

Cher père

It's the middle of Winter when Alf comes to visit.

He's all bundled up in his nice black parka, rainbow beanie and knitted gloves. His smile is blinding, and it feels like I'm being run over by a train when he lunges towards at me and hugs me awkwardly and painfully.

"Hi, how've you been?" Mum asks cheerfully, but stiffly, as she walks up the cold driveway. She hugs me too, albeit more softly and briskly.

I look down to my feet and hide the cigarette I had been smoking as I was waiting behind my back. "Good." I reply. "Up for a new job at that office I was talking about? Might start next week."

Alf blinks at me, smile crooked. He bounces up and down on the spot slightly.

Mum gives me a little smile, but it fades quickly. She can tell, by just looking at me, that I have no chance of getting that job. I'm wearing a pair of jeans that haven't been washed in about a year, and a ratty sweatshirt. My hair isn't washed.

"That's lovely!" she says anyway.

I grimace. "Yeah. It's great."

A moment passes where we just stare at something other than each other, then Alf breaks the silence by slipping over in the hardened ice and falling flat on his butt.

"Right, I better go, I have to," Mum motions towards her car. "Go do that thing..."

I smile. "Oh, right. Okay. Nice seeing you. Have fun."

We hug again and then mum's out of here in seconds, not even looking back at us once.

I help Alf up and he takes my hand like his life depends on it – it sort of does, though, unfortunately – as we walk into my little apartment. He keeps walking closer to me, but I don't have the heart to move away, so when we've reached the door, he's sticking to me like some superglue.

The cigarette goes straight back into my mouth as soon as we get in.

It's not too hard, living as a single and unemployed twenty-seven year old, leeching money off my mum and her newlywed rich husband. They've just returned from Dubai or somewhere similarly exotic for their honeymoon. Somewhere I can only access through Google images and the sidebar ads on lookforjobs.com.

And the rich husband, as a token of his love for mum, graciously transfers a suitable amount of money into my bank account every month. He thinks children from old marriages are like pets – feed them often and let them be. To this I have no objections, because the money pays for not only my living costs, but also supports my resilient smoking and drinking habits.

Now they're off on a business trip so it's up to me to look after Alf for a week; Vick didn't even answer when I called her up at three in the morning last night to hand over the babysitting job.

I mean, Alf's screwed up in the head after his car accident, so he needs attentive care, which I can sort of provide. Vick's always out of the house, like the workaholic she is, so she doesn't really fit the bill.

"Toilet," Alf suddenly says loudly.

I almost burn myself with my cigarette.

I flap my hand over to where the bathroom is, and Alf takes off in a run. He slams his face into the door, shakes his head, then enters after struggling with the door for a few minutes.

Looking after Alf is... Not difficult. It just makes me extremely depressed.

He's not always been like this – before the car accident, he used to be outgoing, charming and clever. Then one night, he and mum went to the cinemas to watch *Life of Pi*, and on the way back, some random cab-over truck ran into their car and smashed half of it into an incoming SUV, which just about completely decimated the small Beetle. Mum, obviously, got out alive almost unscathed – a true miracle, the doctors said. But the Alf we knew sort of... disappeared. He was physically capable after a few weeks, but his head, his damn head. Apparently he had hit it extremely hard against the dashboard, and he went into a coma for a few days. When he woke up, he'd changed.

So Alf's still here, but his mind isn't. His brain's almost dead, reduced to the capacity of a four year old.

The bathroom door opens and Alf stutters out, adjusting his pants uncomfortably. I help him, and it takes around half an hour to make him undress, put his boxers on properly, then put his pants back on again. During the process, I drink up the rest of my old bottle of cheap lager that I find in the fridge, and finish another one.

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Later on, we go out to the mall to get some groceries. I figure that if I can make him something that he likes, he'll make life a tad bit easier, make it easier for me to deal with him. Fish fingers. Cheeseburgers. Generic children food. Because Alf can't deal

with normal food; he either eats it and throws up, or just chucks it at the wall or the ground.

As we pass the sidewalk and into the warm shopping centre, Alf stops and stares at a girl, his eyes twitching. His mouth opens into a large O. She's pretty, he's saying.

For the first time today, I smile a little. "She's like, sixteen, man. You don't need that in your life." I drag him away, and he finally takes his eyes off the girl and gives me a huge smile.

"Fun." He announces.

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" I reply half-heartedly as I look for the Walmart sign.

Most of the vegetables are still expensive like last week, but the bacon flavoured Cheetos and DIY taco kits are on sale, so I take three of each and put them into the cart.

Alf picks up a carton of strawberry milk from somewhere and gingerly places it into the cart, and I wait for him as he shuffles everything else around so the milk is nestled comfortably and safely between my six-pack beer cans and frozen chicken nuggets.

When we get home, I cook dinner – the aforementioned nuggets and fries – and Alf eats it happily, throwing half-eaten pieces of chicken at my face and grinning all the while.

After doing the dishes and forcing Alf to take a shower, I call and talk on the phone with Cathy for a bit; we flirt and make plans for Friday, and at the end she says something like 'I'm really looking forward to it', which I half ignore because her voice drops uncomfortably low when she says it, and frankly, the aspect of what she's

planning is slightly frightening. It's not that I'm not interested. The overenthusiasm just puts me off.

"Here," Alf's voice suddenly breaks the silence, and I look up to see him standing in the doorway in his pyjamas, holding out a book gingerly. "I *brang* it."

"What?"

He just walks up and deposits the book in my lap. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. My chest tightens on its own accord, and I swallow. Alf always used to read this before. Used to call it the best work of literature, gave it to me when I was younger to read.

Jesus Christ, I can never escape thinking about what happened. It's screwed up.

But I smile and pick up the tattered book anyway. "Want me to read it to you? Can't believe you remembered it. You lose it all the time."

So we head to the spare bedroom, hands held. Alf climbs into the bed and I shove him lightly over to make space for myself, and we both get underneath the covers, me in my dirty socks and all.

I read for about half an hour, checking my phone every so often for texts from mum or Vick, which never appear. When I finish the second page of *The Red-Headed League*, Alf lets out a little grunt, shifting around. He's sleeping lightly, face mashed up against the pillow.

The lamp light casts a soft shadow onto his face, and I can see the dusting of freckles on his face, and his long eyelashes. I stand up and carefully remove myself from his embrace.

Alf murmurs something as I turn to leave. "Good night. Good good night."

I turn my and look at the curled up form on the bed. I bite my lip.

“Night.” I say quietly. I flick the lights off and close the door quietly.

Somehow, just seeing him makes it difficult. I wonder how long it’ll take for me to accept that it’s okay to be scared, that... tragedies like this happen to other people too.

I sit down and let my head fall back against the wall. Slowly, my eyes fall shut. “Good night, dad.”