Allie and Lena

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The day Allie drew her picture is one I will never forget. She and my wife Elena came in that day, just like every Tuesday. But for some reason Allie saw something different in me, something I couldn't see myself. At first the picture was simply intriguing, but soon it became so much more than that. It became an answer.

"Hey, what's on special today?" Elena asked.

"We have turkey for $4 a pound, I think that's it. You want it?" I asked. Elena always came in on Tuesdays because that's when we have specials. She picked Allie up from daycare on the way home from her job at the grocery, and they stopped at the deli on the way home. Allie stood quietly beside Elena, holding her hand. She looked up at me with her brown eyes, her dark curls tied into a ponytail.

"Hi daddy, how are you?"

"I'm alright, how are you doing?" I asked.

"Good." That was all she said.

"That's good." I turned to get the turkey from Elena, not noticing that a customer had just walked in. I was weighing the turkey when I heard a tapping on the glass.

"I want some turkey. I don't have all day," he said. He was a regular, not my favorite guy. He worked at a bank around the corner, and he would usually stop in after work.

"Sure, I'll be right with you."

Fine.

I handed Elena the package of turkey. "I'll pay for it before I head out tonight," I told her.

Elena slowly walked out, leading Allie.

"Sorry about the wait. What can I get for you?" I asked the customer.

"Do I get free lunch meat too?" he asked, a mocking expression on his face.

"I'll take a pound of the turkey, and half a pound of Swiss."

As Allie and Elena walked out I heard the tiny bells on the door jingle, and Elena turned and rolled her eyes at me, mouthing "what a jerk" about the customer.
The rest of the afternoon dragged, and as we were getting ready to close another customer came in. Izzi and Miguel were cleaning off the counter, and I was counting the money, getting ready to take it to the bank. I stuffed the money in the bank bag, and looked up. “We’re closed,” I shrugged, barely looking at him.

It was an old man with a dirty matted beard and hair, and too many layers of clothing for the spring day.

“I just wondered if you had some soup or something you were going to throw away. Maybe I could have it,” he said.

I looked in his eyes.

“We aren’t supposed to do that, man, if we gave away free stuff how would we make any money?” Izzi said.

“Well, if you’re just going to throw it away you won’t make any money from it, and no one will eat it either. That doesn’t make much sense, does it?” the old man said, not condescendingly, but in a friendly manner.

I turned and grabbed the box of bread we were getting ready to take to the dumpster, and out of the fridge I grabbed a block of cheese.

“What are you doing? You could get fired Mitch. Is that what you want?” Izzi said.

“Fuck no that’s not what I want, and that’s why you’re not going to tell anyone about it, right?” I said.

“Whatever,” he replied.

“Thank you,” said the old man, as he waited for me to set the box in front of him, never reaching, only waiting.

“Yeah, well, don’t ever come in here when my boss is around. He’d call the cops or worse. So don’t make it a habit,” I said, focusing my eyes on his.

He walked out and I finished with the money and walked it to the bank around the corner, then headed for home.

Our second floor apartment was hot and smelled of burned fish when I walked in. My wife Elena was standing over the stove, flipping filets of cod in hot grease. I closed the door, and as I walked across the small living room I noticed the mess on the floor.

Elena turned from the stove. “Hey, how was the rest of your day?” she asked, a smile on her face.

“Fine. Why is all this shit all over the floor?” I said, my voice resentful.

“Nice to see you too, Mitch. Allie just got done playing and she didn’t pick up her toys yet because she had to go to the bathroom, which is where she is in case you even care.”

“I just want her to take responsibility for her stuff, that’s all. I guess that’s too much to ask.” Even as I said it I hated myself for it.

“Well, in case you didn’t notice, she’s four. So give her a break.”

Elena started pulling scattered toys from the threadbare yellow carpet, a look of disgust on her face. At that moment I wondered what I ever saw in her.
When we were 19 we started dating. Nine months later there was Allie, and 4 years after that we were in our shitty apartment on the south side, me working at the deli and Elena working at the grocery down the street. I love Elena, although I don't understand her sometimes, and I love Allie. I definitely don't understand her. When she was born she seemed so simple and yet so scary, tiny fists and skin softer than feathers. Now she has a personality of her own, and she knows so much and I know I didn't teach her any of it, and neither did Elena. There are just things you learn on your own, like how to tell the kind of mood the people around you are in. Probably she thought I was always in a bad mood. She may have been right.

Elena was back at the stove, stirring the rice, and adding tomatoes and peppers. I opened the cupboard and pulled out three plates, and three glasses. After I set them on the table, I pulled three forks, knives, and spoons from the drawer by the fridge. I opened the fridge, pulling out the milk and butter. I poured us each a glass of milk, and as I did Allie walked into the kitchen.

"Hi, daddy," was all she said, hardly looking at me.

"Hi, Allie, how are you," I asked her, in the softest voice I could. Maybe I could trick her into thinking I had a good day. Get some sort of response at least.

"I played with Sammy when we got home from the deli, and we drew pictures. Mine was of the deli."

"Oh yeah, well can I see it?"

"I'll go get it."

As she walked out of the room to get the picture Elena turned to me.

"Why can't you always talk to her that way? Do you see how much that means to her?" she asked me, looking into my eyes.

"Why do you have to be so mean to me? I know how to talk to my daughter."

I looked at the floor, at the brown linoleum with the green specks of paint from who knows when, maybe before I was born, definitely before Allie was born.

Allie walked back into the kitchen. No more from Elena. She showed me the picture. It was of the deli, with its trays of meats and the heavy cheeses hanging and some lined up on top of the counter. She included Izzi with his greasy black hair pulled into a ponytail, and Miguel, short and fat in an apron.

I was in the middle of the picture, reaching over the counter, handing bread to someone. Unlike the others it appears that I am clean and friendly, my dark brown hair neat and trimmed, and my mustache a clean line. I smiled in the picture. The others wore slight scowls.

"How come I look nice and Izzi and Miguel look so nasty?"

"Well, I think they just look mean, and at the deli you always look nice. Plus you look better than them 'cause you keep yourself clean," my daughter said to me, her innocent eyes large with the feeling of importance I was giving her with these simple questions.

"Okay, but how come I'm the one handing the bread to someone?"
"'Cause you do nice stuff for people, and Izzi and Miguel don't do nothin'. Like today when you helped that man in the suit, even when he was mean."

I had never thought about the way I had treated the guy from the bank as anything special, he was just another customer.

"Can I take this to the deli, Allie? I want to hang it up right in the front of the store, where everyone can see it. Especially Izzi and Miguel. They might be inspired to work harder."

"Sure, daddy." That was all she said. This was big for us, this communication between her and I. I wanted to keep talking, but had no idea how.

We sat at the table and Elena prayed for all of us, and for our nourishment, and especially that we would walk in the path of Jesus and do right by others. I ate the cod and rice and it felt like I was eating plain oatmeal. Elena cooks cod because there is always a special on it at the grocery. I hate it. I didn't bring it up right then because I was enjoying the silence. After dinner I helped Elena wash and put away the dishes, and while she gave Allie a bath I sat in the living room and stared out at the street.

Allie had left her drawing on the coffee table, and I picked it up. Very good for a 4-year-old, or maybe I was very untalented. All my drawings at that age and just about any age were with stick figures and scribbles. Allie's picture had filled in people, with clothes and hair and expressions. Also, a lot of color. The bright yellows of the cheese, the dark and light of meat, even bright green in the jar of pickles. What really struck me then, after dinner, when I was all alone, was the drawing of me. All this time I assumed she thought I was scary and mean, and that I didn't do anything at all. In the picture it was clear to me that there was pride. I looked so happy to be handing the person their bread, and I looked almost professional. Shit, how do you look professional when you work in a deli? I thought about the old man that day. Did I look like that when I handed him the bread and cheese? Did I do it begrudgingly? I thought about Allie, too. I didn't always treat her the way I wanted to. I thought maybe I should be more careful about the manner in which I do things. I wanted to be the man in the picture who made Allie proud.

After awhile Elena and I tucked Allie in, and I showered and changed for bed.

I crawled in beside Elena, hearing her soft breathing and wondering what she thought of the picture.

"Elena," I whispered.

But she didn't respond. She had disappeared into the world of dreams, where for all I knew she was a doctor with a rich husband and four kids and a dog named Mitch, not a husband named Mitch.

I realized in the darkness, lying next to her, breathing in the light scent of her, that she was who I wanted. I had always wanted her and loved her, even through our hardships. She was too good for me, but she seemed content with that.

The next morning at work I started out by making sure everything was
incredibly clean. Sal, the owner, would be in that day and I didn’t want to get in any trouble. Izzi and Miguel hated Sal, but I felt pretty indifferent to him. He gave me a job, which payed most of my rent, and in return I figured I could at least give him a clean store.

“Sal must be comin’ in,” Izzi said.

“Yeah, at 10, but don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, I have it under control,” I said.

“Fuck you,” he said, laughing.

“As long as we don’t give no bread to old bums today I think we’ll be fine,” said Miguel.

“Hey, shut up about it. What did it hurt to give a poor old man some food? You would rather waste it?”

“Naw, I just don’t know how you got the balls to give away Sal’s food.”

“What Sal doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

I continued to clean up, not really concerned about Izzi and Miguel’s code of ethics. Sal’s pocket was fat enough, and the old man was obviously not doing so well in the money making department. It wasn’t like I threw money at him.

Our first customer of the day came in, but it isn’t a customer, just Miguel’s girlfriend, Monica. They’d only been dating about 2 months and were still in the state of bliss.

“Hey baby, I got something for you. I brought you a tamale from up the street,” Monica said, touching Miguel’s arm softly.

They stood flirting at the counter and as I continued to clean I thought about Elena and I when we first started out. Seemed like we couldn’t get enough of each other.

I was getting ready to finish community college and hoped to get my degree in business. Elena was working at the grocery then, she thought as a temporary thing. When we found out she was pregnant we didn’t really freak out. It wasn’t that scary. We had no understanding of how hard the real world is. We told our families and we had a little ceremony at St. Marks, and we found our place on the south side, close to the grocery. I thought I would just wait a few years then go back to school. Living paycheck to paycheck proved that we needed both incomes, and I settled in to working at the deli.

Another customer walked in. It was Louie from down the street; he had a restaurant and ordered all his cheese from us.

“I’ll get your order for you Lou, just one second,” I said. I set the mop back in it’s bucket and walked to the back room. That’s when I noticed it. Under the door there was a folded piece of paper. At first I thought it was probably just a menu from a Chinese takeout place, but as I looked at it a little closer I saw that it had my name on it, scrawled in neat handwriting.

I quickly folded the note in half and stuffed it into my apron pocket. I carried out the heavy box of cheeses and meats for Louie, and set it on the counter. “It’s all set Lou, do you want me to put it on your tab?”
"Yeah, that's fine kid. See ya around."

He walked out and all I wanted to do was read the note. I went into the employee's bathroom and locked the door. Leaning against the wall, I reached into my apron, pulled out the note and unfolded it.

It was short but clear. The old man was thanking me for the food. He said he didn't want me to get in any trouble, and that he thought it was very nice of me to think of others like that. His name was Carl according to the signature at the bottom of the page.

I wondered if he would come back around. I wondered why he would leave me, a complete stranger, a note.

I heard Sal, so my little break was over. "How are you today Sal?"

"Fine, looks like you're keepin' the store running alright. Clean, real clean. Did Louie come in today?" he asked, sweat dripping from his bald head from walking to the store.

"Yeah, you just missed him."

"Good, I don't like talkin' to him. Always talks about his restaurant. Food so good. Such a nice place. Why don't you go in on it with me, he says to me. Because I got enough problems, I tell him."

"Well, all the bank slips are in the book, and I placed our order this morning," I told him, not sure how to talk about anything but business with my boss.

Sal did his inventory of the place, checking the stock and making sure everything was in order.

As he walked out the door I felt Allie's drawing, still folded neatly in my apron pocket. I had forgotten to put it up. I grabbed some tape from the counter, and folded two pieces, placed them on the back of the drawing, and hung it up right on the front refrigerator.

As I was smoothing it down the old man came in.

"I don't have anything for you today, not yet at least. If you come back around 6 I might have something," I said.

"No, no. I just wanted to make sure you got the note, I didn't want your boss to find it. I thought you might get in trouble."

"I found it. Thanks. It was no big deal. Come back anytime I'm here and I'll fix you up with whatever I can."

"Thank you young man. That's a real nice drawing there. Someone thinks highly of you," he said.

"Yeah, my daughter, she drew it for me."

"I remember those days. My son was quite the artist too, always drawing pictures of his mother and I. You hold on to those days, they go by quicker than you can imagine."

"Yeah, I'll do that. Really, come in anytime."

"Thanks. You have a nice night now," he said. He walked out, the bells on the door signaling his exit.

The store got busy around 5, and after the chaos died down I began to clean
and close up. I knew Sal would be back tomorrow. “We’re gonna go big shot,” Izzi said as he and Miguel neared the door. “Yeah, we don’t work overtime pretty boy,” Miguel said. They walked out. I sat at the front counter for a long time, just thinking about all the changes in my life over the last four years. I hated my job, but more had happened to me in those years than working in the deli. I was a husband. I was a father. I knew he was right, the old man. Time would pass by, and Allie would grow up. Did I want her to remember me as some jerk that screamed at her about her toys? Or did I want her to remember me as the man who put her pictures up at work, and tucked her in each night? On the walk home the air was fresh, a dampness lingering from spring rain. The pavement looked hard and cold, and when the streetlights came on their light was dim, casting shadows on the walls of rundown buildings.

When I opened the door to the apartment that night Allie and Elena had already eaten, and I heard the water running for Allie’s bath. Once again I thought of Allie’s drawing, and with the revelations of the day I saw it in a new light. In the picture I didn’t look like I’d settled. I looked like I was doing my best to move on. I looked like a man who was happy, not because of his job but because of something more than that. The me in the drawing had not given up. Allie wouldn’t give up on me no matter what I did. Elena had always stood by me.

“Daddy!” Allie ran out of the bathroom to greet me, her wet hair flying behind her. I hadn’t had this type of greeting from her in a long time. I hadn’t deserved it, and I still didn’t. I wanted to change that.

“Hey sweetie, how was your bath time?”

“It was good,” she said, hugging me.

After all the times I had been in a bad mood, or I had ignored her, she still loved me and accepted me as her dad. I realized this was what mattered.

“You’re late. I was worried.” Elena said.

“I just had some last minute stuff to take care of for Sal, that’s all. Sorry I worried you. Did I miss dinner?”

“Sorry, it’s more cod. I left you a plate in the oven.”

Hugging Allie, I looked up at Elena. “Sounds great Lena,” I said. I hadn’t called her this in months.