The Watermark

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My wife Penelope and I are sitting uncomfortably apart from one another on a hard wooden bench outside of our social worker’s office. Neither of us has said a word since the secretary led us here twenty minutes before. The clock hanging from the wall across from us painfully reminds us how long we’ve been waiting. The monotonous ticking has since driven me mad with anticipation but seems to cause little to no effect on her.

I look at Penelope out of the corner of my eye; I don’t think she has moved in minutes. Deep in thought, she must be considering her next actions very carefully. I want to reach out to her, to feel her skin, and to maybe reassure her this time will mean something.

As if sensing my gaze, Penelope turns her head slightly catching my eye.

I smile.

She opens her mouth. She says nothing, but I know she is dying to speak. A second time she opens her mouth and curtly reminds, “Vincent, I want you to understand,” she begins, her voice low but confident. “If this time doesn’t work—if we are denied—I don’t think I can go on. I think this will have to be it.”

She turns away, and the lightest puff of air escapes her nose. I don’t move. I know what she means and I’m not entirely surprised. I continue to look at her, thinking over her word choice.

And still we wait.

This has taken much longer than I had anticipated. Most couples only have to wait nine months to see their child’s face. How long had it been for us? Two years? Three? I can’t really recall when we started trying.

But, that’s not to say there was a particular point in our relationship where we had decided to start our family. Looking back, I always knew I wanted children. And Penelope for sure wants kids. That’s one of the greatest things about her. She is a mother.

I think she told me that fairly soon after I asked her out. Less than a month or two afterward, she had said, “If there is anything I want more than anything in the world, it’s to be a mother. I don’t care who with—I just want kids.” I smile whenever I think of this, but it has become something different.

I’ve always known she felt this way, and it is absurd to think she’d change. But, maybe just this once she can put the thought of children aside for me.

I remain ever hopeful, but I can’t help but feel guilty for the wait I’ve put her through. We had been trying for months before we decided to get tested. I remember the doctor’s visit. It had come as quite a shock to both of us.

Infertility.

But Penelope was fine. It was me. I had failed her as a husband, not giving her the one thing she really wanted. But even through three separate artificial insemination failures she began to wane on her emotions. I was losing my wife.

It was then that I offered the idea of adoption, but she immediately shot it down. Carrying her own child is the whole idea of being a mother. To her, I think, being a parent only comes from having biological offspring. That doesn’t sit well with me; children can come from anywhere. It had taken months to finally convince her of adoption, but I am still uncertain if this will really be acceptable for her.

Penelope had been very on edge for the last few months leading up to this meeting. She hadn’t even softened when I had given her the gift a few months ago. I had thought it spontaneous and romantic. It wasn’t even her birthday or Valentine’s Day, and I had given her a gift just because. It was stationery. Personalized stationery with a watermark I designed myself. It had a string of lilacs, her favorite flower, surrounding her initials.

Penelope didn’t see it the way I had.

She had bitterly grimaced at the papers. She had overtly remarked on how practical the gift was. That ream of stationery sat untouched for a month.

I look back at my beautiful wife. I know if I wait she will turn to me.

I follow my instincts. She needs me, so I reach out for her hand.

It’s there mere moments before the office door opens. Penelope rises immediately to her feet. If she had felt my touch, she doesn’t react to it. Instead, she eagerly walks through the open door the worker, Ms. Caldera, offers. Penelope has changed within moments. She smiles and greets the worker with a casual, gracious tone.

I follow with a vague smile, staring after her.
We exchange appropriate, but short regards and small talk. The introduction goes smoothly with the social worker discussing our case as usual. Everything seems just as it has every other meeting. Ms. Caldera asks the regular questions. Penelope smiles and laughs along with her with what seems like a forced rate, and I must play along. Taking it all in.

It isn’t far into the meeting that our social worker turns to a folder in front of us all. A folder of collected letters of recommendations, she says. Penelope smiles to see this.

“All of our friends seemed more than willing to write great recommendations,” she assures Caldera, and possibly herself, I think to myself.

“Well, that’s what I wanted to talk about to you this afternoon,” Ms. Caldera holds the folder in her hands and thumbs through the letters.

She looks up at both of us and frowns.

The worker goes on to explain the latest letter she had received less than a week ago. From one of our close friends, the letter describes the environment of our household as being toxic, especially for a child. Unlivable, dangerous, and hazardous are just a few words that stick out to me as she reads through the letter. Each syllable pierces me.

“The relationship between the two prospective parents is unhealthy; it can only result in a damaging childhood and adolescence.”

I can only shake my head. I need answers. Who can write things like this about us? Things that are untrue.

I demand to know who wrote the false account of our home. I struggle to keep my voice steady.

Shaking her head, Caldera apologizes. Information like this is expected to remain confidential.

Penelope remains silent throughout all this, staring straight ahead she furrows her brow and barely parts her lips. I turn on her. Pleading. Looking for an answer. However, she in turn gives me one last glance and shakes her head.

Laying the folder down, hands pressing the letter to the desk, Caldera returns to the matter at hand. She explains that the letter will not be taken lightly, but it will also not bar us completely from the program. However, chances will now be a fraction of what is thought to be impossible.

Caldera poses one last question: will we want to continue through the program risking the letter’s effect?

I look to my wife for the answer. She seems to refuse now to meet my gaze beyond all measure.

I have been denied everything. I forfeit.

Looking to the worker for support, I finally look down at the folder before them. Focusing my eyes upon the small stack of letters—the slandered one on top—I accept.

“No,” I say. “We’re done here.”

Caldera nods. The papers in her hands are pocketed back into the folder, even the one with the lily watermark and the initials.

**Seth “The Dragon” Bacon** is a senior in English education with a performing arts minor. He has lived in Iowa his whole life but doesn’t like corn. He is a Taurus and prefers to sleep on his left side. The quickest way to his heart is through a ham sandwich. That’s all!