

Separation Anxiety

By: Brandon Fries

The incessant squawking of birds distracts me. I look up and the sky is bright blue, and the sun is high, it's noon. Two sparrows swoop down, taking turns attacking the crow. The two together, defending their nest, defending their babies, the life they built, together.

It's hot today. She wouldn't have liked it. She loved the feeling of the icy air biting her skin. I feel the tickle from the constant stream of sweat cascading down my forehead.

I'm wanting for this to be over soon.

I pray for a breeze to come sweeping over the lush green hill, giving this crowd a reason to smile, a whisper of hope. I look down at the vacant hand of my little girl and clutch it. Her palms are cool and she looks up at me for a quick moment. I hug her tightly and weep. I feel their stares and immediately hate them all. I let her go. She sits on the ground, and her fingers chase a bug that moves through the blades of grass.

She's unaware of the love that surrounds her today.

The psalms are read.

The sobbing grows.

I kiss the braids of my little girl.

Her mom is dead.

I always wondered what it felt to lose someone close to you. Not like losing a lover for another, or because they stole your money or pride, but to lose someone at the height of a loving

relationship, where partners committed and devoted to each other. It's a loss that is much deeper. It's awful.

"Oh, Mike," the pastor's wife interrupts. "I'm so sorry for your loss." I'm sitting in my leather chair and forced to get up as she comes in for a hug.

"Thanks, Sarah," I say. She comes in strong and I can feel the weight of her chest rub my love handles.

"Julie was such a radiant woman. I will dearly miss her." She touches my left cheek and passively looks through me. "I made you a lasagna to help you in this time of grief. Let us know if you need anything."

"Thank you," I mutter as I plop down into the chair and grab my glass to help free her up to move onto the next victim.

I rub my right thumb on the rim of the glass. We bought these glasses right after our wedding. It's filled with the caramel brown liquor that she bought for me on our last anniversary, the fifth anniversary, our last.

The burning tears well up so I drink the last shot in my glass. I stand up, hoping to find a distraction. Our daughter runs up to me holding her newest Dora doll by the hair.

"Papa, you go play?" She asks.

Julie would know what to do. She would know what to say. She was the perfect parent, unlike me. I can only pretend to be a parent.

"Yes sweetheart, we can play," I say. Her sticky hand reaches out and grabs mine. She leads me through the living room and out the front door to escape. Her yellow dress flows behind her as she bounds down the porch stairs,

going straight for her blow up pool. As we get closer, she lets go of my hand and lets out a scream of excitement.

"SWIMMING!" She yells as she plunges feet first into the pool. I reach out to pull her out but realize that she's happy. Julie would pull her out to put on a proper bathing suit and lather her with SPF 50, but it's OK. I'm here for her now.

"All right, sweetie. You can swim for 15 minutes." I say.

"Hey, dude." I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn around.

"Hey, Alan. Thanks for coming," I say. We've been friends for years and I know he'll be with me through the long haul.

"I think something might be burning." He says looking back inside.

"Shit, the pizza." I run in knowing that if Julie was here, she would have set the timer. I enter the kitchen and smoke is billowing out from the oven. I run to grab the towel to take the pizza out but trip over the garbage can. I put my hand out for balance but miss grabbing the marble island and feel my head bounce off the hardwood floors.

I lay.

Dazed.

The tears fall quickly.

Sobs follow.

Uncontrollable.

"Wake up, Mike." I hear Alan saying. "Everyone is almost gone. Are you OK?"

"Thanks, Alan," I say, opening my eyes. "I'm just exhausted. Where's Aubrey?"

"She's still in the pool. I didn't want her to see you like this. You have a nasty bump, but everything else looks fine." He says.

I gingerly get up and walk outside. The sun just finished setting, and it's getting dark out. I hear the giggles and splashing of my little one in the pool.

"Aubrey, it's almost time to come in," I say.

I look over and see Alan followed me outside.

"Alan, I can't believe this is happening," I say to him.

"I know, buddy." He says. "I can stay with you and help with Aubrey. I know she doesn't really know what's going on yet, but she'll start asking for her mom soon and when that happens you might need some help."

"Thanks, but I think I'll be better once everyone leaves the house." Aubrey steps to get out of the pool, but her foot catches the side, and she falls, skinning her knee. She shakes it off, then runs back and jumps into the pool again.

"And Aubrey is a lot tougher than people know," I say. I go to the pool and take her hand to help her out of the pool.

I look down the road as the streetlights flicker on. The trees are green, and the cool summer night air is picking up. I notice a small parade of cars makes their way down the avenue. Suddenly, they stop in front of my house. I count five patrol cars and a minivan.

The cops get out of their cars and march up the walkway to me.

Aubrey looks over and sees him. Her eyes get enormous. She drops my hand. I feel Alan grab my shoulder to hold me back.

"No!" I shout. The officers hurry forward towards me, letting Aubrey slip past them. They raise one of their hands at me with their other hand resting on their belt.

"Mr. Anderson," says the first cop. "Please don't make this more difficult than it already is."

I lurch forward to protect her. That's what Julie would have wanted.

"Not today," I say. "It can't happen now. Please."

I feel more hands reach over and grab me. I peel their fingers off me and finally break free. I head straight at them, knowing that the adrenaline will give me the strength needed to save her. I am her protector.

"Stop, sir." They shout, pulling up something from their belts.

He smiles as she jumps in his arms. That grin. The winning grin. I lost. This only fuels my anger even more and I spin past the cops to grab Aubrey. She turns her head towards me and cries as I reach for her.

Another cop appears and I feel the crunch under my knuckle as it smashes his nose. I reach to take Aubrey from him but he pulls her away from me. I shove him hard into the van, just enough for his grip to free her.

"It will be alright, Aubrey." I tell her as I hug her tight. "Mommy is gone, but I'm here for you. It's going to be OK."

I feel a sharp pinch on my right shoulder. Suddenly electricity pulses through my body and I drop to the ground. The five cops pounce on me.

"Stay still sir." they are all shouting Aubrey's back in his arms as his tears baptize her.

"You can't take her. I'm her dad!" I scream. I fight to break out from their grip, but the electricity shoots through my body again. I feel my pants get wet as I lose control of my bladder.

Flashes from the air explode.

"Sir, she's no longer yours. He's her biological father."

They hold a paper to my face with a judge's signature.

It's Independence day.