



*What Happens When
My Wife's Ex-Boyfriend,
Back From Iraq,
Pays Us a Visit*

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Just when I thought things were getting better, my wife, Anya, talks me into allowing her ex-boyfriend to come by the house for a visit. He wants to say hi, she says; he's curious about the baby and things, she says.

I don't want to put her in a bad mood. The pregnancy was hard; she has, or had, post-partum depression and is on mood pills. She seems to think this is important. The guy is a disabled veteran. He lost both legs in Iraq.

He was in a truck that drove over one of those roadside bombs. IEDs they call them -- Improvised Explosive Devices. You hear about them on the news all the time. When the news of her ex-boyfriend got to her ears, Anya said she wanted to get married and have a baby. So that's what we did.

The soldier's name is Pete. He comes by the house the next evening. He drives a specially made minivan that he operates completely with his hands, levers for the accelerator and brake.

At least he still has his arms and hands and fingers, Anya says.

We watch him from the window. He crawls into the back of the van, the side door opens, a ramp comes down, and there he is, in a motorized wheelchair. I know the government didn't pay for all that neat stuff, his grandparents did.

Anya opens the door.

Pete, she says.

Anya, he says.

It is awkward. She reaches down to hug him. He kisses her on the cheek. He tries to kiss her on the lips but all she offers is a cheek. I don't mind.

Hello, I say.

Hello, he says.

We shake hands.

Oh, come in, Anya says, come in.

Thank you, he says, the wheel of his chair almost running over my toe as he passes by me. I don't mind. I don't think much of it, to tell the truth.

So where is the baby? Pete asks my wife. Where is this little bundle of joy?

Asleep, I say.

Nap time, Anya says. Babies nap a lot.

Can I look at him?

Um, he's upstairs, Anya says.

Pete nods. He taps one of the wheels of his chair. Can't quite walk upstairs, now, that's the ugly truth, eh, he says.

You look good, she says.

For a crippled guy? he goes. Thanks.

I mean, she says.

I know what you mean, he says. You look even better. Marriage and motherhood agree with you. Always knew it would. A boy, he says distantly, a son -- how lucky you are, how lucky you are.

I ask, Can we offer you something to drink?

Water, soda, orange juice, Anya says.

Beer?

We have beer.

A cold beer would be nice, he says.

She looks at me. I nod.

Three beers, coming right up! she says.

A few minutes later the three of us are sitting in the living room, drinking beers and talking.

So, he says.

So, I say.

So here we are, Anya says.

Here we are, Pete says. Did you ever think ... I mean, here we are, you're married, you're a mom, and I'm a

man without any legs.

Pete, she says.

Think about it, he says.

It's not something I want to think about, she says.

So, I say, to change the subject, that's quite a vehicle you have out there, Pete.

He gives me this look. You know the look. He finishes his beer. Yes it is, he says; yes, it's pretty nice, I'm lucky to have it.

I get up to get us more beer. I listen to them, my wife and her ex-boyfriend. They are not talking. I return with three beers. There is tension in the air. They are looking at each other. Now, I do mind this. The man is in my home and he seems intent on causing trouble.

Thanks, he says when I hand him a new beer.

I've barely had any of this, Anya says about her beer.

I'll take it, Pete says. He quickly sucks down the beer I gave him. Anya and I just watch. She looks at me. Her eyes say don't, don't cause any waves, let's just get

through this. I wonder if she regrets inviting him over. He's done with his beer. She hands him her second bottle.

I'll savor this one, he says.

You always could put them drinks back, she says.

And I can handle my booze, he says, saying to me: Don't you worry, none, guy, I can *handle* my beer.

He can, Anya says.

You used to, Pete says to her, I remember right. *You* used to put back the beers too.

Wine coolers were my thing, she says, smiling, remembering.

You used to match me one-for-one, he says, nodding, remembering.

Those were the days, she says.

The days, he says, looking where he used to have legs.

Those days are long ago, she says; I don't drink like that anymore. I can't. I'm older. We're all older.

Wasn't *that* long ago, he says.

Long enough, she says.

Not long enough, he says.

I know they are talking in code, about something else.

Upstairs, the baby cries.

He's awake, Anya says.

Those pipes! Pete says. Maybe he will be an opera singer.

Nah, rock band, Anya says. She stands up and goes to the stairs, goes up and tends to the baby.

Pete and I sit there.

So, he says.

I don't know what to say to him, so I say: It must have been very hot in Iraq.

Hot, yeah, hot, he says, and a lot of other things, it was a lot of other things, things you can't imagine, things people like you have no idea about.

People like me, I say.

Citizens, he says, safe and comfortable in your civilian homes. Safe and free because of what we do. We ...

He doesn't get to rant. Anya returns with our son, holding him close.

Well looky here! Pete says.

I do not want him to hold my child. If he asks, I will protest; if he suggests it, I will deny it; if Anya starts to hand the baby to him, I will say no.

She sits down.

He's hungry, she says.

You can go ahead and breast-feed him, Pete says. Hey, I'm kidding.

Funny, she says.

I'm kidding, he says. Can I see him...

She leans forward.

He has your eyes, he says.

I think so, she says.

And your nose, he says to me.

Excuse me, Anya says, standing up and going to the kitchen. I am grateful that she will breast-feed the baby in there.

You're a lucky man, Pete says to me.

Thanks, I say.

No, really, he says: you don't know how goddamn lucky you are.

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He stays for dinner and gets drunk. We order pizza and he eats pizza and drinks more beer and asks if we have anything hard to drink. I lie and say no but Anya says, I think we have some tequila. I give her a look. Pete says tequila would be good. Anya gets the bottle. We all have a shot of tequila.

That's *enough* for me, Anya says; one shot is one shot too many for me.

She coughs.

Awww, Pete says, drunk, I remember the days you could put half a bottle away and still drive home -- drive me home.

Those are days long gone, I say.

Drive home together, Pete mumbles.

He exaggerates, Anya says to me, I never drank like that.

I know this but still, I am wondering.

I can drive! he suddenly shouts.

Ssshhhh, the baby, Anya says.

Tell the little sucker to wake up and party! he yells.

Okay, look, I say.

I CAN DRIVE! he screams. I'LL SHOW YOU!

He tries to get up, out of his chair, thinking he has legs. He falls right down on his face. There is a *crack* sound when he hits the floor.

Oh, Jesus, Pete, Anya says.

Oh, he says, oh god.

My wife says to me: Don't just stand there, help him!

I don't want to touch him; I don't want to be near him; I want him the hell out of my home and away from my family.

Help him, she says.

I help Pete back into his chair.

I'm okay, he says.

You're not, Anya says.

I better go, he says.

No, Anya says. You can sleep here on the couch; sleep it off.

I look at her.

I gotta go, he says, weeping now.

You're too drunk to drive, she says.

I look at her.

He's too drunk to drive, she says to me; he can sleep on the couch.

I know I can't argue with her.

Okay, I can sleep it off a bit, he says, and then I'll go, I won't bug you anymore. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry ...

Anya gets some blankets and a pillow.

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I'm not a happy camper. I let her know this when we go upstairs to our bedroom.

So what are we supposed to do, she says, let him drive, she says.

Why not, I say.

He could get in an accident, she says.

I want to say so what.

We could be liable, she says.

No we wouldn't, I go.

We would feel guilty, she says.

No, I go.

I would, she says.

I don't like him here, I say.

I know, she says.

I don't want him here, I go. I don't feel safe, I say.

What is he going to do, she says. He can't walk. He can't do anything. He's a sad...sad sorry version of the man he used to be, she says.

The man you used to love, I say.

She looks away.

Love, I go.

I don't know what it was, she says; that was a long

time ago.

Different days, I say.

Yes, she says.

I don't like this, I say.

He'll sleep it off, she says, and then he'll go and that'll be that, she says.

* * *

I can't sleep. Who knows what could happen. I tend to the baby when the baby wakes up and cries. I let Anya sleep, except when she has to feed our baby. Maybe I did sleep. Who knows what happens in those strange hours. But I don't sleep much.

* * *

In the morning, I can hear the TV downstairs and it is loud, too loud -- music, the channel is set to MTV or VH1 and the guitars and drums are loud, the male

voices screech and remind me of being a teenager and playing my music loud in my bedroom and I didn't care what my parents, siblings, or neighbors thought.

Anya gets the baby and we go downstairs. Pete has the remote. He is still on the couch, propped up, and he has turned on the TV.

Morning! he says.

Pete, what the, Anya says.

Turn that down, I say.

He just looks at me.

Please turn that TV down, I say; turn it off, please, I go.

He hits the mute button. I sure am hungry, he says. Scrambled eggs and bacon would be nice, he says. I bet Anya here is still a hell of a cook, he says. It's a skill you never forgot, like sucking a dick, he says, with a sneer, you're always good at it.

Anya turns around, holding the baby close. She is upset and I am too.

That's it, I say, Pete, let's get you in your chair and

get you out of here.

Don't touch me, he goes when I move to help him; don't you dare touch me, you bastard, he cries.

Fine, I say, you're an independent man; do it yourself.

I push the wheelchair near him. He shoves it away.

I'm not going anywhere, he goes; I'm staying right here and you're going to take care of me, he says to Anya.

You're crazy, she says. Pete, you're...

Crazy, he says. I always was.

You're *not* staying here, I say.

Yes I am, he says.

No, I go, you're not.

Not much you can do, he says; go ahead and beat me up, toss me out, throw me in the gutter. I'm a war hero. The police won't like it. The newspapers and TV news people won't like it. People won't like it. You'll be looked at as—as—as—a monster, treating a war vet, a crippled war vet, like that -- I mean, I lost life and limb

to protect your right to freedom; because of me, you creep, you now have this nice home with your beautiful wife and wonderful child. *Because of me*. Because if I never joined the army, I would be married to Anya right now and that baby would be mine. She said if I joined, she wouldn't wait for me, she would dump me. Tell him, Anya, tell him this is true.

I know the story, I say.

You don't know jack, he goes.

I just said that to make it easy, Pete, says my wife. I was going to break up with you anyway. I knew you would join the army no matter what, because of 9/11; so I told you that to make it easier for everyone concerned.

I don't believe you, he says, thinking about that.

It's true, she says.

Liar, he says.

No, she says.

She's a liar, you know, he says to me.

I am close to exploding. He sees this.

You want to hit me, he goes; you want to hurt me.

You're pissing us both off, Anya says.

The baby cries.

You're upsetting my child, she says, you're disrupting my home.

Home home home, he goes; *this* should be *my* home.

Get out, I say.

No, he says. Go ahead and hit me, throw me out, he says.

Anya looks at me, shakes her head.

This should be my home, my wife, my baby, he goes; this should be my couch, my TV, and so this is where I'm going to stay. I'm camping out and you'll have to kill me if you want me gone, he says. Go ahead, he says. Kill me, he goes. I'm dead anyway, he says.

He turns the mute button off and the loud rock music blasts out of the TV speakers. The baby cries. Anya runs up the stairs.

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I'll call the police, I say when we're upstairs and putting the baby back in the crib.

No, she says.

He's nuts, I say.

He's hurt, he's upset, he's in pain, she says.

Don't care, I say.

I don't want any drama, she says.

This is already drama, I go.

I don't want it to be any worse, she says; the police will make it worse. Just play along. He'll give up and eventually go.

You mean just leave him there, I say.

He'll get hungry, she says; he'll have to go to the bathroom. He'll go, she says.

* * *

He doesn't. He plays the TV loud and he calls out for

Anya. He says he is hungry; he wants her to make him lunch, dinner. He says he wants beer. He screams. He cries.

I'll get him some food, Anya says.

I grab her arm.

Don't you dare feed him, I tell her.

He's *hungry*, she says.

I realize she still has residual feelings ...

So what, I say.

We're like prisoners up here, she says.

It was your idea, I go. Let me call the cops, I go.

She groans. He'll leave soon, she says.

* * *

For three days, we are indeed like prisoners upstairs. We sneak down, sneak out, when we are certain he is asleep. We come home, he yells at us --

I NEED FOOD! I NEED BEER! I NEED TO TAKE A SHIT!

* * *

I'm at the local bar and having a few beers with my friend, Ed.

You won't believe what has happened to my life, I say to Ed.

I give him a rundown of the events. His eyes get wider as I tell him more.

You're pulling my leg, says Ed.

I wish I was making this up, I say.

That's just weird, he goes.

It's something, I go.

It's scary, he goes.

It sucks, I go.

And you're here, he goes. Here with me.

I needed to have a drink in peace, I say.

Your wife, your kid, he says.

At her mother's, I tell him; I packed them up this morning and got them out of there.

Good, good, he says.

We drink more beer. We're getting sort of drunk.

The guy may never leave, says Ed.

I thought about that, I go.

He's like a grunt dug in his foxhole, says Ed; he's there, ready for war. He wants war, you know.

He wants his life back, I say; but he's not going to get the old days.

What will you, he starts to say.

Don't know, I go.

You need a gun, he says.

Wish I had one, I reply.

I have a gun, he says, a revolver.

Really.

Do you, he starts to say.

I have fired guns at the range, with my stepfather, I say.

I live three blocks from here, says Ed.

I know.

We can take a walk, he goes. I can let you borrow, he goes.

* * *

There are two things that give me courage when I go home -- the alcohol running through my blood and the Smith and Wesson .38 silver snub-nose in my hand. I know he is still there. His van is still parked in front of the house. The TV is on in the living room. He's there, in the dark, his half-body illuminated by the TV and the images of spaceships shooting laser beams at each other in outer space. There is a box of pizza and an empty twelve-pack of beer on the floor by him.

Hey, he says; there you are. I got to the phone and ordered delivery. I was getting really hungry there. Some pizza left if you want a slice.

I sit down in the chair across from the couch.

No thanks, I say.

He asks where Anya and the baby are. I don't tell him. I ask him what he's watching. Not sure, he says; but there are a lot of actors in make-up that are supposed to be aliens of some sort.

The gun is warm in my hand.

I have no idea what you must think of me but it mustn't be good, he says. Now that I have some food in me I can think straight. I feel just horrible. I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. If you can give me a hand, get me into my chair, I'll be going now.

He sees the gun, I'm sure of it.

Or maybe he doesn't.

I want to kill him right then and there. Instead, I help him into the wheelchair.

You don't know how lucky you are, he says.

I think I do, I say.

I'm very sorry, he says.

I know, I say.

Well, tell Anya I said that -- that I'm sorry, and tell her I hope everything is okay, and maybe we can talk later, some day, some day down the line.

Some day, I say.

Finish the pizza, he goes, it's good.

And then he's gone. He makes his way to his vehicle;

takes him a few minutes to get his chair and body in. I watch him from the window, holding the pistol, ready for anything. He gets behind the wheel and drives away.

I sit down. I eat a slice of pizza. It's cold but tastes great. I have a beer. I watch some TV. I would have killed him, I know this; I was ready to commit murder. That scares the hell out of me and makes my skin feel itchy. I take a shower. Violence is a funny thing, a weird part of life. I call Anya at her mother's house and tell her she can come back home now.

