

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Second Place, Adult Short Story Contest

The Cups

By Sharon Nissim, Silver Spring

The cups are still on the side of the sink, where they've been for 24 hours: a Yeti coffee tumbler (overpriced), a black utilitarian plastic reusable water bottle (not environmentally friendly), and another reusable pink stainless steel water cup she'd gotten as a gift from her old boss. She hadn't used any of these, she always uses the same oversized plastic water bottle with the measurements on the side that give her the instant gratification of knowing exactly how hydrated she is, and she washes it every few days. No, the cups by the sink are all cups he has used and left there for her to clean them. (He wouldn't say that though, would he? What would he say—that he meant to clean them later? That he thought they would magically clean themselves?) She washes the kids' plates from breakfast, unloads and reloads the dishwasher, but leaves the cups exactly where they are.

She pours a cup of coffee (that he made), and walks to the stairs, passing by his office. She thinks about stopping to thank him for the coffee, but instead pops her head in and even though she can see he has his I'm busy and I can't multitask face on, says: "I need you to pick up Caleb today so that I can take Samantha to soccer."

Click-clack, click-clack of the keys. He doesn't answer.

"Can you or not?"

"Can I what?"

"Did you seriously not just hear me?"

"I'm working."

"Today. Soccer. Caleb."

"Yes, I can pick up Caleb. What time?" He would know if he ever looked at either the Google calendar or the physical wall calendar that she meticulously maintains.

"You need to pick him up at five, and don't be late because then one of the other parents has to stay and watch him."

"I'm getting on a meeting."

She walks upstairs to her office where she can still hear his meeting because he never closes his door. At times like this, she misses her old commute, the feeling that she is a part of something, a mass of people all moving with a purpose, transitioning between the people they are at home

and who they will be at work. She misses coming home at the end of the day and asking him a question she doesn't already know the answer to, of momentarily forgetting what his smile looks like and then remembering all over again and feeling lucky. She misses not being able to see the laundry, the mess that is waiting for her at home—being able to block it out and use her brain. She even misses small talk with her colleagues (who, if she's being honest, she didn't even like all that much).

She puts on headphones and tries to get some work done. She still feels like she's catching up from the early pandemic days when she could not find enough minutes to work and even when she did, she would just stare at her screen unable to catch hold of a thought long enough to put pen to paper. At her annual review her boss had actually said that she had seemed "distracted" in the past year, but that she had done a good job "balancing" her work with her three kids, while her husband had gotten a promotion for doing even less than before. She honestly can't think about it too much without wanting to punch something, or someone, in the face.

A few hours later she makes a salad out of last night's dinner leftovers, only for herself, even though she used to always make lunch for him too when it still seemed like they were playing house together, united in facing what everyone thought was a temporary obstacle. When she is done, she washes her plate and puts it in the dishwasher. The cups are still there, taunting her.

Her phone rings and it's probably spam but she answers it anyway just in case, and it's Caleb's preschool.

"Hi, Ms. Adams?"

"Yes...."

"Everything's fine..." She hears a deep breath and then a rush of words. "But Caleb has a fever and you will need to pick him up right now."

"F--k." She doesn't mean to say that out loud.

After she hangs up, she goes to look for him. It's one of her pet peeves (one of many, he would say) that she never ever knows where he is, but he always manages to turn it around on her (why do you always need to know where I am?). Her therapist would tell her she is right and he needs to communicate better, but she's not sure that it's good to have a therapist who thinks she's right all the time, and that maybe she should get a new one, but how would she go about breaking up with a therapist who she feels is like her friend at this point, and, well, inertia?

She finally finds him in the bathroom, where she should have checked first, and she shouts to him through the door that "Caleb has a fever!" He says, "wait until I'm out of the bathroom, I can't hear you," and she responds that there isn't time because they need to pick him up right now. He comes out of the bathroom looking aggrieved.

“Can you pick him up?” She will not beg.

“No, I have a meeting in five minutes.”

“Fine, I’m going, but I have a two-hour meeting this afternoon I can’t miss so you’ll need to watch him.”

“I have a doctor’s appointment. The one you’ve been telling me to make for months.” She takes a deep breath and tries very hard to control her eye muscles.

“Alright, hopefully, he will sit quietly in front of the television.” Unlikely, with this child. “I hope he’s OK, I hope it’s not COVID.”

“I’m sure it’s not, you know he gets a fever every time he even looks at a germ. And those kids are always slobbering all over the toys. And even if it’s COVID, he will be fine, kids are fine.”

That last part makes her go from worried to annoyed, and perhaps even further than that, and a part of her really knows this isn’t his fault, and she’s not mad at him, but she would like just once for him to be worried with her. She has no idea what that’s like, but she imagines it would make her feel a little less lonely.

“I don’t know how you know that.”

He reaches out to touch her shoulder, his face softens, but she turns away. She’s not done being annoyed yet.

She brings Caleb home and plops him in front of *Sharkdog*. Why does every toddler TV show have to have a jingle designed to get stuck in your head? She gets on her meeting, camera off, hoping she can be muted most of the time. But Caleb starts to whine just as she needs to answer her boss’s question and she looks around in a panic for help; she knows he hasn’t gone to his doctor’s appointment yet. She can hear him in his office, but why isn’t he coming to help? She tries to text him while unmuting and starting to talk, but even that is too much for her all at the same time. And she yells out “I need help with Caleb!” forgetting she’d already unmuted and then there’s Caleb crying “Mama, change my poo-poo” and everyone in the meeting is looking away uncomfortably because this isn’t cute like when one of her colleagues is holding a small baby that coos and probably smells like roses. And her boss doesn’t have kids; he just has a dog that barks every time anyone comes near the door and is louder than her kid has ever been on a call. And where the f--k is her husband? She is trying to explain something to her colleagues while texting him a poop emoji, followed by a series of expletives. Eventually he saunters in, scoops up Caleb and playfully tickles him, causing him to screech. She turns around and points to her screen, mouthing to him “I’m not on mute,” and he finally, blessedly, leaves and takes Caleb with him. Her heart is racing and her hands are shaking. She has no idea what they’re talking about in the meeting now. She texts him again, “that meeting was a total disaster, thanks a lot.” He never responds to her sarcasm.

A few hours later, she's forced herself to 20 minutes of yoga but feels even less calm than before, and the kids have eaten but it's not quite their bedtime and they're feral animals, and she is just so tired. She clears the kids' dinner plates (she knows she needs to make them do it themselves, but it's just easier this way) and stares at the pile of dirty pots and pans in the sink. She had thought she was making a simple dinner, how did all this accumulate? She starts cleaning while the kids wrestle each other in the other room; she listens to make sure they haven't crossed the line from fun to injury, but sometimes it's hard to tell which kind of screams she's hearing.

Where is he? She hears noise coming from his office, but she cannot decipher if the noise is work-related or it is him playing guitar, which is his current hobby (she needs to get a hobby), and she isn't at all sure she wants to go any closer and find out, because she doesn't even have the energy to be angry right now, and it's a bath night, and baths are his thing so how long should she wait before she reminds him to go start the bath but then he's just going to say she's nagging him and that he is now totally not motivated to do the bath (oh, she didn't realize she was supposed to need motivation to pack the kids lunches or read their school emails or keep track of their calendars or do their laundry).

She finishes washing the dishes, but she doesn't clean those three cups. They stay exactly where they are. It takes all her self-control to leave them there because she's found in the last couple of years that nothing makes her feel more at peace than an empty kitchen counter. (She imagines the look of horror on her 25-year-old self's face if she could go back in time and tell this to her.) She remembers her mother scrubbing their counters every night until not a spot of grease was left, after feeding and bathing the kids, because her father did not do those things, he was a "provider" and only that. She also remembers the look on her mother's face while she scrubbed: scrunched up with all of the things she was trying not to say, with all the people she thought she could've been. She wonders if her kids ever see her make that face. She hopes not but she has no model of how to make this work: a job, two kids, a "modern" marriage. He's nothing like her father but she can't decide if she's set the bar too low or too high.

She hears the kids upstairs, no doubt splashing water all over the floor during bath time. And she hears him laughing with them and pretending to be a monster trying to get into the bath, and she briefly remembers an entire list of things she loves about him (she should write that list down, maybe, tomorrow, someday?)

But she's still cleaning up from dinner and just starting to make lunches for tomorrow when Caleb comes downstairs fully naked with a runny nose. He's bright red and she needs to take his temperature, but first she is just thinking what the f--k, because really wouldn't making sure the baby doesn't stay naked and pee on the floor be included in the definition of doing baths? She yells upstairs, "Why is Caleb naked?" And he screams back, "I just bathed them, you can put on the diaper, can't you?" And she yells back, "Your father of the year award is on the way." And then she picks up a naked Caleb under his arms and carries him kicking and screaming upstairs (which hurts her lower back, because he's really big now and she's getting old) and

finds her husband sitting in a chair looking at his phone and she drops Caleb right onto his lap, causing his phone to clatter onto the floor.

He looks up at her, genuinely startled.

She declares: "I can't do this anymore."

"Can't do what, exactly?" And she knows he's not taking her seriously because she does sometimes have a flair for the dramatic, but she doesn't know how to explain that she's not crying wolf, there really is something scary coming.

When she doesn't speak, he asks a different question: "Why are you so mad at me?"

She pauses for a minute. She doesn't know how to answer that question; it seems like there is either nothing to say or everything.

"Because you never clean your cups." He looks like he wants to laugh but he knows better.

And there is a moment then where she imagines going downstairs and walking out the door (she would never do that) or picking up the cups and throwing them at his face (she would never do that either). But instead, together, they brush their kids' teeth, wrangle their limbs into pajamas, read them too many bedtime stories, sing them their lullabies, and turn on their nightlights. When they are finally quiet in their rooms, she goes downstairs, and takes the three cups still standing sentinel by the sink and throws them in the garbage. He probably won't ever know they're gone, but she will.