

## It's Not Fair

I felt out of place. Despite the effort I had put into curling my hair and donning my best skinny jeans, I felt different than the other moms. It had been so long since I spent an evening out with them. The wine tasted delicious and a bit unfamiliar as I sipped and the other women talked. I had been looking forward to this time to unwind, to try to feel normal. To connect with women from the neighborhood that I hadn't seen for some time. I talked with Connie a bit about our daughters' upcoming Girl Scout outing. Katharine joined us and asked how my mother was doing after her recent foot surgery. I appreciated their efforts to include me. We were interrupted by the waitress with plates of appetizers. Several women made comments about how this was going to blow their diet as they scooped nachos and spinach dip onto their plates. I did the same, not remembering the last time I had been at a restaurant.

But as Jess giggled over her toddler's mispronunciation of the word hamburger, and Marianna complained that her daughter was having trouble choosing between dance or soccer, a feeling materialized swiftly and without warning. It churned in my stomach and rose like bile in my throat. Three words bubbling up, swirling in my throat, begging to spew forth from my mouth. I swallowed them down. Never had three little words filled me with such guilt. I stood abruptly, nearly knocking my chair backwards. While my brain silently screamed "It's not fair!", my mouth mumbled an apology and I left.

I drove. I turned the radio up. I let the tears come, ruining the makeup I had so carefully applied in order to appear well-rested and put-together. I pictured the moms exchanging concerned looks and whispering about me for a few minutes before they returned to conversations about their next family vacation and which nail salon had the best deals.

I doubt Jess's morning started with pulling a red t-shirt out of the hamper and hoping it didn't smell too bad. I had forgotten to do the laundry the night before, and it was Tuesday. My son has to wear red on Tuesdays. And not just any red shirt, but one with the tags removed so the neck wouldn't be so scratchy.

And I'm guessing Marianna's daughter happily ate a bagel or a piece of toast, or a banana for breakfast. Not my kid. Breakfast was precisely 16 Frosted Mini Wheats turned right side up. Heaven forbid if we ran out and there were only 14 left - a meltdown of nuclear proportion would soon follow. Carter counted everything. EVERY. THING. The stairs, the floor tiles, the buttons on my shirt, the raisins in his snack, the number of strokes his toothbrush made across his teeth. Once he picked up a spaceship built out of Legos and started repeatedly saying "421 pieces...421 pieces".

And I know Katherine's son didn't get picked up on a short bus this morning and need to be strapped in. Today as his bus drove away, I waved goodbye to Carter, like I always do. He stared straight ahead and flapped his hands wildly. Some days I fantasize that he's actually waving back to me when he does that.

I worry about him all day long as I try to focus on work. I wonder if I remembered to send an extra outfit after his last accident. I wonder if anyone will play with him at

recess that day. I worry that his special ed teacher will have a sub who won't know about his food allergies. I worry that my phone will ring and the dean of students will explain that Carter hurt somebody. Or ran off school grounds. The Dean's voice always has an air of calm confidence and empathy, but I can't help but wonder if she tells her family at home about my "spoiled brat" who just needs "a good spanking" and some "boundaries".

The house was quiet when I returned. Mark was asleep in the recliner, the day's newspaper spread across his lap. He had only made it to page three before he succumbed to sleep. I kissed his forehead but didn't wake him. Sleep was a precious commodity around here, and I didn't want to steal a single moment of it from him. I walked up the stairs alone, and peeked in on Sara. She was such a brave and helpful big sister. My heart ached for the opportunities she missed over the years as her brother hijacked her parents' time, attention, and energy. I kissed her cheek and pulled the covers up around her. I tiptoed to Carter's room, thankful that he, too, was sleeping peacefully. I wondered if he actually speaks in his own dreams the way he does in mine. I don't kiss him, too afraid he will wake. But I do stand there another minute and sigh a full breath of remorse for betraying him just an hour before. Thankfully he has no way of knowing that for a moment I wished away his uniqueness. For a moment I was jealous of how easy the other mothers had it. It's not fair. Those three words never made it out of my mouth. But two others did. "I'm sorry," I whispered. I blew him a kiss and headed to bed.