

NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOR

Troy Jewell

Bobby had spent the last two months trying to bust out like he was a prisoner, and by then I was ready to release him onto the world. He kept crawling to the top of my ribcage, keeping me from breathing, then poking his feet along my insides. It was like he was standing to salute the general that never came. Every once in a while, me and Dennis saw something jutting out from my belly and it became a game to guess what it was—a foot, a knee, his head.

But mostly it hurt, and when Bobby did these things, I tried to remember the first time I heard his little heart so as not to get too upset. I wasn't that far along, so I wasn't expecting the doctor visit to be memorable. I didn't even ask Dennis to go. The faded pink and blue on the walls was sickening, and the office was cold. I cringed when the doctor squirted jelly on my stomach, and nearly fainted from shock when the doctor told me the rhythmic swooshing, I was hearing from the monitor was the heartbeat. My arm flailed toward the

nurse next to me, and she patted my shoulder while I held her hand tight. It was a wonderful moment, which is why I tried to think about it as much as I could, but that was also when the fear started.

From then on, I constantly worried if I was eating the right things, if I was taking enough calcium pills, if his heart still sounded the way it was supposed to. I hoped he wouldn't have my nose because it's too bumpy or Dennis' feet because, well, they're ugly. Then, I got scared about the delivery: If I could get the epidural in time, if he would come out headfirst, all kinds of stuff. Around the seventh or eighth month I stopped being scared, for a little while anyway, and started getting angry—the little shit was hurting me.

When the contractions finally came, I was thankful, but they hurt to high heaven. At first my whole body ached slightly like I had the flu, and then, in a few short hours, the pain turned worse where it felt more like a boa constrictor squeezing my belly and privates.

After Bobby was birthed, something changed. I wanted him back in me. This is normal, the nurses said. But life seemed to fall in on me, collapsing all around. I could barely breathe again, but for different reasons. When I pulled him close, instead of feeling him resting lightly on my chest, I felt like he was standing on me. The fear moved in and replaced Bobby.

When Dennis was working and I was home alone, the fear would settle and there was no way of stopping it. It got worse because of the money issues, too. I worried about not having enough food to eat, then not having enough breast milk. I was scared about paying for daycare when the time came; I worried about getting clothes for Bobby when he got into school. Everything flooded my mind no matter how stupid it was to worry about something I couldn't do a thing about for years. The scariest part, I guess, was being frightened *for* him and *by* him: when he was hungry and grabbed for my breasts; when he slept in his bassinet I'd imagined he would stop breathing; when Dennis was holding him I thought of Bobby's future, or got nervous to meet his first love, or when he would begin to drive . . . it went on and on.

Dennis was great, but I didn't want to bother him about that stuff. He worked so hard, spending twelve-hour days guarding office buildings, and I didn't want to burden him with my fear. Usually when he got home he'd want to rest, and after Bobby was born, he'd want to spend time with him. Plus, I could tell that Dennis had his own set of things to worry about, and it always had to do with money. I had taken maternity leave from my job at Wal-Mart to be with Bobby for the first few months, but we were running out of money. And when Dennis worries, there's no talking to him. When I'm worried, I

want to talk. It's one of the differences between us.

Before Bobby was born, when we did talk about all that was bothering us, Dennis would say things like, A man has to care for his family, simple as that. But after Bobby he realized what it was going to take to pay the bills. One day when Bobby was about two months old, he said he thought I should go back to work. Keep you busy, he said. He didn't talk about the money problems, but I knew what was on his mind.

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We moved here to the north side of Jacksonville for better jobs a month after we graduated high school. That was five years ago, and even though we don't have those jobs anymore, we've stayed, partly because we've gotten used to it here. We never considered how having a baby was going to change everything, that we would struggle for years. We knew we wanted to have kids, so we did. The money and the fear never entered our minds, at least not as much as it does now.

We couldn't ask family to watch Bobby because the closest was a five-hour drive to Tampa. And we didn't know anyone who sat at home with kids, so we either needed to pay for daycare that cost as much as a college education or find another way. I wanted to stay home with Bobby, damn the money, but

I knew deep down that it was a losing battle. I didn't really have a choice. We needed the money, and the only way to get it was for me to go back to work, which meant Bobby would need to stay with someone for a while.

We finally decided that when I went back, I'd work the afternoon shift instead of morning. That way there would be a little overlap between our schedules, and we'd only need to find daycare for four or five hours instead of eight, but we were still at a loss as to who would watch him. There was no way we could afford the good daycare places, and I was scared and nervous about him going to begin with.

Anyhow, one night, we finally decided to ask the neighbors if they knew anyone, or if maybe one of them stayed home during the day. Dennis didn't really want to do that, saying, What's important is men taking care of their families, helping raise their children, keeping everyone safe. He was having a tough time with me going back to work, even though he knew I needed to and he suggested it. He didn't want to do it as much as I didn't, so I told him, I don't disagree with you and It'll be okay. It's not your fault, I said, and then added, You do keep us safe. That seemed to work a little, but the fear was still there. For both of us. Mine had gotten a little better at that point. Some of the things I worried about before had already passed and wasn't a big deal. Like I

got the epidural just fine, and Bobby had all his toes and fingers and so far, it looked like he had his dad's nose and my feet. I still worried about the future, but it didn't hit me in waves like before. The fear was slightly less intense but it was still there, settling in like the muck at the bottom of a pond, and floating up with the smallest movement of a fish or boat or wind.

We had some good neighbors. A few had kids. There were the Watsons on the opposite side of the building. They were a young black couple that just moved from Atlanta. He was a teacher, and she worked at a doctor's office. The Corbins would have been a good choice and lived in the building next to ours. They had a four-year-old and a three-year-old. Sometimes the kids left bright yellow and red dolls and fire trucks out front, between our building and theirs. No one cared about the toys, but now I kind of miss them. Once, we went to the Corbins' apartment for a cookout. This was before Bobby. Mr. Corbin pushed around the hotdogs and hamburgers on an old Coleman grill while the kids kicked and tugged at one another. Mrs. Corbin and I sat on rusting chairs and chatted. I could tell Dennis wanted to jump over to the grill and take over. He knows best when it comes to grilling. The meat came out charred, but we ate it anyway, out of courtesy. They were good people but left soon after that night.

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After asking around some, Mr. Battle, our next-door neighbor, agreed to watch Bobby for a few hours while we worked. Dennis came home around seven, six if he was lucky, and I had to leave around noon for work, and some days still got home before Dennis. Mr. Battle was such a nice man helping us out. And I was so glad he did because we were at our wit's end with money trouble. Dennis had even said to me when I told him about Mr. Battle, Boy that's a load off.

Mr. Battle was our parents' age, about fifty, maybe sixty years old, skinny, and nearly frail. He was usually in shorts and some kind of sweatshirt. I guess his body couldn't decide if it was hot or cold. When we first moved in, he was in and out of the hospital. Once, before Bobby, I ran into his mother, a sickly old lady with dark, droopy skin under her eyes, on my way to meet Dennis at the bowling alley, and she said, Cancer and He'll make it, my boy. After about six months or so, maybe longer, I saw his mom on the stairwell that connects his and our apartments. I said, Hello, how are you, how's your son, and she practically hopped into my arms with excitement. He beat it, she said, he beat it. All right was all I could think to say, then she added, I don't know what I would do with myself if he was gone. I didn't talk with his mother long. We

weren't buddies or anything, but she stuck with me. Every once in a while, something would remind me of her—a picture of me and my mom, an old lady shopping alone at Wal-Mart—and I'd think about what she said last, how I never saw her smile except that night, and how I was glad I wasn't her, couldn't even imagine being her. Now, because of Bobby, I know better. Later, when me and Mr. Battle would cross paths, we'd talk mostly small stuff, but I'd always ask him about his mother. Good, real good, he'd say, then move on to something else. What's Dennis been up to lately? Have plans for Christmas?

Finally, nearly a year later, when I visited with Bobby to see if Mr. Battle could watch him, the memory of his mom trotted in with the fear, but just being around Mr. Battle helped. He looked healthy and was putting on weight, for one, and when he talked his lips curled up into a crooked smile. He said he'd be home every day at 7:30 in the morning, that he'd started working overnight shifts at the gas station. He told me to bring Bobby over about 11:30—he wanted to sleep for a few hours first. Perfect, I said, I'll bring his stuff too. About then, Bobby wriggled in my arms, did a half-turn toward Mr. Battle and reached for him. I smiled because it was obvious Bobby liked Mr. Battle, and was comfortable with him.

He then asked me to come in, to check things out. You ought to look

around, he said. Make sure everything's okay. I don't want to have any hazards around for the little one to get into, he said. I was embarrassed that I hadn't thought of it first, so as I handed Bobby to him, I just skirted past and into his apartment. His place was exactly like ours, except that it was mirrored and cleaner. His kitchen was to the right instead of the left, and his screened porch was off the living room. Just like ours. Everything was in its proper place, too—the fruit bowl on the counter near the kitchen even had apples and oranges in it. I scanned his living room, noticed he had a fish tank in one corner, opposite the television, and said, Oh, Bobby loves fish. Once, we took him to the aquarium downtown and he stared at the blue and yellow fish for a long time. He would reach out and point, try to poke them, and a few times he even opened his mouth wide and stretched to the glass, either trying to eat or kiss those fish, I said, hoping my story would show I was a good mom. Mr. Battle just nodded and grinned as Bobby pointed to the fish.

Near the fish tank, along one wall, right above a white, cloth couch was a series of photographs. I said, These your family? Yeah, Mr. Battle said with more pep and happiness than I had seen before, and he walked to them and began pointing at each one, like Bobby mesmerized by the fish, giddy and animated. As Mr. Battle poked at each person in the photos, he'd tell me about

them. That's my sister, Clara, he said. She lives in Boston with her husband and three kids. These are her kids, my nieces and nephew. He went on and on, and I couldn't tell you who those people were if I was quizzed on it two minutes after learning their names. That's because I was moving my eyes from Mr. Battle's bony fingers pointing to his family to the picture in the center of the wall—one of him and his mom—then back to his face. I hadn't noticed before, and it may have been those few, small moments looking at the pictures and Bobby's face so close to his, but I noticed that Mr. Battle's face was boyish and plump. The pocked marks I had noticed the first few times, when he was taking chemo, were smooth, and he was clean shaven. I don't remember there being even a sliver of facial hair. What really made him look, in his face anyhow, like a much younger boy, were his eyes. They were dark brown and glistened, even sparkled, and the skin around them was thick, but not puffy like he was tired or sick. His face seemed to be filled with baby fat and he had gotten younger between the moment I had met him at the door to just then when he was telling me about his dear mother and family.

The fear started to rise in my chest, and my thoughts turned to Bobby, and how Mr. Battle reminded me of Bobby in some odd way. I reached for Bobby

then, and he came to me without fussing. Mr. Battle, in a brief moment, became Bobby, and Mr. Battle's mother became me. It wasn't her I saw in that picture in the middle of the wall. It was my head atop her body, holding onto Bobby, not her pulling a younger Mr. Battle to her chest.

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I was glad and able to fight back those thoughts until a few months into working again. I had just picked Bobby up one evening and was feeling the fear root up. Mr. Battle looked pretty much the same, but he had started to resemble his old frail self, even thinning. And in those few moments that he handed me a squirming Bobby and I said Thanks, I realized, quickly, like when the fear first overcame me, that Mr. Battle was someone's son, and that I was someone's mom. It was then that I looked past Mr. Battle and noticed all the pictures were gone from the wall. At the time I didn't think too much about it, but assumed he was getting them reframed or something like that. I now understand what my fear, Mr. Battle's changing and those missing frames meant, and it still creeps me out to think about it, to think that me and Bobby were the last to see Mr. Battle. Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night thinking of Bobby and Battle and how much they were the same back then.

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As Bobby swiveled toward me, his eyes and Mr. Battle's were at the same level. In them I saw my own brown ones. He sure is a handful, Mr. Battle said. Wears me out.

When I got him inside, Bobby dropped off to sleep. He had taken to sleeping on me, from exhaustion, after spending a few hours with Mr. Battle. He looked so peaceful with his eyes shut tight and little sandman dust in the corners. His miniature fingers were balled into a fist, and every once in a while his arms jerked up like he was dreaming. Dennis was resting, turning the television remote around in his one hand and sipping a beer.

It was cool that night. We had the windows and the front door open, letting a cross-breeze through, tickling the hairs on my arms. It was between this peace and the start of the fear that I heard a loud metallic pop. Bobby kept on sleeping, and Dennis didn't move either.

We were used to hearing strange noises. A few weeks before, we were awakened from bed by Mr. Battle banging around in his apartment. It sounded like he was moving heavy wooden furniture. Way before that, we heard a car ram into the ditch that sat behind our apartment. The road turned right where the ditch met it, and if you weren't careful, things could be bad. When we went to check on what we heard, red side panels and plastic compartments

from the Mustang, as it turned out, riddled the ditch, and the muck had started to pull some of the pieces down. The emergency workers and some of our neighbors were already there, so we just stood along the edge of the ditch. Later, we learned that three of the four teenagers died.

Even though I was used to the noises I couldn't keep my mind off that pop. Really, it was more than a pop, but it didn't last too long, so that's all I could think to describe it as.

I'm not sure why, but looking back on it all, I suppose that noise stuck with me because I had been thinking of Bobby. I cradled his neck and pulled him with me to rise from the couch. His little body lay limp in my hands, and I took him over to Dennis and said, I'm going to check on that noise, be back in a minute. He said, What noise? Don't you need some shoes? And I said, Won't be long. Something just isn't right, and I turned to leave. I had to fight my thoughts in order to check on it, but I thought it would be good to go for a walk, get more air.

Outside, there seemed to be an imaginary barrier between the air inside and outside. Comfort and Bobby lying on my lungs was inside. The outside air picked me up but was sickened with the newly painted building. All the trim was dark green and it looked like we lived inside a gigantic forest, while the

paneling and walls were a muted yellow.

I pushed myself through the smell and went to Mr. Battle's door and knocked gently. When he didn't answer, I knew something was wrong. I hadn't picked up Bobby that long ago, so I knew he was home. Since I couldn't get an answer, I knocked a little louder and just a little more, and when I did this the second time the door creaked open. Thoughts of Bobby kept rattling around in my head, and I was scared by that and the door opening on its own. Instead of going to get Dennis like I knew I should have, I opened the door wider and called out, Mr. Battle? When I didn't get an answer I yelled again, You in there, Mr. Battle, and opened the door more.

The lights were out, and it was dark in his apartment. I definitely should've gone and gotten Dennis then, but I didn't. It sounds strange, but I think I didn't because of Bobby. I was trying to escape my fear about Bobby by taking on another fear that I thought I could beat.

I yelled out for Mr. Battle again. The only thing I heard was the refrigerator running, so I stepped more inside, walked to the porch, which was just off the living room, near the now empty wall. He wasn't there. I checked the kitchen, flipping on the first light. More nothing. I walked to the back of his apartment to his bedroom, expecting to find him asleep, but he wasn't there

either. Then as I was leaving his room I glanced toward the bathroom. Even though it was still dark, the light from the kitchen showed enough. Mr. Battle was in a chair, faced away from the mirror, and his head was slumped forward. Behind him, the mirror had a little white hole in it, about the size of my fist, and tiny crackling strings pushed out from the center. It looked like a spider web glistening from the morning rain.

I still don't understand, not exactly anyway, why I did what I did next, but instead of leaving right away I walked into Mr. Battle's bathroom and flipped on the light. My bare feet—I don't know why I didn't have shoes on—crunched on glass. The floor, underneath Mr. Battle, was covered with a pool of gunk and grime. His hair was matted against his head, and goo, almost like Playdoh, was smashed against the back of his head. Blood was flowing slowly down his neck and onto his chest, running to the corners of the room, racing like millions of red ants going for breadcrumbs. On his left, next to his foot, lay a revolver. I was suddenly aware of the glass and blood burrowing into the bottoms of my feet and my own blood seeping out.

I couldn't stop looking at him, wondering what Mr. Battle was faced with that he'd do that to himself. Then the fear hit, more intense than ever before, so I ran home. At each step I felt the glass go deeper, the blood squish under

me, and I imagined that I was leaving bloody footprints. When I got inside my apartment, I didn't immediately see Bobby or Dennis and I collapsed onto our living room floor. Thankfully, I had enough in me to call out to Dennis. He poked his head from the bedroom and said, I'm changing a diaper. What's wrong? And just as quickly, I relaxed, my muscles flopped, and the tightness in my chest let go. It was so quick I still have trouble understanding it and wonder if it really happened the way I remember it.

Dennis came out, with his giant bear paws wrapped around Bobby, and I cried and cried and cried. All I could think of was my little Bobby's eyes and how they were nearly the same as Mr. Battle's. And the fear rushed in again, full force, deeper than ever before, like the glass in my feet, and I remembered his mother. It didn't happen to me, of course, but I couldn't even handle the thought that she would see the things I had. So I decided she wouldn't.

Meanwhile, Dennis was trying to find out what I was crying about, my feet smeared with blood. I'm sure he was scared too, so I got up off the floor and told Dennis what I had found. Jesus Almighty, he said, and stared out the still-opened front door. He stood like that a couple of minutes, walked to the phone, and called the police.

When the police came by, they wanted to talk with us and our other neighbors. I told the detective everything—about my fear, about Mr. Battle watching Bobby, how I found him, and when he asked, about my bloody feet. Afterward I asked the police if I could take care of Mr. Battle's apartment. Let me get back to you, he said. When he came back about thirty minutes later he said that they had what they needed. Found a note addressed to his mother. It would save the family some money if you did a real good job of it. There's companies for that, you know. You'll be surprised where everything goes. It's hard to get it out—all the blood and tissue and stuff. I couldn't do it. It's nice of you to help the family. It might be a little easier on them if you go in and clean beforehand.

After everyone had left, I sat down next to Dennis, took hold of him and a sleeping Bobby and cried some more. Dennis, bless his heart, didn't know what to do, so he did what I wanted and just held us. Then he took Bobby, placed him in his crib, and had me sit on the edge of the bathtub. He ran warm water over my feet, plucked the glass out of my soles, and worked the soap into the tiny cuts, getting rid of the dried blood and dirt. He pleaded with me not to go back to Mr. Battle's apartment. Think about Bobby, he said. It won't be good for you, he added as he patted my feet dry.

I'm always thinking of Bobby, I said. I can't stop thinking of him. And I rattled on to Dennis about all my fears, Mr. Battle's giant eyes being the same as Bobby's, and I said, It's for her, for his mom. Dennis stood, not sure what to do, and asked, Whose?

Dennis understood I think, when I said, Mr. Battle's mother, or at least knew he wasn't getting his way this time and stopped trying to reason with me. I went to the kitchen and grabbed a bucket, two rolls of paper towels, some old bath towels, floor cleaner and glass cleaner. Before leaving, I kissed Dennis and then Bobby on his soft head.

When I got back to Mr. Battle's, the place reeked. I don't know why. Maybe the blood had its chance to seep. Or maybe it was always there but I didn't notice it before now because I was so worried.

It smelled of vomit and baby powder. I pushed through the smell and filled the bucket with warm water and some detergent in the kitchen, then started with the tan carpet in the bedroom that met the linoleum floor. At first, I picked fragments of glass and bone that the police didn't take and dropped them in a garbage can I found. There wasn't that much on the carpet. Most was on the bathroom floor and the thought entered my mind that Mr. Battle might have done that on purpose.

As I moved farther into the bathroom, my throat tightened. I slopped some soapy water onto the floor, dipped my sponge into the water and scrubbed and scrubbed. I pushed down and out, brushing away the grief and heartache that his mother would feel. As I did this, I thought about how much his mom must have worried about him, and how excited she seemed when she told me he'd beat it, her son had beat the cancer.

I thought about how much I'll worry about Bobby. I thought about how me and Bobby were the last to see Mr. Battle alive, and wondered if the worry and pain and fear would ever go away. I drove the sponge deeper into the floor, moving blood and soap and water and grime from one side to another until my shoulders and arms and legs hurt. I scrubbed for hours, thankful all the time that I wasn't Mr. Battle's mother and that Bobby was ours, for now at least, and not someone else's next-door neighbor.

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