

A Boy

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The Niros were always flamboyant. They had a big house, four cars, an in-ground pool and basement arcade to boot. Yet they chose to have their home built in an average income suburban neighborhood. The husband, Bastian, was the president of a hospital in the neighboring city, just eight miles north. The wife Charlotte, a rather large woman in size compared to her husband, ran a home daycare on the weekends. During the weeknights she was often seen out at the local bars and clubs with ‘friends.’

It was no surprise that the Niros had money. The rest of the neighborhood, myself included, came up with the idea that Bastian’s family came from old money. That Charlotte seduced Bastian and was living off what he could provide for her. It was a baseless assumption really, but the entire neighborhood was full of gossips and the Niro’s were easiest to gossip about. Not that anyone was marked off the list. Everyone always had something to say about someone. But the Niros were typically the number one choice in terms of outrageous discussion.

None of us ever really saw them save for when Bastian left for work or we brought our kids over to their house for Charlotte to babysit. So, it was utterly shocking when I opened my mailbox on a Saturday afternoon to find an invitation neatly tucked into my monthly Time Magazine subscription. I ran back inside my house, nearly slipping on the damp grass from the previous evening's rain. The neighborhood Facebook group (which Bastian and Charlotte were left out of, for obvious reasons) was in uproar. The newest group discussion post read in big bold letters: **THE NIROS ARE HAVING A BABY?!**

The comments on the page were a mix of excitement or disbelief. Some had even posted pictures of their invitations. Everyone in the neighborhood was invited to the celebration. It was to be extravagant, as the invitation so opulently

exclaimed, to celebrate the awaited arrival of a new member of the Niro family.

“Impossible,” posted Brenda Bennet who lived just four houses down from me. She was tall and blonde, her skin forcefully darkened. Gregory Hicham Sr., the older man who brought my daughter treats when she was younger wrote: “What a sudden surprise.” While old Ingrid, as the neighborhood had named her, simply asked who was planning to attend the event and what we planned to bring. Not everyone commented and I didn’t blame them. I hated posting on that page but reading what was posted was an entirely different matter.

Gifts for the baby are not required but would be highly appreciated.

I was slightly offended by that sentence when I read the invitation, though I still found myself at Walmart the next morning looking for the most gender-neutral baby clothes I could possibly find. I decided instead on three pairs of animal themed socks, two sippy cups and a grey rattle toy. It was more than I had wanted to buy, but once I started, I couldn’t stop thinking about the faces that the Niros would make at the number of gifts I brought with me. Because they hadn’t asked for them. Not really.

I even bought a gift bag with red polka-dotted tissue paper. It remained stuffed away in the corner of my closet and when my daughter asked me what was in the bag, I dismissed her question and asked about her day at school instead. She rolled her eyes at me, catching my attempted subject change. That night we ate dinner at our small rounded table, talking about the party, discussing this supposed baby. I continued thinking about the Niros into the night, peaking out of my window and looking at the house nestled at the end of the cul-de-sac.

The clouds parted, the moon escaping through and illuminating the Niro’s home. I shivered in my robe and settled into the large expanse of my bed. I felt myself missing the feel of arms around me as I tucked my hands underneath my pillow and turned onto my side. I briefly wondered if Charlotte was trying to fall asleep as well, with

Bastian's warmth surrounding her. I felt my mind numbing as I fell asleep to the sounds of the night. The whistling of an owl, the rustling of the pine tree just outside my window.

It was to my great disappointment that when I arrived at the Niro's house on the day of the celebration there were dozens of gifts lined up on a foldable table. All with colored bags and even more colorful paper. There was hardly any room left on the table for mine. I gave the gift to Charlotte when she opened the door to let me and my daughter (who was annoyed that I had dragged her along) inside. I told Charlotte that we both had a hand in picking out the gift. She thanked us, her cheeks bunching up as she smiled.

We drank, laughed, congratulated, though the neighborhood mostly stuck together. The Niros were the ones who had to mingle. The children, young and old, had gone to swim in the pool or play one of the games in the basement. Screaming and laughing, high-pitched cries of utter joy could be heard. I saw Mr. Hicham blowing up party balloons and twisting them into fun little characters. An orange dog, a blue giraffe.

He squeezed the end of it a little too hard and the balloon popped. The child in front of him started to cry. My head throbbed at the sound. He tried to calm her down but she showed no signs of stopping. He eventually turned to the remaining group of kids, blowing up more balloons and twisting them together. More children were running throughout the house. One was thrown into the pool. Another one jumped off the diving board.

I almost didn't notice Charlotte approach me until she broke into my peripheral view. She was holding her hands over her belly, though because of her weight, I couldn't see the baby bump. She was watching Bastian as he spoke to a group of three women. The one in the middle, who happened to be Brenda Bennet, was smiling and laughing at each joke Bastian made. She had been the person to start the neighborhood Facebook group. Her oldest kid was a soccer player. Her youngest, a pianist.

"How far along are you?" I asked Charlotte.

Her blonde hair was neatly tied up in a bun, her cheeks were red from exertion. She huffed as she spoke.

“18 weeks.”

“Oh wow,” I marveled, taking a sip of the lemonade in my red solo cup. “How does Bastian feel about it?”

“He’s really excited actually, I told him just last week.”

“Last week? That’s a little long to keep a pregnancy secret don’t you think?”

Charlotte chuckled softly, “He’s always working and I’m busy too. I just never found the time, I guess.”

I nodded in understanding, thinking of my own failed relationship. I felt suddenly out of place next to her. There was still another 45 minutes before we were all to be herded into the yard like cattle. All just to pop the giant green balloon tied to a post to reveal the baby’s gender. It needed to happen sooner; I was ready to go. It was hot and miserable, not to mention awkward. I had no history with this woman. I could have stayed home.

“He’ll be a good dad I’m sure,” I said, mostly to break the silence, less because I thought it was true.

“You think so?”

“Of course, he gives off dad vibes.”

“Dad vibes?”

I nodded again, taking yet another sip. The lemonade was doing absolutely nothing to cool me down. The regret of going for the flavored drink instead of the cold water crossed my mind briefly.

“He just seems like the kind of guy who would be good with kids.”

Charlotte continued to watch Bastian. He was still talking with the same group of women; Brenda was laughing a little too hard. She leaned onto Bastian, looping her arm in his. Bastian in turn wrapped his arm around her waist, using his other hand to wipe tears from his eyes, though his chuckling did not cease.

“Bastian wants a boy,” Charlotte said. It was almost inaudible.

“Not a girl?”

“No. But it makes sense if you think about it. Boys aren’t walked all over like girls are. They can do anything they want to do, act any way they want to act.” She paused to take a breath, “If we ever have a son, Bastian said he’d teach him to play football, to drive a car. He’ll show him how to ask a girl to prom. How to cut his own hair and get a real job. Things like that.”

“Do you want a boy?”

Charlotte shrugged, “It doesn’t really matter what I want, the body is the decider this time around.”

I laughed at her comment, though Charlotte’s lack of response made me go quiet. Her previous words flooded my mind, bringing up memories. Broken glass, a bruised hand, my daughter’s tear-streaked face as she begged us to stop fighting. I rubbed my cheek where the long-faded bruises had once been. I could still smell the coppery taste of blood in my mouth, though it had been years since that time. There was a dull ache in my chest but it faded quickly, my focus floating back down from the clouds.

My mouth opened to formulate a response but Charlotte looked at me before I had a chance, a small smile cracking her serious expression.

“We should have cake before we do the reveal. Don’t you think?”

She was looking at me expectantly, so what else could I do but nod enthusiastically and follow her into the kitchen?

I trailed after her a bit reluctantly. My thoughts flickered to my daughter, wondering when she had left my side. Though the concern I felt for her was second compared to the spike of worry that shot through me as a child bounded in through the open screen door that led into the backyard. He was screaming, another kid was in hot pursuit, a water gun in hand.

“Not in the house ki—” Charlotte started, but before she could finish the child slammed into her stomach. I gripped the cup in my hand feeling it buckle beneath the pressure. Charlotte caught the child in her arms, stopping his pursuer in the process. She bent down rather quickly despite her

condition.

“No water guns in the house boys,” she said, dragging out the “y” in boys. They huffed, running around the corner. I saw one of the boys turn around and stick his tongue out at Charlotte before they disappeared, their laughter continued.

“Are you okay?” I asked almost immediately after.

“Of course, why would I not be?”

“Well it’s just, I thought...” I trailed off, looking down the empty hall where the two boys had gone. “Your baby—”

“Is perfectly fine,” she finished. As if to reinforce her point she rubbed her belly.

When we reached the kitchen, she called for Bastian who appeared in the doorway, a look of mild annoyance on his face which instantly dissipated when he saw me.

“Let’s serve cake,” she said, holding the knife firmly in her hands. He complained the entire way as he approached the counter then turned and regarded me with a blank stare, wrapping his arms around Charlotte’s middle. He kissed Charlotte’s cheek, rubbing the bulk of her stomach. He pressed into it and Charlotte flinched away.

“What are you doing?” she asked him, accusingly.

Bastian shrugged. “I’m trying to feel the baby.”

“Not right now, we have guests,” Charlotte said, her eyes flickering to me. I felt myself begin to sweat even though I was wearing a sleeveless shirt.

Bastian dismissed her comment and began to reach for her again but she pulled away and opened a cabinet, taking paper plates, forks and knives from within it. I turned away from the pair and took a large drink from my cup, unsure of why I had even come with Charlotte in the first place.

“Could you grab the napkins?” Charlotte asked. I only realized that Charlotte had been talking to me when I felt her hand on my shoulder. I nodded enthusiastically, a raspy “Of course,” spilling from my lips.

Then the couple called to the rest of the group, announcing the cutting of the cake. Children swarmed in, brushing past me. Other people from the neighborhood filtered into the large kitchen grabbing paper plates and

plastic forks. Some, though unnecessarily, took photos of the pair as they held the knife together and cut into the spongy dessert, Brenda being one of them. It was like a wedding all over again. Completely over the top, an event soon to be forgotten, tossed aside like most things in life.

There was more mingling and small talk. I meandered around looking at the photos plastered all around the front room. I saw Bastian and Charlotte in Venice, kissing on a gondola. The one next to it showed the two bundled up from head to toe in winter wear as they stood upon a large sheet of ice. Though why anyone would take a photo while ice skating was beyond me. There were many more pictures. All of them featured some expensive place or exotic island. I felt jealous of Charlotte. I wondered what life could have been like had my partner and I been more financially fortunate. If they hadn't run off, despite my best efforts to keep things together. I shook my head and turned away from the wall, heading out into the blistering summer heat.

I ate my rather small slice of cake and then found my daughter. She was sitting at the edge of the pool with her feet dipped in the water staring across the yard at one of the older boys. He was shirtless and his swim shorts were stuck against him, dripping with water. He was kicking around a battered ball with a girl his age. She laughed and screamed. Her braided pigtails flying as she ran around. Occasionally he would look over at my daughter, flashing a toothy grin. I wanted to stomp over to him and wipe that smile off his face. But I didn't.

Someone had moved the table of gifts so that it was placed right next to the giant green balloon. Bastian and Charlotte were there, sorting through gifts. People were gathered about, begging the couple to open their gifts first. There were collective ooh's and aah's as they revealed multiple articles of clothing, diapers, pacifiers, toys. There were quite a few repetitive gifts.

"It's alright," Charlotte had said, "We'll just give the duplicates to Goodwill."

Bastian had insisted that they keep them all, saying that

it was poor behavior to give away gifts, though I was sure he was specifically referring to the gift that was bought by Brenda who ended up purchasing the same pair of pajamas as old Ingrid who was housed just across the street from her.

Charlotte temporarily gave up persisting about donating the gifts and instead insisted that it was time for the reveal. My daughter was next to me now, looking down at her phone, completely uninterested. I was still holding my cup, habitually taking another sip only to find that there was no more lemonade left in it. There was chattering and the snap of cameras as the Niros both gripped the string tied to the green balloon. Someone had started a countdown from ten.

Nine

Eight

Seven

Six

Five

Their fingers tightened around the string; Bastian's face was pulled taught in concentration.

Four

Three

Everyone standing around the Niros began to raise their cameras in unison. I passed my empty cup to my daughter who took it absent-mindedly, still scrolling on her phone.

Two

I grabbed my phone from my pocket, opening my camera, my thumb hovering over the red button.

One

They pulled the string and the balloon popped, blue confetti spilling everywhere. It showered over the Niros, pooling at their feet. "It's a boy!" Bastian yelled, taking Charlotte in his arms, though he could not lift her. There was barely any room between them, her belly pushing flat against Bastian's as they embraced.

The crowd cheered, the muted snap of cameras ensued, the neighborhood broke into chatter, descending upon the Niros. Bastian was still hugging Charlotte and crying into her shoulder. I kept my distance and clicked into my gallery

to look at the photo. The angle was jagged and blurry. I cursed my shaky hands and moved to erase the photo but I was stopped dead in my tracks. The picture I took had been just a moment before the balloon had ripped open, small pockets of blue confetti peeking out.

In the picture, Bastian's eyes were focused up. A large smile stretched across his face. Charlotte was not looking at the balloon, instead she stared straight ahead. She wasn't smiling, her mouth downturned in the beginnings of a frown. I used my thumb and index finger to zoom in and get a better look. No one had caught her expression in the chaos of it all. Only the camera. In that picture, Charlotte's face was forever contorted in complete and utter misery. I pressed delete and the photo disappeared. Taking the only tangible evidence of that moment with it.