

CONFESSIONS OF A CHILD CARE WORKER

Part I

The Anonymous Child Care Worker

It's December 26th, and you are at a holiday party looking over the canapes and wondering how many you can put in your pocket and how they might hold up for breakfast in the morning.

Someone who may or may not be the estranged husband of someone you think you once knew, comes across the room, takes hold of the hand you were about to use to scoop up a half dozen mushrooms stuffed with a kind of cheese you can't quite identify by sight or smell, takes the hand between two sweaty palms, looks deeply and sincerely into your eyes, breathes 100 proof Scotch into your face, and says in tones heard mostly in church during the funeral of someone very important who has died in a particularly tragic way, "Bless you. You do such wonderful work. I could never do what you do."

Suddenly, little bombs explode behind your eyes and the entire room turns the same bright red that signals a nuclear explosion in a Saturday morning cartoon. You have just come off a double shift on Christmas, which turned into a triple when one of the overnight staff didn't show - claiming a dead grandmother and a croup three-year-old; and you know it's not all-true but that doesn't help. Then, when you called your supervisor in the morning to explain what had happened, you were screamed at because it's against the *labor laws* to work in a row and were reminded that you get holiday pay for only one eight hour shift.

You now remember that the very person who is talking to you, a lawyer with a thriving home decoration business on the side, led the fight to keep a program like the one where you work out of their neighborhood for fear the children would run amuck, looting and pillaging, and leading innocent tikes astray. You recall that this very person bragged about lobbying against the state budget which would have given you a 3% raise on a salary which is now just slightly lower than the hourly wage offered your 11th grade sister to work at *The Gap* in the mall.

You figure that if you stay in the field, with increases like that, and a promotion or two, you will be able to move out of the apartment over your parent's garage without a roommate just short of retirement. Maybe, with the 3%, though, you might be able to stop inquiring greedily after the health of your Great Aunt Matilda because you've been told that you're in her will for her old Chevy Chevette which has 75,000 fewer miles on it than the car you're currently driving that you're pretty sure will fail its next inspection.

You'd like to be in a committed relationship but have fallen in love with another child care worker at your job and you know that one of you would have to leave and take a real job to support the others staying where they are and both of you would have to leave if you wanted to add children - and, besides, you aren't supposed to have relationships at work. You would like to go back to school but your agency doesn't have a tuition reimbursement plan and your schedule constantly changes so you would have a hard time figuring a way you could possibly schedule your classes.

In the past twenty-four hours, you have been kicked, bitten, spit at, and called names that would have sent Aunt Matilda hurtling toward her last reward and made that Chevette yours in an instant. You have filled out log notes, progress notes, incident reports, med sheets, meal counts, and various other mandatory documentation which you have signed with your full name, job title, and degree.

On your answering machine, was the annual seasonal message from your college roommate who is making \$65,000 a year giving advice to people about how to take their piles of money and turn them into obscene piles of money without actually making anything or coming into contact with another human being. The call has come from Cancun where your former roommate was spending the holidays. You listened to this message twenty minutes after learning that there would be no holiday bonus and, as a substitute, you have received a greeting card with your name misspelled, a mug with the company logo, and a notice that your CPR certification has expired.

You have also served hot chocolate and cinnamon rolls to a bunch of kids whose previous Christmases have consisted of cold sandwiches, no tree, abuse from parents who celebrated with a bottle or a needle, and you have had to comfort these parents who have despaired because they know they have failed to provide the bounty the kids saw again and again on television. You have watched them squeal with surprise and amazement as they opened the exact presents they had whispered to Santa at the mall. You have put together racetracks, assembled robots, played a nearly endless game of Monopoly, and watched the Grinch's heart expand 17 times. You have been sledding in the park, skating on the pond, and spent the afternoon at the movies watching huge insects behave like humans. You have saved the turkey from exploding, carved it almost as well as your mother, and made stuffing from your father's recipe.

You sat cross-legged on the floor and comforted a child who sobbed from the ache of not being with the family and who pined for the cold sandwiches, treeless living, and the smell of cheap alcohol because that was their Christmas and their family. They wanted their moms - even the moms they never met. You have talked about life and hope and caring and demonstrated it all by choosing to be there. As you greeted a child at the door, back from a visit that went well and carrying a sweet potato pie that nana made for everyone back at the program, you heard the whispered dreams and wishes of children who can still make many of them come true. You have laughed until you doubled over, fought back tears, applied *Big Bird* band aids to wounds which can't be seen, and you realize that you have successfully postponed growing up for one more year.

You remove your hand from the moist death grip; you return the steady gaze; you suppress the lecture bubbling up into your throat; and say, "I do it because I love" (as you think, "No, no, you couldn't.")

And then, you empty the large plate of mushrooms into a large napkin and triumphantly mutter, "Breakfast!"

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