

I Did This for Him

By Stormy McIntosh

At six months pregnant, I awoke to something heavy hitting the floor with an enormous crash. It must have been three or four in the morning; I had been asleep for a few hours, but the sun was not yet up, nor the birds, and the house was quiet, apart from the sound of my son's father dropping to the floor at the foot of the bed. I don't remember leaping up, or how I made it to his side so quickly, but the image of his head in my hands as his body seized and jerked, and how his eyes swam and rolled is burned into my memory. The can of aerosol was lying a few feet away under the TV stand, and what he had been doing became clear. For how long he remained unconscious, I'm not sure, but it felt like time stopped as his body went limp and my panic grew. I spent several excruciating moments shaking his shoulders vigorously, willing something, *anything* to happen, when finally his eyes opened and focused on my face. I knew there was a problem. I knew this was not what I wanted for my son; but I was young and scared, and so I ignored it.

Months passed. My son Milo was coming, and I remember reading the text his father sent to an unknown number on his phone: "I'm having a kid today and I can't think of any way out of it other than to kill myself." It was clear from this text how he felt about becoming a parent, but irrationally I tried to convince myself that he was only panicking, and he would come around eventually.

My time in the hospital was spent in a fog. A few blurry days alone, nurses flitting in and out, wondering where the father was. Two social workers came into my room on the second day, concerned because I hadn't stopped crying except to sleep; they asked if I was okay. They asked if I was safe. I told them yes and they left. I was cleared to go home, and upon arriving, found the father of my son, passed out in my bed and surrounded by vomit. An empty bottle of whiskey lay on the floor; the smell in the room was putrid. It was sickeningly sour and made the air feel heavy and unbearable. I became lightheaded and left the room. My grandmother woke him and they cleaned up the mess as I lay on the couch in the living room, slightly delirious from the post-birth hormones and reeling from what I had

come home to. I cackled at a Popsicle joke, and wondered whether this was really worth it.

We never had a chance to become a family. Alcohol. Percocet, Vicodin, Valium. Cocaine. Heroin. It all came first. I was left alone, forced to learn how to be a mother by myself, while he constantly scrambled for a high, desperate and wild. Frequently, thoughts of leaving entered my mind. *Maybe this isn't a good idea, maybe he's dangerous, maybe it would be better if he's not around at all.* But they were always followed by excuses: *Maybe it will get better. It will, it will. He will get better. This can't last forever.* Still, the thought lingered, waiting in the back of my mind, resurfacing every so often to whisper quietly that it was better for Milo if his father wasn't involved.

Eventually, he started drifting. He was only seeing Milo a few days a week. Then, just the weekends. Suddenly we were only seeing him once every few weeks, and he wouldn't answer the phone. The rare moments he did spend with us were merely a distraction from his true intentions, which he made clear by leaving during the day and at all hours through the night. He had a knack for finding people like him, and often paraded drugs and guns in and out of the apartment our son was growing up in. In the hours he spent inebriated, he revealed to me in slurred words that he saw nothing wrong with sharing his habits with his growing child. He saw nothing wrong with caring for a child while high. He saw nothing wrong with the “friends” he brought into the apartment. He insisted that I was just unfriendly and paranoid, a crazy worrier who didn't understand. It was too much, and we broke up.

Things worsened for us as the years passed. My son grew, and the more he grew, the more he noticed. He began to wonder where his father was. He began to cry when he left, and cry when his father said he would be there but wasn't. He started asking if his dad was coming to see him, and I would always tell him someday soon, but not today. He stopped seeing Milo during holidays, and sometimes would go months without visiting or calling. Our only contact was the texts I would occasionally receive in the late hours of the night, sloppily written and always blaming me for his shortcomings. I only ever answered one.

Most of his texts to me followed the same pattern: I would receive an initial message telling me how proud he was of our son. How thankful he was that his son had a mother like me. That he would always love me, and hoped one day things would work out. And always, a few days later, I would receive another text, or sometimes several. They always bore the same message: I was trash. I was a terrible mother. I was a mean and foul human being who didn't deserve a child. A few accused me of being an alcoholic, though I didn't drink. These texts would come steadily some nights, message after message, until five or six in the morning. In general, I was good at ignoring them.

But there was a particular text. This text was not much different from any other; the same rules applied as they did with any other slew of messages he would send to me. This time he was accusing me of keeping our son away from him, disregarding the fact that we had set plans that he failed to follow. Something about this accusation, coupled with years of pent-up frustration and a desperation to do what was best for my son, caused something in me to snap. I had been angry with him before, but not like this. This fury felt like fire. It burned through my fears and gave me courage to make a choice I had previously been too anxious to make. My blood was boiling, my chest swelling with rage, my mind sick with anger. I would not allow him to talk to me as if it were my fault he failed as a father. I would not allow him to blame me when he was too hung over to show up for our son. Above all, I would not allow him to take Milo for granted. Every time he said he would be there and wasn't, every time he put Milo in danger with his efforts to get a fix, every time he let our son down flashed through my mind. It was not okay. I refused to ignore it. And so I started typing.

I allowed my emotions to carry me. Everything I had hidden from for years, every ounce of dread and worry that I had so carefully tucked away, came spewing out like a faucet. I told him it was not my fault that he was an addict, and it was not my fault that he didn't show up when he said he would; that he was a wreck of a person and should seek help for the demons that haunted him. I told him he was following a path that would not end well for him, and I was not going to be the one to tell Milo that his father had died of a drug overdose. I had to protect our son, so until he was sober and

stable, he was not allowed to be in Milo's life at all. With that, I pressed send and set the phone down. My hands shook slightly. My words had been harsh; all eloquence and tact was lost in my anger, but I found I did not feel guilty. I only felt overwhelming relief. It was over. We were okay; Milo was safe.

To say the decision to cut ties with my son's father was difficult is a gross understatement. The struggle to decide whether an absent father was better for Milo tore at my insides and ate into the walls of my stomach. Was this what was best for Milo? Should I take the very real risk that his father might die while he's young and subject him to that sort of pain for the rest of his life? Or worse, play with the possibility of Milo getting hurt, physically or emotionally, due to his father's blatant disregard of his safety and poor judgment of dire situations? Ultimately, the answer is no. We could, and can, do this on our own. We make an excellent team, and together we can navigate the world regardless of the circumstances.