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## A Love Deserved

🕒 February 11, 2024    👤 Lindsay N Marshall



Sebastian points to the letter T, alone in the center of the child-sized magnetic white board. T for Tyler. T for tired.

I sit criss-cross applesauce next to my four-year-old charge, who is excited and proud he's found the letter that's been missing from the set for days, and glance at the table a few feet away

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where my phone sits face up. The screen is still black. Tyler hasn't texted me back yet. It's been over 24 hours now.

Across the classroom, another child screams, throwing his tiny body onto the ground. A temper tantrum for who-even-knows-why. A smaller child bends over with a smile on his face, fists reaching to yank his hair. Two grown-ups run toward the scuffle, shouting their names, preparing to pull them apart. The screaming child keeps screaming. Whether he even noticed the hair-puller or not, I'm not sure.

Sebastian thrusts the letter A into my hand and guides it to where he wants it on the board. I always thought it was cute how he does that. He could put the letter on the board himself, but he wants me to do it for him. Exactly where he wants it. And if it's wrong, he takes it off and hands it to me to try again. Like he's the one teaching me.

It's cute, but we do this every day.

And today is different, because today I need to know if Tyler hates me or not.

We got in a fight yesterday. It's all I can think about. I almost feel bad looking away from Sebastian and his hard work on the ABCs to keep checking my phone, but I can't help myself. It's eating away at me.

I shouldn't have gotten so mad. He doesn't owe me anything. We're not together. But he knows how much I care about him. It's exhausting feeling like he's only using me when no one else is around. I'd rather be friends again, but now it's like we never were.

Sebastian makes a noise and tugs on my hand, giving me the letter B.

"I'm sorry, buddy," I tell him. And I am. He makes another small noise in response and pulls my hand up to the spot next to A. He points to each letter with a short chubby finger and I read them aloud to him. I know he knows them, but he never says them.

Love from  
Morgan  
Spurlock's OG Ex-  
Wife

The last text I sent Tyler yesterday was practically my heart on a platter.

"I know you don't love me the way I love you, and that's fine. I can accept that. But you know that I love you and you keep stringing me along anyway. You don't talk to Shelby or Candace or Liz the way you talk to me. So you're just taking advantage of my feelings for you."

I don't know how I expected him to respond. To say he's sorry, I guess. To tell me he didn't mean to string me along, and that we can be friends again like we used to be. Maybe even to tell me that I'm wrong and he does love me. Even though I would know that's a lie.

Instead he says nothing. Crickets. It's almost worse than the fight was. Like he really doesn't care and I'm only hurting myself by pretending that he does.

"PJ, get down!" the lead teacher Michelle yells. I look up in time to see PJ, wide smile on his face, leaping off a table across the room.

I feel a small hand on my cheek and turn to see Sebastian, his mouth open in a way I can only assume is sad, and my already broken heart cracks just a little bit more.

"I'm sorry, Sebby," I say, and he hands me the C. He points and I recite, "A. B. C."

I think about telling Tyler I'm sorry. I can take back everything I said in anger yesterday. As much as it hurts me to be just another girl on the backburner for him, I'd rather have him in my life than not. So maybe I should apologize.

"No the fuck you won't," flashes a message across my phone screen. Liz is a mutual friend who's watched my friendship with Tyler morph into something more and subsequently deteriorate over the past four years. It's almost embarrassing to think about how long this has been going on.

I'm inhaling a bag of potato chips in the teachers' lounge on my

lunch break, finally free to stare at my phone for as long as I'd like.

Another message pops up:

"You need to stop loving people who can't love you back. It's not fair to you."

I'm not sure if I can call Liz a mutual friend anymore or if she's solidly in the category of "my friend" now.

I type back a response:

"This whole thing is my fault though. I shouldn't have gotten mad."

I can just imagine Liz's face. Furious. She's told me for years I'm too good for Tyler, but she doesn't get it. I can't help how I feel.

Tyler used to be the person who'd pick me up from the airport, drive an hour out of his way to see me for ten minutes, and make me laugh when all I wanted to do was cry. He's not that person anymore, so isn't it my fault?

"I don't wanna fight you on this, but you're wrong."

I sigh and turn the bag of chips upside down over my mouth. I click back to that last conversation with Tyler. Still crickets.

When I get back to Room 3 after my lunch, Sebby's coloring with paint markers. He looks up when I open the door and runs toward me, grabbing my hand and leading me back to his table to show off his picture. He keeps all his colors separate, piles of red and blue and green that never touch. All his artwork on the wall looks the same. I wonder if I brought him a coloring book, if he'd color inside the lines.

Next to him is PJ, a dark blue smear across his lips.

"He was sniffing the paint marker," Michelle says.

"Of course he was."

Sebastian grabs my hand to force me to look at him. He points to a spot of color on his sheet of paper and I tell him, "Red." He

points to the next and I say, "Blue." A third spot, "Green."

"Here, let's try some more colors," I tell him and dig in the bin until I pull out an orange. He takes it, with no discernable expression on his face, but somehow I can tell he's happy.

By 1 pm, still no texts from Tyler, but I've changed four poopy diapers, as well as Sebastian's muddy pants from when he decided to sit in a puddle during recess. It was a battle getting all the mud off his hands and arms when we came back inside. He sat still enough for me in the child-sized kitchen while I scrubbed at him with a baby wipe, but it wasn't getting the job done, so I walked him over to the sink in the corner of the classroom. He gripped a fidget toy in one small fist, so I did what I could to wash the free hand I had access to.

The other grown-ups in the room are talking and laughing about the antics the kids got up to outside.

"Did you see Colton ripped his diaper off?"

"He was seriously trying to get naked. I had to wrestle his clothes back on him."

Sebastian looks at me and I smile. "I've got a good kid," I say, quiet enough so only he can hear. He reaches a small hand out to my cheek, so I know he understands.

At nap time, Sebastian climbs in my lap.

His para from last year told us that he doesn't like to be touched, but that hasn't seemed like the case with me. The first time he opened his arms to hug me, it felt like I'd won the lottery. The kid who's supposedly not affectionate is affectionate with me. It barely took a week before he felt comfortable enough with me to snuggle up at nap time.

None of our kids nap, except for maybe Colton, who falls asleep against the chest of whoever happens to be rocking him that day, but we turn the lights off and try to get the kids to at least relax.

My phone sits on top of the small bookshelf, directly in my line of sight. Just in case.

I think about showing up on Tyler's doorstep later, but he still lives in his childhood bedroom, and I'd really rather not deal with his mother today. She still treats him like a baby at nearly 30. Maybe that's why he thinks he can get away with treating anyone however he wants.

I wrap my arms around Sebby and bounce my knees up and down like I remember my mom doing to me when I was small.

"Ride a pony, ride a pony, ride a pony. Oops, pony fall down!"

Sebastian laughs like it's the funniest thing in the world. It makes me smile for a moment, then my phone screen lights up and my heart sinks.

*It's probably just Liz*, I think. But it isn't.

The name that flashes across my screen is one that used to give me butterflies, used to make my face light up whenever I saw it. But now it just fills me with dread, anxiety. I've been waiting for his response all day and now I don't want to open it.

Sebastian starts wiggling in my lap while I stare at my phone, unsure of what to do. He twists his body sideways and leans back so he's hanging upside down off my legs. I forget my phone for a moment as I scramble to get my arms around him so he doesn't crash headfirst into the floor. He hoists himself back up, laughing, before doing it again.

I get a handle on the wiggly worm with one arm and reach for my phone again. This time I open it, worried I won't get another chance until Sebastian's mom picks him up at the end of the day.

"I told you I don't want to be in a relationship with you. Why do you keep trying to force it?"

The text reminds me exactly why I was so mad yesterday. The gaslighting. The words in my mouth. I squeeze Sebastian a little tighter and say quietly so only he can hear, "Sebby, you might need a new para soon when I go to prison for murder."

He laughs, but even if he knows what that means, I know he

won't repeat it. He's the perfect person to tell my secrets to. His laugh is infectious and soon I'm laughing with him. Then he throws himself backward over my legs once more.

It takes longer than it should to type out my response as I only have one free hand, the other trying to ensure my poor child doesn't get concussed during nap time.

"On what planet is asking you to stop face-timing me at 3 am for 'inspiration to help you sleep' the same as forcing you into a relationship?"

There's no hesitation in his reply this time:

"I thought that's what you wanted."

I almost wish I could just call him and hash it out, but there's no use. This isn't the first time we've had this fight. Or the second. Probably not even the third.

Sebastian sits up in my lap again to find me staring at my phone, smoke coming out of my ears. He whines and writhes, trying to pry my fingers away from the phone.

I can deal with Tyler later. Right now Sebby gets my full attention.

It's a weird conversation to be having while I'm at school, monitoring four-year-olds. It almost feels wrong, reminding Tyler that the real reason I'm mad isn't because he doesn't love me, won't date me, but because I've been downgraded in his mind from best friend to set of tits. A cam girl free of charge. His own personal live action spank bank.

Yet every time I ask to hang out, he says no. Sometimes he doesn't have time, sometimes just plain no, no excuse. Sometimes he doesn't respond to those requests at all.

But like clockwork, there he is on Facetime at 3 am. The only time he remembers I exist.

We've done this song and dance so many times. I'm so tired of it.

I have good reason to be mad. I've let him gaslight me for so long that I've started gaslighting myself too.

Sebastian is always the last to get picked up at dismissal. It's not so much that his mom is always late, but rather that all the other parents and grown-ups are always early.

Every day without fail, I get Colton and PJ situated on the bus—an actual short bus, which I was surprised to find is not merely a joke that mean kids make—then trudge back to Room 3 to find Sebastian running in circles around the classroom. I texted Liz an update on the Tyler saga on my walk back into the building, and all she had to say was:

“You have a lot of love to give. Just try to give it to someone who deserves it.”

I know Tyler doesn't. Logically, I know that.

But some pitiful part of me still thinks I'm the unlovable one.

I never responded to his last text. I guess I wanted Liz to give me some great insight on what to say, but she just keeps telling me what I already know. Maybe it's time to do something about it.

I block Tyler's number before I can think better of it. I block him on every form of social media. The only way to get over him is to pretend he doesn't exist, the way he does to me during daylight hours. Erase him from my life for good. Put those years of friendship in the past. Realize that what was friendship to me was the long game for him, but not a long game that ended in commitment. Just a happy ever after with his own hand.

“Sebby,” I say upon entering the classroom and finding him busy at his favorite activity this time of day, running in circles. “Let's go read a book, okay?”

As I suggest the book, he slows down. He takes my hand and walks with me to the carpet where he picks up a tattered copy of Pete the Cat. I sit down criss-cross applesauce and he plops down ungracefully next to me.

Michelle sits nearby, writing a note to Sebastian's parents about his day. The rest of the paras are gone, done for the day when their kids head home. So I'm always the last here too.



“What did he eat for lunch?” Michelle asks me.

Sebastian turns the pages of the book, looking for the first page but flipping past it.

“A cheese stick and three Oreo cookies.”

“Is that all?”

He finds the page and points a chubby finger at the words.

“Well I tried to give him rice and beans, but he didn’t want it. He knocked the spoon out of my hand.”

“Did he at least eat three entire Oreos?”

“Of course not. Just the white part.”

Sebby starts whining and reaching for my hand. He points at the page over and over until I finally look down and start reading. I have this book memorized with how many times he wants me to read it. He turns the pages at the right time, so I have to wonder if he knows how to read or if he just memorized the book too.

When I get to the song Pete the Cat sings, Sebby squeals and flaps his hands.

“You like the song?” I ask him. I know he does, we read this book every day. I sang it ten times in a row once, and he got upset when I told him I wanted to take a break.

He doesn’t answer my question—he never does—just continues squealing and flapping before turning the page and pointing again.

“You’re really good with him,” Michelle says, watching us. “He loves you.”

I want to comment ‘yeah, of course he does, he’s my little buddy,’ but Liz’s last text sneaks its way through my brain again. I’ve got a lot of love to give. Give it to someone who deserves it.

Of course it’s a different sort of love, and in a few years Sebby will forget I exist too, but for now, he’s the only one who deserves

it.

He flips back to the first page and rests his head in my lap. I start the book over again.

Photo by [Resat Kuleli](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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### Written by Lindsay N Marshall

Lindsay N Marshall is a student pursuing her MFA in Fiction at Arcadia University. She helps care for children with special needs by day, and writes about women who fight back by night. Currently querying her first novel, she's previously written pop culture features and personal essays for newspapers and online magazines. When not writing, she's often found rewatching Supernatural or crowdsurfing at a punk show.

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