with a low grumbling,

"Yes."

Without missing a beat she begins her everyday ramble of PTA meeting drama, soccer injuries, bake sale quarrels and upcoming homecoming football games. I nod and smile, not really taking in what she's saying, but she keeps going.

"The kids will be home from practice in a few minutes. You know the lady from down the street with the really bad perm, Susan something, well, she offered to carpool from practice this week. I know she's just trying to butter me up so that I'll bake my famous chocolate chip cookies for the school bake sale next week, but I don't mind. It's been a long week, and I could really use some time alone at the end of the day."

She pauses for a moment, and I take the opening to finally break the news. I walk around the kitchen island and hug her from behind, giving her a kiss on the cheek, my polite way of shutting her up.

"Hon, I need you to listen to me for a minute. I want to talk to you about this before the kids get home so you just have to let me get this out." She nods still smiling but looking a little startled by my tone.

"The firm let me go today. With the market crash and budget cuts they had to fire one person from every department." I feel a weight lift off my chest when I finally say those words out loud but then her face hits me like a pile of bricks. Her bubbly smile had melted into a childlike pout.

"What do you mean?" she whimpers.

“Sweetie, please keep it together. Don’t get hysterical.” Big mistake. That really got her going.

“They can’t do that to you! We have to call our lawyers! We will fight this! You have worked at that firm for 7 years. You don’t deserve this,” she yells as if I’m not standing two feet from her.

I hear footsteps coming up the front steps. The kids are home and could probably hear her yelling from the front lawn, along with the rest of our nosy neighbors. Just then our youngest son comes crashing through the door. This gets my wife to stop yelling as she immediately plasters on her fun mom face that they are so used to seeing. Our two boys freeze in the doorway hesitating to speak. The four of us just stand there staring at each other, my wife still grinning, my boys looking back and forth between the two of us and me, staring at my feet. Finally our oldest son steps forward, asking, “Would someone please tell us what’s going on? We could hear mom screaming from Susan’s car.”

I know that as soon as I open my mouth the room will erupt with questions that I don’t really want to deal with, but I say it anyway.

“Today the firm had to let me go. It wasn’t anything I did. I need you guys to know that. There just isn’t enough money to go around, and they had to let a few of us go.”

For some reason the room doesn’t explode like I thought it would. My boys still just stare. Their faces fill with the same disappointment that I’ve felt about myself all day. I let my boys down, and now they are staring right through me as if everything they have ever known were a lie. I step forward to explain, but I’m cut off by my youngest saying, “What does that mean for our trip to Disneyland? Are we gonna have to stay here for Christmas like some poor family?”

Our oldest chimes in,

“Wait, what about USC? Am I still going?”

His face twists with a horrible realization.

“Do we need financial aid?!”

“Oh my gosh, of course not! We are not going to reach that point. I won’t let us!” I interject. “I can’t believe I’ve done this to my own family. I’m meant to be the provider, and I never want my family to worry about money.”

I’m pacing the kitchen with my head buried in my hands when I feel a tap on my shoulder.

“Honey, why don’t you sit down and collect yourself,” my wife says with a forced smile, “Boys, stop staring at your father like that and go clean up before dinner. I’ll call when it’s ready.”

The boys drag their feet up the stairs and both slam their doors in unison. My wife sits me down on a stool and holds my hands. This is when she says to me the last thing any man wants to hear from their wife.

“Umm, hon, should I get a job?”

Hearing this, I nearly pass out.

“How could you even say that? What about the kids? Who would pick them up from school and take them to practice? Who would have dinner ready for them when they got home? We are not raising latchkey kids! Do you really want to become one of those working mothers who neglects her own children?”

My wife takes a step back as my face reaches a new shade of red.

“I am a man goddammit! Doesn’t that mean anything anymore?”

And that was the end of it. My wife went off to finish dinner, the boys came down from their room, and we all sat in silence around our dining room table. As far as my family knows I’m handling it, but I’d never tell my wife what I did that night. Later that night after everyone went to bed I made a very important call.

“Mommy, I need your help.”

“Don’t worry sweetheart. How much do you need?”

Story 2:

I jam on the emergency break as my 16-year-old Honda Civic tries to roll me back down the hill leading into my neighborhood. This seems to be my nightly routine at this point. I got the car from my grandpa when he couldn't drive anymore. It had gotten me through high school and college, and now I lugged my ass back and forth from my dead end office job every morning. I graduated from college last year and need a way to make money. With family bills coming in and monthly student loan payments hanging over my head, like a happy reminder any time I think I might be getting somewhere, that job is all I have right now. I mean it *was* all I had.

Throwing my bag over my shoulder, I hop out of the car just barely missing my head on a street sign as I stumble over a crack in the sidewalk. I do this every fucking time! I live on the third floor in a two bedroom apartment. In those two rooms we fit 5 girls: 2 girls I went to college with and two other girls who found us in a craigslist ad. I've converted half of our already small living room into my bedroom. My bed folds up into a sofa during the day, and my dresser becomes a coffee table. It can be awkward when we have people over and my bright pink Target underwear is hanging out of the table where they're meant to put their coffee.

I stomp up the stairs to my apartment, taking them two at a time. I stub my toe on the door on my way in, but I'm too pissed to notice. My roommates are sitting around our little dining room table working on their computers.

"I can't fucking believe it! Those assholes!" I scream kicking the front door shut.

My roommates look up from what they're doing, the four of them just staring at me. I don't care, I just keep going.

"Can you believe them? How could they fire me?! I'm the best goddamn assistant they have! I've put up with my bosses' bullshit for 2 years and he just fired me, just like that?"

"Wait, slow down. What?" one of them says as she steps forward to put a hand on my shoulder, but I cut her off, nowhere near done with my rant.

"He had the audacity to say 'It's not personal,'" I say in my best douchey man voice. "Of course it's personal! I mean who the hell does he think he is!"

I go on like this for a few more minutes, only stopping to take a breath. Finally, my roommate Cami steps forward. She's the only one who can ever calm me down. As soon as she looks me in the eyes, I collapsed into her arms. I begin to sob, soaking through the Goodwill sweatshirt I bought her for her birthday.

"I'm so sorry. I'm ruining your sweater!" I say through my whimpers.

“Honey, don’t worry about that. Anyways, it was only \$6,” she reminds me, laughing at the childlike face looking up at her.

“That seems like a lot of money now that I have no job. What am gonna do? I just paid my monthly college loan minimum, and I was depending on next week’s paycheck to be able to pay rent,” with this I start working myself up again. “I won’t be able to pay rent and then you guys are gonna kick me out, and then I’m gonna be homeless, or even worse I’ll have to move in with my dad.” I stop to take another big breath, giving Cami a chance to cut me off.

I went to college with Cami but she had to drop out after sophomore year. Her family ran out of money and then her grades dropped and she lost her scholarship. Since then she has been working at a restaurant, making more money in tips in one night than I made in two days at my office job.

“Don’t worry about that right now. You are not moving in with your dad and we are not going to kick you out. I can lend you some money for rent, and I’ll ask my boss if she has any space at the restaurant. There is no need to ask your parents for help. They have done enough for you. We’re big kids now! We will take care of ourselves.”

I giggle at her calling us big kids, thinking of us in a Huggies commercial wearing pull-ups. While my brain wanders into the weird realm of 24-year-olds in diapers, my least favorite roommate, Kelsey steps forward. Kelsey is one of those people who grew up with money but wants to explore the simple life. She likes the idea of being a struggling college student, living in a small apartment and driving a crappy car, because she knows that when she goes home for holidays she’s seen as the cultured cousin who everyone looks at with admiration.

“Why *don’t* you call your parents? Aren’t they supposed to be there to help you when you need them? I would be so pissed at my parents if they didn’t help me. Like, they gave birth to me, isn’t that their job?”

We try to be gentle around Kelsey, not wanting to scare her off and lose the roommate who offered to cover all utility fees, but sometimes I really want to hit that girl. I look up at her with a fake smile and say,

“Sorry, Kelsey, but my daddy is trying to support his other three children who are currently living at home. I’m sorry if his parenting skills aren’t living up to your standards.”

I make sure to end that with a laugh and a smile so as to not sound as pissed off as I actually am. This shuts her up, and she goes back to working on her computer. With this I fall back into my hug with Cami. I don’t know what I would do without her. For now my rent was covered, and I could

work as a waitress until I found a job that could get me back on track with my career. I'll just have to take it day by day and see what happens.

Story 3:

My younger brother and I run up the street to our apartment. I know my Mami won't be home yet. She works late most nights, but she always comes home to make us dinner. Granted we eat at 8pm, but we always eat dinner together. When we get inside we follow our normal routine of taking off our sneakers, hanging up our backpacks, and running to the TV to fight over who gets to pick the show. I usually win, because I can just sit on Gabriel. After that we do our homework, and I make us a pre-dinner snack.

My mom usually gets home looking very tired. I hear her dragging her feet up the stairs, but when she comes inside, a smile washes across her face. This is my favorite time of the day. Tonight when she gets home, her steps are a little slower and her eyes are a little less bright. She gives us both a kiss on the cheek and then goes into the kitchen to clean up and start dinner. Me and Gabriel like to help her by setting the table for dinner before she gets home. That usually cheers her up after a long day at work. She works at some sort of clothing factory. I think she sews there, but I'm not sure. For some reason, the plates and folded cloth napkins on the kitchen table don't make her smile today.

We eat dinner like normal, and she asks us about our day. Gabriel tells us that he learned to spell his name in cursive today and then proceeds to write it in pen all over his arm. This makes me laugh, but Mami doesn't look too happy. I then tell her that I got the highest score on my math test, and she lights up and gives me a huge hug. This is the Mami I know. I help her clean up from dinner, and then I take Gabriel to get ready for bed. We share a bed in a small room in the back of the apartment. I get myself ready for bed, and then Mami comes in to tuck us in.

Later that night, I wake up to the sounds of hushed shouting. Mami must be on the phone with our neighbor, Betsy. Betsy and Mami are best friends. Her real name is Betsaida when she was born, her parents had just gotten to the US and no one else knew how to pronounce her name, so she just goes by Betsy. Betsy has been in the US much longer than Mami so she mostly speaks English. Mami, on the other hand, doesn't like speaking English at home, because she wanted to keep our Spanish alive. So in their friendship Mami speaks in Spanish and Betsy responds in English. It's a little weird but it works for them.

Hearing the shouting, I get up and creep to my door. The apartment is small enough that you can hear everything from the other side.

"¿Como voy a cuidar a mis niños? ¡Podre perder el apartamento!" Mami says through her tears.

"They can't just fire you! How is that legal?" responds Betsy.

“¿Y pues si yo no soy legal? Claro que me pueden echar.” I know that this must be really bad because Mami is doing her rhetorical question thing where she makes you feel stupid. She only does that to us when we’re really messing up.

“Come on, you know what I meant. But does that mean you can’t get unemployment?” asks Betsy, clearly concerned.

¡Ay! El *unemployment* nunca fue una opción. ¿Como preguntas algo tan dumb? Oh crap! The Spanglish is coming out. This means she’s pissed! I tremble behind my door, not knowing how worried I should be. I don’t want to work myself up. I have to be there for my Mami so I keep it together.

“Sorry! I’m only trying to help. What are you gonna tell the boys?” Betsy says, taking one more shot.

“No se les voy a decir.” My heart stops. “No quiero que se preocupan.” All I want to do right now is run out of my room and tell her it’s gonna be ok. If I hug her tight enough then maybe she won’t worry so much. But I stay put, too scared to let her know that I’ve been listening through my door.

“Then what will you do?” I hear Betsy say from the other line.

“Voy a actuar como si todo fuera normal. Mañana voy a salir y encontrar cualquier trabajo que pueda.” What she said next really stuck with me. “Vine aquí por mis hijos y no voy a hacerlos sufrir más. Haré lo que sea por mis niños.” I start tearing up a little, muffling my quickened breathing in my sleeve. Then I hear my mom start to cry.

“Esto es demasiado. Tengo que irme.” And with that she hung up the phone.

I hear footsteps coming toward my bedroom. I jump up and run as fast as I can on my tiptoes and throw the covers over my body. My door cracks open a little. My eyes are glued shut, and my head is buried in my pillow. I try to slow my breathing so she can’t tell how fast I was just moving. I hear the door open all the way and then footsteps come toward my bed. A pair of warm familiar lips touch my cheek, and then lean over me to my brother’s cheek who’s sleeping right beside me. Then she quietly walks out of the room and closes the door behind her. She really is the most amazing person I know.