

Exit 238

by Hannah Wilson-Black

Wham.

Okay, okay, good to go. Time to go. Time to get out of this legally contested house and out of the guilt spiral. Speaking of the guilt spiral, maybe it's time you make an appointment with the couples' counselor. Hope he does one-on-one appointments too.

Oh, dammit. Here's Justin with the pool bag.

Whumpk.

Trunk is open again. In goes pool bag. *Wham.* Justin gets into his carseat. What a good kid. It's a real shame he has to be surrounded by all this crap — the adults and their problems. You pick up his tricornered hat from the floor of the van, put it on his head, and hope this makes up for not going to Disneyland or something. The finances just aren't in the right place right now. Plus, a trip to Florida might be a little over-the-top. Daniel would send out an Amber Alert.

Daniel. That absolute sleaze. You wonder how many times you met **her** at company events, how many times he had to juggle *his women*. But that's for another time. Not for now. Now it's time to go.

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"I'm proud of you guys for not fighting," you tell the kids after they get their McDonalds. You thought you might splurge and stop somewhere nice but then Isabelle asked nicely so you pulled into the Drive-Thru under the golden arches. You braced for impact when Justin got the

better toy in his Kid's Meal but he gave it to Isabelle, and what's more, she pretended not to want it.

"Thank you mommy," says Isabelle, rustling around in the paper bag for her nuggets.

"Tanks," says Justin.

The kids are unusually quiet for the rest of the drive, but they don't look *unhappy*, which is good since the whole point of getting away from home was to take everyone's minds off the fact that Daddy has been sleeping at Best Friend/College Friend Jim's house.

You had actually thought you could have worked this out together, maybe smoothed it over, learned a lesson, gotten a transfer to another branch. Sandi (with an "i") could be a distant memory, a one-time blunder, a small and temporary dip in the credit score of your marriage. But Daniel, oh, *Daniel* needed some "space/time to think about our future together." And that's why you're taking the exit for Colonial Williamsburg.

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You follow other families around while Ye Old Tour Guide talks about how many sheep used to graze here, etc. The other Mommies and Daddies are getting along, you happen to notice. Luckily this is not the 1700s so the Mommies weren't given to the Daddies along with a herd of goats and some bullion. Grandpa and Grandma did not hand-select Daddy for Mommy, which makes Mommy feel worse because she apparently chose incorrectly, chose a two-faced scumbag who might be leaving her for Sandi with an "i."

Justin is happy to take a picture with Martha Washington. Isabelle objects and asks Martha to justify slave-owning. She's been really excited about history class lately and demanded to meet the Washingtons, possibly so she could ask this very question.

Martha sees the bags under your eyes and understands that you're not going to help her out. Isabelle leaves unsatisfied, but forgets about this once you all get to make Olden Timey Ice Cream down by the butter churn.

You buy Justin an ink-and-quill set because at least it's not a Nerf gun, even if fifteen dollars is a lot to charge for some ink you have to make yourself. Isabelle requests a pocket-sized Constitution because she wants to "know her rights." Smart kid. Guess she got that from Daniel, along with his dark eyes. You always thought he was smart, anyway. But evidently not smart enough to not leave his phone password-less on the kitchen island with his texts open. Really a rookie mistake — in fact, you're almost sad you found him out. Maybe a little disappointed that he wasn't as clever as you had pinned him to be.

You take some pictures of the kids in the Old Timey stocks, which they think is funny. It makes you smile to think that they can see the stocks as something amusing, instead of a Boring Adult Metaphor about being trapped (in, say, a recently stagnant marriage broken open by infidelity).

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"Are you tired, mommy?" Justin asks when you rub your temples on the way to the Wig Maker, who is only open from 4:00-4:45, so better hurry.

“A little, Jus,” you say. No one ever tells you how much the loss of a body next to you can keep you up at night even when you’re supposed to be angry with that body, not missing him.

“I’m a little tired too,” says Justin.

“Do you still want to see how they made wigs?” you ask.

“Like in the olden times?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok!”

You’re the only people in there besides the wigmaker, who greets you with “good day, madam,” and the children with “good day young miss” and “young master,” which makes them giggle. The re-enactor is perhaps in his thirties, small spectacles perched on the end of his nose as he demonstrates to the children how he sews hair onto a frame before attaching it to netting. Justin and Isabelle are very attentive as he talks about soaps and powders.

He pulls a box of sage soap down from the dusty shelves behind him and when the smell hits your nose you’re reminded, of all things, of the day Justin was born. You remember that Daniel came into the maternity ward late, he was at work the day your water broke — nine days earlier than expected. You yelled at him because he was wearing a new cologne, a scent not unlike the smell of this soap. Through the tears of labor you screamed something about *why did he have to go and change up something on a day when everything was already changing so much*. He laughed a little and held your hand and apologized. Even then you should have known he needed change more than you ever could. Three jobs in six years, too many colognes, and now you too were left in his wake. Hurricane Daniel.

“That looks like Sandi’s hair,” says Justin, breaking the haze of your thoughts.

“Hm?” you say. Isabelle looks like she’s expecting a dam to break.

“That looks like Daddy’s friend Sandi’s hair,” says Justin, pointing to the head of hair the wigmaker is working on. It’s true. It’s the most vibrant red, just like hers. You bet she dyes it. She would.

“Oh, oh?” you say, faking nonchalance, grateful Sandi is still just “Daddy’s friend.” But the feeling doesn’t linger long.

“Does Daddy love Sandi instead of you now?” Justin says, obliterating the Saran wrap of household normalcy you were trying to maintain this week.

Isabelle says, “Justin that is not a nice question!”

The wigmaker’s mouth stretches into an awkward half-smile. He goes to the back room to get “more hair.”

You lean down to Justin’s eye level.

“You don’t have to worry about that, okay Jus?” you say. “Mommy and Daddy are just figuring stuff out right now. Mommy and Daddy will always be friends no matter what, okay?” The last part feels like a lie but of course the rage is still fresh in your mind.

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The worst part of it all is that you found out while the kids were home. Just leaning back across the kitchen island to read the recipe book again. It called for butter but you only had margarine. You would have gone to the computer to find out if they’re the same for pie crust but

his phone was right there and you knew he didn't have a password so you opened it and the texts were there. Bubbles of blue reading *had fun w/ u today ;)* sent to a woman who was not you.

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The wig man returns from the back and you give him a little smile that is meant to smooth things over but probably just looks weird. He finishes his demonstration and the three of you leave just as another family is coming in. Are you a family? Just you, Justin, and Isabelle? You got the family rate at the motel, which might just be good enough.

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You decided to serve the goddamn pie, you remember, before confronting him about the message. You told yourself it was because the recipe explicitly and repeatedly said "best served hot" but you tasted on your tongue the sick joy of looking Daniel in the eyes as you cut him a piece.

Have some Goddamn Pie, you little fucker; you thought as you served him a slice, like the dutiful wife you are. Later you would invite him onto the back porch for a conversation that would end with him making mad excuses and you sobbing into the potted plants. You imagined, before you ever met Daniel, that if you were to leave your husband you'd do it in black heels and a red dress and pearls, perhaps even aiming a gun at him, for the theatrics.

"So long, loser," you'd say, hopping into a sports car and zooming away.

Instead you cried into the hydrangeas, sent him to Best Friend/College Friend Jim's house, and took the kids to Colonial Williamsburg.