

I click Send on my laptop, sit back in my chair, and grimace.

“Well, that should give them something to think about,” I say to absolutely no one.

Rubbing my tired eyes, I wonder for the fiftieth time that day why I ever agreed to be a class mom again.

My first instinct had been the right one.

“Absofuckinglutely NOT,” I told Nina Grandish when she asked me. Nina is the reigning high priestess of the school’s PTA. In spite of that, she is my best friend. “It’s the worst job I’ve had since I worked customer service at Allstate.”

“Please!” she begged. “I really need you.”

“Nope. I don’t have time.”

“Yes, you do. Vivs and Laura have already gone back to school.”

“I’m starting my mud-run training.”

“That’s unlikely,” Nina scoffed.

“I’m thinking of getting a dog for Max and I’ll be busy with that.”

“No, you’re not. You hate dogs. Come on! Think of all the *experience* you bring to the job.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. “Thanks for reminding me how much older I am than all the other parents.”

“Not older,” Nina cooed, “*wiser.*”

And I am, by almost fifteen years. The nineties were a bit of a lost decade for me. After a blistering four years at the University of Kansas (Go, Jayhawks!) I found myself with a super-useful degree in art history and not a chance in hell of finding a job with it. So, I decided to hit the road and see a bit of the world. Some people go to Paris to look at great art; some go to Rome to look at great architecture. Me? I went to Amsterdam to see a great band. INXS was just starting to ride their wave of international success, thanks to the album *X*. Luckily for me, they weren’t *so* famous that they would only date supermodels. I got picked out of the audience thanks in part to the “no bra” phase I was going through, and lo and behold I ended up a groupie.

You know that Cameron Crowe movie *Almost Famous*, where the girls are called Band-Aids and they travel with the band and keep the musicians’, um, *morale* up? It was kind of like that but not nearly as glamorous. I was with INXS for a little over a year, then moved on to a folksinger named Greg Brown. Yeah, I had never heard of him either, but he could certainly draw a crowd, albeit an unwashed one. In those three years away, I somehow ended up with two kids, one of whom may or may not have been fathered by Michael Hutchence. Thanks to his untimely death in 1997, poor Vivs may never know. But Laura’s sperm donor was most definitely Greg Brown’s banjo player. I’m 65 percent sure.

To quote the poet Steve Perry of Journey, “They say that the road ain’t no place to start a family.” So I took my two kids from two different fathers and made my way home to Kansas City.

Actually, by that time my parents had fulfilled a lifelong dream and moved to Overland Park, which is a fancy suburb of KC. I was sad that I didn’t get a chance to say good-bye to our old house, but thrilled that I had such a nice place to bring Vivs and Laura home to.

Let's just say I had a bucket load of explaining to do to Kay and Ray Howard, my extremely Catholic parents, when I landed on their swank new doorstep with Laura and Vivs both still in diapers. My mother's face went from confused to horrified to delighted so quickly that I thought she was having a stroke.

Luckily, they are more the forgiving kind of religious people and less the judgmental kind. So after a few dozen Hail Marys and one excruciating afternoon at Our Lady of Unity doing the Stations of the Cross, I moved in with them and started what I now call the normal years. With their help, I raised the girls, worked for a while at Allstate, and, yes, was class mom seven endless years in a row. It's a record that I believe still stands at William Taft. I hope it's not what ends up as the most noteworthy thing in my obituary, but you never know.

It was while working at Allstate that I met the man who would become Baby Daddy #3 and Husband #1, Ron Dixon. By the way, I still have had only one husband. I just think it's funny to introduce him that way. Ron called to file a complaint with the people with whom he *thought* he was in good hands. As was my job, I took the call and tried to talk him out of canceling his policy. Ron has an amazing voice. Even when he's complaining, it sounds like he just swallowed liquid velvet. I could have listened to him all day. It was around the time he called me a soulless bitch that I decided I wanted to meet him. To this day, he thinks I took all my disgruntled phone callers to lunch.

What can I say? I had him at hello. I'm not unattractive, considering my age and the mileage I've put on my body, and Ron happened to be single, having just gone through a soul-sucking divorce. In fact, when he called the insurance company he was trying to put in a force majeure claim for a fallen tree that had clearly been hit by a car. I later found out that the tree was the victim of domestic abuse, having been plowed over by his ex.

As a member of the sisterhood, I take exception to men always calling women crazy, but in this case I can say unequivocally that Ron's ex-wife, Cindy, is nuts. Not fear-for-your-life nuts, just garden-variety nuts. The biggest problem is that you never know in what form the nuttiness is going to rear its ugly head. Like one day, a few months after Ron and I moved in together, six Costco-sized crates of diapers appeared on our doorstep with a card from Cindy saying, "Get the message?" I figured she was either calling us babies or suggesting that we have a baby. Ron said she was telling us we are full of shit.

Ron is a good fit for me. He's what my father would call a solid guy, both physically and emotionally. He's about five eleven (although he tells people he's six feet, for reasons that are not quite clear to me) and fit without looking bulked up, and he has short dark hair that is thinning at the temples. He's not what I had typically found attractive in the past—I mean, he doesn't even have a tattoo—but he has immense charisma and just about the kindest face on the planet. Combine that with the voice, and I was a goner the moment I saw him. Our courtship was short and sweet, because when it's right, it's right, and why screw around? And thanks to crazy Cindy's fear of vomit, they never had any children. So when he dropped the B bomb on me on our first anniversary I shouldn't have been surprised.

We were having dinner at Garozzo's, and over penne Victoria he casually mentioned that he would really like to have a baby. I stifled my first thought (*Well, good luck with those labor pains!*) and told him of course we would try. I pretty much counted on my aging womb to keep anything from happening, but wouldn't you know it? I had one good egg left. And thank goodness for that, because Max is the dessert of my parenting life.

So now at the ripe old age of forty-six, I have two girls in college and one boy starting kindergarten. And I'm the oldest mom in the grade. Oh sorry, the *wisest*.

* * *

"Max! Get down here. Your toast is getting cold."

I sit back down at my kitchen-counter office and slam out an email to my class parents that I hope they read before drop-off this morning.

To: Parents

From: JDixon

Date: 9/6

Subject: Questions answered

Dear Parents,

Wow. When I said, “Any questions?” at the end of my previous email, it was what is known as a rhetorical question, as in one that doesn’t need a response. Oh, well. Allow me to answer them in the order they were received.

- 1) No, I’m not kidding.*
- 2) Yes, I’m serious.*
- 3) No, beer making is not a craft.*
- 4) The date of curriculum night is on the original email—just look.*
- 5) No, you can’t be fired from a job you volunteered for.*

Thank you for the feedback.

Jennifer

Max rounds the corner to the kitchen wearing an outfit that bears no resemblance to the one I picked out for him.

“Wow. Love the red pants. Aren’t they part of a costume?”

“Yup. Pac-Man.”

“And the purple top?”

“Nana gave it to me, remember?”

“I do. Are you sure you want to wear them together on the first day of school?”

“Ya. I want to stand out.”

“Well, mission accomplished.” I quietly thank the heavens that he didn’t wear the matching Pac-Man hat.

Max smiles and takes a bite of his toast. Ever since he was old enough to pick out his own clothes, he has exhibited a, shall we say, *unique* taste in fashion. You never know what ensemble he is going to come up with. Sometimes I think he uses a blindfold and a dart to put his outfits together. I’d left him a pair of khakis and a white polo shirt on his bed in the hopes he would embrace his new school uniform, but I guess he didn’t.

Ron comes in from his run all sweaty. I love him this way.

“Hey!” I grab his butt. “I need you ready to go in ten minutes if you want in on the first-day-of-school fun.”

“I’m ready now.” He grins and dashes up the stairs.

“Mom, what’s my teacher’s name, again?”

“Miss Ward.”

“Is she nice?”

“I haven’t met her yet, but she seems nice from her email.”

“I hope she likes purple.”

“Who doesn’t?” I smile. “You know you have to start wearing the uniform tomorrow, right?”

He nods, his mouth full of toast.

“I’m going to pick you up at noon and we can go out for lunch anywhere you like.”

“Can Dad come?”

“I don’t think so. He needs to be at the Fitting Room.” I’m referring to the sporting goods store Ron owns.

Before I can even yell, “What the hell is taking you so long?,” my husband is showered and ready. It really must be nice to be a man. I’m not a very high-maintenance woman, but I do need more than six minutes to shower and look presentable.

“Who’s ready for kinderga—”

Ron stops mid-word as he takes in what Max is wearing.

“Is that what you’re wearing, Max?” he asks.

I give him a look across the kitchen table that says, “Don’t be an asshole about this.”

“Ya. I want to stand out.”

“I thought there was a dress code.” Ron looks at me.

“Not on the first day.” I shoot him another warning look. They usually work. I must be misfiring. “And it’s only a half day today, so let’s get going!”

2

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. Yup, all caps, bold and italicized. That’s how epic it is in my mind. Everyone is so clean and excited! Backpacks are fresh, sneakers are squeaky, and pencils are sharp. Take this same snapshot mid-November and it’s a whole different story.

We make our way down the well-worn hallways of Vivs’s and Laura’s old stomping ground, William H. Taft Elementary School. When we get to room 147, we find the prettiest and preppiest person I have ever seen standing at the classroom door greeting people. She has long blond hair, which is kept back by a pink headband. She is wearing light-pink-checked pants and a white blouse with ruffles. I hope she owns a smock.

As we approach, she hits us with a dazzling smile and holds out her hands.

“Is this Max? Oh, my goodness, Max, I have been so excited to meet you! Is that a new shirt? Purple is my favorite color!”

Well, color me impressed. Miss Ward is a real charmer. She has obviously studied the pictures we all sent in at the end of the summer. Max hasn't said a word, but wears the goofy smile of a man smitten. So does Ron when I look over at him.

"Hi, Miss Ward, so nice to meet you. I'm—"

"No, no!" Miss Ward interrupts me. "This is not about Max's parents. It's all about Max today. Come on in and find your name on your desk, sweetie." She ushers Max into the room and he eagerly follows without a backward glance.

Ron and I look at each other. I shrug.

"It's all about Max."

As we head out of the school, Ron asks what I'm up to.

"I'm going to meet my new trainer."

He looks at me skeptically.

"I know what you're thinking, but after that debacle at your store I feel like I need to step up my workouts."

"Or, just, you know, start them." He smiles and gives my shoulder a squeeze.

Here's the thing. Ron's sporting goods store is one of the biggest in KC. A few months ago, they hosted a mini mud run to promote our governor's "Get Fit" initiative. When he mentioned that he needed participants, I volunteered. That was my first mistake. I thought I was in shape, thanks to my twice-weekly visits to our neighborhood Curves, which I had joined shortly after Max was born. So when I got to Ron's store that day and saw the course setup I was, like, "No problemo." That was my second mistake.

Let's just say that the upper-body strength you get from hauling a toddler around for a few years doesn't exactly prep you to climb a rope or swing from monkey bars or even drop to your belly and crawl through mud, although that was the easiest part.

It was weeks before I could show my face down at the store again. I mean, it's not great when the wife of the owner breaks down and cries because she can't get over the wall. Plus I was sore for days in areas I didn't know existed.

"Who'd you get to train you?" Ron asks when I don't acknowledge his dig. I can tell he is annoyed that I hadn't consulted him on the decision.

"Someone my mother recommended. He comes to your home and works you out. I figured I'd finally start using Ron's Gym and Tan." That's my nickname for the home gym Ron has set up in our basement.

Ron gives a fake gasp. "You mean you're going to give up Curves?" He's never been a fan. Ron's kind of a gym snob.

"See you later." I give him a sly smile and head to my minivan. "Hot new trainer's awaiting."

Ron frowns. "Hot? You didn't say he was hot."

I laugh as I open my car door. I actually have no idea what he looks like. But with a name like Garth, I have high hopes.

* * *

My mom has actually told me very little about Garth, just that he used to be a trainer at the local Lucille Roberts gym. He had to stop for a while and is now getting back into it. He's very cheap for an in-home personal trainer—\$30 an hour. I just hope this isn't a case of "You get what you pay for."

I pull up to the house and see a white Prius parked in my driveway. My new trainer is ten minutes early. Me likey. As I get out of my car, he does the same, and I get my first look at the man I will be spending two hours a week with.

I wish I could tell you that everything turned to slow motion and "Dream Weaver" started playing in my head as he whipped his hair around and flashed me a dazzling smile, but that would be lying.

Garth is about 5'6" and mostly bald, and he looks like he's in his midfifties. He reminds me a bit of the actor Michael Chiklis from *The Shield*.

As I rearrange my expectations in my head, he walks over and guess what? He *does* have a dazzling smile! It makes me like him immediately.

"Hi, Jennifer, I'm Garth." He shakes my hand and nearly crushes it.

"Ow. Hi, Garth. That's a good grip you've got there."

"Oh, good gravy, I'm sorry," he says and lightens up his vise grip immediately. "I always forget to take it down a notch for the girls."

"No problem. Clearly I need to toughen up a bit."

"Well, that's what I'm here for." He smiles and follows me to the front door.

"Can I get you something to drink?" I ask while throwing my purse on the hall table.

"Nope. Thanks. I always bring my own." He proudly holds up a gallon jug full of water. Clearly Garth is old school, and fancy water bottles are not his style.

"Umm, why don't I show you our workout area and then I'll run up and change."

"Sounds good." Garth smiles again. "After you, my good woman."

As I lead him down to the basement, I wonder just how old school he is. Not for nothing, but I've been at Curves for five years. That's some pretty advanced stuff.

Ron's Gym and Tan is located in a corner of our basement, right next to the laundry room. It consists of a treadmill, a bench press, free weights, a mat, and one of those big exercise balls.

"This is fantastic!" Garth declares, and it only takes me a second to realize he is not kidding.

"Really?" I ask. "Do we need any other equipment?"

"No. This is perfect. Why don't you get changed, and I'll lay out a workout plan." He actually sounds excited.

"Okay. I'll be right back."

As I run up the stairs to my bedroom, I wonder what I've gotten myself into.

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