

The Almost Kept Woman

by Mahalia Solages

Ellie aloofly looked over a pot of warming soup while she waited for her midday reality show to start. She often thought how carefree it was before all of this. Now she wondered which would be more effective, the microwave, or the oven to muffle a baby's wails?

Checking her cell phone in her pocket brought her eyes to the saggy worn sweat pants covering the body she didn't care to recognize anymore. This was ridiculous! When was she going to get a break? Even in middle school, she and Ehan were the ultimate couple. He was the jock with potential and she the princess with a sporty essence. She knew her parents didn't understand why Ellie didn't expect more for herself. Ellie was planning on medical school and Ehan was to sign on to a college team in the North. In High School, she heard the gossip at the games, saw the recruiters, and was ready to hold on to Ehan's arm. By the time graduation came around, Ellie knew she deserved and anticipated the lifestyle Ehan would soon provide.

Ellie kicked passed the plastic bags on the kitchen floor. The sofa faced the long granite counter top. She plopped herself on the cushions, stretched her leg along the length of the backrest and placed her cell phone next to her chest. Her mom dragged in with the last of the grocery bags, a sack of dog food under her arm.

Ellie thought if she had two grocery bags in one hand, squirmy Jeremy in the other and forgot to set the stroller brakes, would she have enough time to catch baby Lila if her stroller tipped over from the sewage grate depression just as a car was backing out? She shook off the thought of responsible multitasking and clicked to the channel she needed.

"Is the soup ready?" Her mom said out of breath.

"It's on the stove."

"Yes, but were you planning on feeding the kids?"

"It's hot mommy!"

"And it will continue to be if you leave it in the pot." Ellie's mom exhaled loudly while dividing slimy alphabets into two primary colored bowls. She took two rubber spoons from the drawer.

"I was going to do it, but you always beat me to it," Ellie said turning up the volume.

"Have you checked on them?" Ellie's mom held her hands out maneuvering the maze of plastic bags, her eyes landing on the empty dog bowl perched on a scrolled iron stand.

“Kara would say something.”

“Do you know what they’re up to?”

“It’s why I had three of them. They can entertain themselves!” Ellie’s thumbs responded to a text. Her eyes were on a commercial.

“Kara is three and by the way, while you’re sitting there, why don’t you start a load or two?” Ellie’s mom saw the dog scratching at the screened back porch, panting. She walked past the tower of juice stained laundry supporting the leaning pile stacked on the washer, threatening to flow onto the staircase if an elbow grazed it.

“Can’t I get a minute? I’m tired. I have to be at work in a few hours!” Ellie plumped an accent pillow under her head.

“Did you walk Steeler?” Ellie’s mom asked from the top of the stairs when she noticed the baby gate was left open.

“He’s fine.”

“You should have left him with Ehan, not that you needed a dog anyway.”

“Because he’s so wonderful and a multitasker,” Ellie replied sarcastically. “Steeler is my dog!”

Ellie couldn’t understand how Ehan could live season to season devoted and committed after all that happened. They remained supportive of each other when the recruiters waved contracts and medical programs swarmed with offers. As everyone held their breath in anticipation of their decision, Ellie held hers with denial, attempting to conceal the life that inevitably exhaled from her. Kara’s advent was as much of an Achilles heel that tore through the families, spreading shock as was Ehan’s ruptured tendon during the season ending game. Still, Ehan only cared to deserve her and she realized they were in love with different things, from the beginning. Interest dropped with programs and Ellie fell into the cradle of depression. Despite resignation teaming with allegiance during each pregnancy, the enchantment was gone. They became ‘regular’. The union was unnecessary, as she didn’t want the contract Ehan was offering, but the one that passed him by. Resentment and regret simmered the more Ellie hungered for the status she now watched on a screen.

Ellie’s look of disdain followed her mom who escorted the children, placing Kara, two year old Jeremy at the table, then returning upstairs to bring down the seven month old, Lila. Ellie swung her arm over her eyes. How old is too old for a bouncer seat? If Lila flipped over in the bedroom, would the other two have been strong enough to turn her over? What’s wrong with the Ethan Allen bunk bed she bought them? There’s a safety rail and how far does a toddler have to fall to break their neck anyway?

She watched the rich wives on the screen float around a mansion, gossiping about another woman in the group, deciding on outfits for a party. Ellie tried living with Ehan after Kara was born. A two-bedroom shack, matching mediocre jobs and constant battles over responsibilities replaced the novelty of the dream house, fame, and lifestyle of leisure. Blame eventually smothered the relationship. Ellie returned to her parents to deal with the kids the majority of the week. She let her parents believe the arrangement was temporary until she could manage her pending return to medical school. How could Ehan not to grasp at any sliver hinting at an opportunity to get reconnected? He didn't attend any games; was not in contact with any coaches!

Ellie missed the honey before she had a chance to taste it. How cute would she and the kids look in the fall in Pittsburgh? How stylish would little boots, adorable pea coats, and a private jet to visit grandma in Florida look to her friends? She checked her phone, awaiting a reply from some guy who might be willing to take care of her.

Ellie's mom looked like an octopus as she shifted hands to help feed the three children. She got up to sift through grocery bags to place gallons of milk in the refrigerator.

Ellie grabbed her keys and designer glasses.

"Where are you going?" Her mom asked from the pool of plastic opening a can of formula.

"I have some things to do, then, I'm just going to work."

"Lila doesn't have any more clean bibs." Ellie's mom checked the clock.

"You're here. Daddy should be home soon."

"You are their parent! I have my own laundry." Ellie's mom returned to the table, wiped Kara and Jeremy's face, and pulled a bin of toys out from the corner.

"I need your car. I don't have any gas."

"You can't go to work with my BMW." Her mother eyed her from above the rim of her glasses. She had settled on the sofa to feed Lila a bottle.

"I guess I'll be back in two minutes then."

"I think you should really consider switching with Ehan. We can't continue like this. You're home all morning, and yet I am still changing, playing, and tending to them. You are only able to handle the weekends, at best, and that's because I'm here. Ehan is two steps ahead of their needs. I don't ever have to remind him to feed, bath or read to them."

"Oh shut up mommy! You didn't like him before and now all of a sudden Ehan's so perfect! He never wanted to spend money on the kids!"

“I am surprised at the turn of events because he has acknowledged and accepted his responsibilities.”

Ellie rolled her eyes, driving off without a second glance or kiss goodbye floating into her world at the mall, where she escaped regularly, to sift through superficial treasures and spend frivolously. She wanted the high maintenance aura. Needed the lifestyle. Missed the attention. She bought branded clothes for herself and dressed her little cubic zirconium like diamonds. She let people care of things because she envisioned a different setting. She figured she could pay someone at the Laundromat to handle the kids’ clothes when she got around to it. Guilt forced her many minions to tend to her kids when she didn’t pick them up from daycare due to an extended happy hour with girlfriends. Her mother didn’t mind if she showed up four hours after Ellie claimed, they are her grandkids! Ellie placed two pairs of sunglasses in the cart. Her kids. Her three kids with a never been football player turned youth counselor.

After work, Ellie was meeting her girlfriend who worked at a nightclub that was hosting a VIP party for a ball player. She picked out a pair of studded ankle boots with a kitten heel to match the silk jumpsuit she piled over the loaded cart of bibs, sneakers, and new outfits for the kids.

Window-shopping never suited her. It reminded her of being an ‘almost’.

Almost meant didn’t quite make it, and that was still unacceptable.

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