

JEREMY COLANGELO
UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

“SWEETIE, PLEASE, YOU like carrot sticks.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes you do—you ate them at Grandma’s house. You even asked for seconds.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, I say you did, and now I just want you to eat some more.”

“No.”

“Just eat five.”

“No, Mommy.”

“Three, and then I’ll let you go play.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Marie took the carrot sticks and carefully put them in her mouth. When she finished, she called over her mother, Eliza, who suddenly found the ceiling fan very interesting.

“There, Mommy.”

“What?”

“Three.”

“Oh, well, I don’t know. I didn’t see you eat them. It looks more like one. Eat two more.”

“I did too eat them.”

“Marie, please don’t lie to me.”

“Mommy—”

“Marie, stop that right now. I said eat three and you ate one; you have to keep up your end of our deal. You made a commitment. Now be a big girl and keep your side of the bargain.”

“But you—”

“You know there are children in Haiti who would love to eat your carrot sticks. They go all day without food and they don’t have mommies like me to take good care of them. Just think about that when you say you want me to waste good food.”

“Do they really have to go hungry all day?”

“Yes, sometimes more than one. And they’re all just like you, only they aren’t as lucky as you were to be born here. Now do you still want me to throw those carrot sticks away?”

Marie said no, and ate each one while her mother watched. But children are devious. When she finished, Marie looked up at Eliza with horrified eyes.

“What is it, Sweetie?”

“Now I ate all the carrots. We should have given some to the kids.”

“I—”

“Can we do something to help them, Mommy? I want them to have some carrots too.”

“Well, dear, you already ate them all.”

“So?”

“We can’t do everything for them, dear. We just need to remember them when we think about throwing food away.”

“But can we do anything to help?”

“Uh—yes, I put some money in a donation box the other day. That ought to be enough.”

An hour later, Eliza and Dan successfully avoided their neighbour’s eyes as they buckled Marie in her car-seat. For their own sakes, they remembered to bring along the portable TV to keep their precious little girl from bothering them on the three-hour ride. They were exactly twenty-two minutes late. As the car left the subdivision, passing through the iron gate, Dan’s memory sparked.

“Eliza, did I forget to lock the door?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes Dan, you left it unlocked, and I didn’t tell you because I am, on good authority, a ‘mirthless cunt’.” Eliza did not look up from her book.

“Eliza, the kid—”

“Is wearing headphones.”

“But I thought we talked about—”

“You just ran the light.”

He had indeed, and when the sirens pulled him over, and Dan saw his reflection in the officer’s shades, Eliza just stared out the windshield at the cars all slowing down as they went by.

“Did you see the light sir?”

“No I didn’t, officer.”

“Why weren’t you paying attention?”

“Well, I was.”

“So did you see the light?”

“Well, yes, but I was also talking to my wife here and, uh, yeah, I was just talking and the light changed, uh, so quickly, but then, you see, I, uh, we weren’t really trying to hurt anyone because—”

“Your licence is expired, sir.”

“I—I know.”

“So you were knowingly driving with an expired license.”

“No. No, I didn’t know, and I didn’t see the light, and I—”

“Ma’am.”

Eliza pushed Dan back in his seat. “Yes, officer.”

“Is your licence up to date?” The officer handed her the ticket.

“Yes it is.”

“And are you able to drive today?”

“But it’s my car.” Dan barely heard himself.

“I’m all right, officer,” Eliza said.

“Fine, then.” Dan and Eliza changed places and they waited for the squad car to leave. Dan made sure the TV volume was up.

“What *was* that?”

“We both own this car, Dan.”

“You just watched me make a damn fool of myself in front of the police.”

“We paid for this jointly, Dan,” said Eliza in a tone of steel wool.

“And you just smiled at that cop like you were friends or—”

“I drive this car every day—”

“Or lovers or—”

“I drive it for an hour every morning before you even wake up—”

“Or like you both knew the punch-line to a joke and—”

“And you just sit all day and play on your computer—”

“And that is my job, Eliza.”

“And I go out and do all the damn work—”

“Sure you get to go out and talk to crazy people—”

“I make more money in an hour than you do in a day.”

It was right about then that they began to get unreasonable. Eliza pulled onto the highway, and was immediately stuck in traffic. After informing Dan of all of the ways that he could go fuck himself, Eliza consoled the crying Marie

(who had paid closer attention to her parents than they thought) and said that everything was all right and that no, Mommy and Daddy were not having an argument. She then called for an extended moment of silence in honour of her final nerve, which was now very close to expiring.

About an hour later, Marie emitted a loud wailing sound—the sort of noise her parents hated more than any other, because it immediately put them at her bidding. Dan, his hair matted with sweat from the broken A/C, turned off her television and asked her what was wrong.

“My tooth hurts,” said Marie.

“Where does it hurt?”

“What hurts?” said Eliza.

“My tooth,” said Marie.

“Which tooth?” said Dan.

“The back one.”

“Which back one?”

“This one here.” She pointed somewhere on her cheek.

“Marie, could you open your mouth and let me see?”

“It hurts, Daddy.”

“Stop hurting her, Dan,” said Eliza.

“I didn’t even touch her yet,” said Dan. “Marie, can you be more specific?”

“I feel it behind my eyes.”

“Are you sure it’s not just a headache?”

“No.”

“Then let me see.” He reached back and grabbed her chin. Marie began to cry again. Luckily, the moaning kept her tongue from getting in the way. Eliza, hearing the ruckus, turned to see, but Dan insisted that everything was fine, that he knew what he was doing, and that since Eliza had wanted to drive so much, she should just pay attention to the road and let him take care of the child. Eliza, tired of fighting, decided to let that one go.

“You look fine,” said Dan to Marie.

“It hurts.”

“Maybe you’re just tired.”

“It hurts.”

“I think you’re fine.”

“No, Daddy.” She pressed her palms against her temples.

“Marie—”

“Help me, Daddy.”

“Marie, stop that—”

“Why does my tooth hurt, Daddy?”

“Marie, stop.” He held her hands down. “Look at me.” She did. “And stop crying.” She did. “Now listen, I don’t see anything. We brushed your teeth before we left and I saw you floss out all the bits of food. I don’t know what’s going on, but you do not have a toothache.”

“But I do—Mommy—”

“Marie,” Eliza said. “If Daddy looked and didn’t see anything, then there isn’t anything there. Please settle down.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And I don’t want you making a fuss about this tonight,” said Dan, “you understand? You have to be a good girl, okay? Can you be a good girl for Daddy?”

“Yes.”

“Then no more of this. You do not have a toothache.”

“All right.”

“Good girl. I’ll put the movie back on.”

Dan turned on the television. Marie did not watch it though. Instead she took off her headphones and wrapped her arms around her face, rocking back and forth and trying not to moan. Dan fiddled with his cell phone until the battery died. He had left the charger at home.

An hour later—when the pressure had gone down and the boredom had made talking more attractive—they drove past an old man standing outside his car, which had broken down and was now parked on the shoulder. Eliza slowed down just a little bit to get a better look.

“Did you see that guy Dan?” said Eliza, pointing.

“Hm?” Dan twisted around to see.

“With the shirt and the beard, like a hippy or something.”

“Oh really?”

“I mean, honestly, who dresses like that? People should know better.”

“Better than what?”

“Better than to go out like that in public. Now I have to look at it.”

“Right, right, because if you want to look like that in private—”

“Then that’s fine, because no one has to see, but in public—”

“People might get the wrong idea and think you’re some kind of—”

“Right, right.” Eliza nodded and tapped the steering wheel.

“And that would be bad.”

“Of course.”

“Because even if I was, hypothetically—”

“Right, like that.”

“It wouldn’t be right to just go out and make a declaration.” Dan threw up his hands.

“That would be silly.”

“So you can be all like—”

“Like—”

“That in private if you want, but you have to dress up when you go out for other people’s sake, at the very least. ‘There’s a time and a place.’”

“Exactly. It’s not like I go out wearing my wedding dress or you go out wearing a tuxedo.”

“Who would do that?”

“It’s like when you go out on a first date and you dress up all nice and go out somewhere fancy just to make things feel special.”

“We don’t do that in real life.”

“No, that would be silly. But you do it then because that’s just what’s expected of you.”

“It’s common courtesy.”

“And then the other person knows that you’re probably not like that in real life—”

“Right.”

“And so when you go to a wedding, and everyone dresses up, and you have the priest and the tuxedo and the wedding dress, and everyone sits all quiet while you all promise to love each other unconditionally forever and ever.”

“Right, all that stuff.”

“Well, we all have to do that. And we all know that there’s going to be fights and bickering, but for now let’s just pretend that everything is fine so we can go about our business and get things done because, really, we are all stuck here together and no one thinks this is the best way to do things anyhow. So if someone makes a fuss then we’ll all have to bring it up again—and no one wants that—and then there will be an argument and I really just don’t want to deal with this right now so if we could all just keep calm and go along with things and then everything would be nice and quiet and, really, why can’t we all just have a nice time like we used to?” Eliza’s breath began to pick up. Dan recoiled.

“Are you all right?” He said.

“Yes.”

“But are you—”

“Yes, it’s fine. It’s just that guy really bugged me. I don’t want to have an argument.”

“Because you know you can tell me anything.”

“Dan, I don’t want to get into this.” She pulled her shoulders in.

“All right, I just—”

“Just stop, okay? I just don’t want to have this discussion.”

After the loving couple stepped out of their minivan, and pulled their docile and obedient charge out of her seat, they walked (holding hands) up the concrete steps and on to the front porch where they waited—politely—for the door to open. Inside, scattered on the cushy chairs and couches, was their extended family—chatting about this and that. Dan put his car keys on an end table, and with Eliza and Marie stood courteously, leaning on the banister and edging their way into the conversation. They stood patiently until the uncle with the big ears (was it Uncle Kevin, or Uncle Mike?) stood up from the sofa to use the bathroom. By the uncle’s return, Dan and Eliza had already usurped his empty spot with Marie on their laps. The uncle, seeing this, only nodded and sat on the floor—keeping an eye on one of his brothers-in-law, who had just finished his fourth beer on a notoriously small bladder.

“So, how old are you now?” It was Aunt Clarissa, with whom Dan and Eliza shared the couch.

“Six,” said Marie holding up six finders, “but going on seven—so I guess I’m more like six-and-a-half.” She lifted another half way. Eliza and Dan laughed, and Marie lowered her hands. Her tooth was still bothering her, and she tried to get down for a glass of ice water, but Eliza held her in place.

You are going to socialise—Eliza would have said if she’d needed to—I don’t want you to embarrass me.

“That is very big for a little girl like you,” said Aunt Clarissa, “and you’ve gotten so tall. Have you been eating all your vegetables?”

“We try to get her to, but she—” but Dan suddenly realised that no one was listening to him.

“I do, I guess, but I don’t think I should,” said Marie.

“And why not?”

“Well, Mommy said that some poor people in a bad place need the food,

too. Shouldn't I give my carrots to them?"

"I, oh—"

"Marie," said Eliza, "you stop that right now."

"But, Mommy—"

"We are having a good time here. You are being impolite." She turned to Aunt Clarissa. "I'm sorry about her."

"Oh, I know. She was so nice last time." Aunt Clarissa decided not to notice Eliza letting Marie get away. The two women started talking—but later on neither could remember what they had said. When a voice called from the kitchen asking if anyone would have a drink, they both answered yes.

Meanwhile, Marie had gotten her glass of water—which tasted like the bit of carrot hidden underneath her gum—and had gone under the kitchen table to escape the adults. There wasn't anything for her to do, no other children, no toys, no pets. Why did her parents bring her here? Outside it was still sunny, and the front door was open. Obviously someone would notice her if she tried to go outside; of course someone would worry if she disappeared. Her parents did notice she was gone once the food was all laid out and the kids' table stayed empty, but by then Marie had already gone two blocks and had forgotten to remember the way back.

Of course they found her—once they knew she was gone and had spread out across the neighbourhood, it did not take much time at all. It had been Eliza, driving the familiar van, who had brought her home. Ever afraid of strangers, Marie had avoided the other cars and ran away when she heard people call her name. Dan had wanted to take the car, but he couldn't drive without a licence. He had walked three kilometres in the wrong direction before Aunt Clarissa remembered to call him back.

So that was it for the dinner. None of the other family members talked to Marie after that, and Eliza would not let go of her hand. What had the poor girl been thinking? You simply didn't do that to people—running off out of boredom, not saying where you were. They asked her what she'd been thinking, and she said she didn't know. They said she *had* to know, she *had* to remember. What kind of kid was this?

Marie, Eliza, and Dan were the first to leave that night. They left early because of the long drive—they said—and not for any other reason at all. But the night had been hard on them. Ten minutes away from the house, Eliza stopped the car and stepped outside to think and get some air. Dan rubbed his forehead and asked Marie to please not talk for a while.

A family of four drove by just about then, bored and tired and desperate to get home. They saw Eliza outside—her hair frizzy with sweat and stress, and her breath coming out white with cold. (“Or is that a cigarette? And with a *child* in the car!”) People like that shouldn’t have children—they all agreed—people like that, so irresponsible. Can’t you at least try to look presentable? What kind of example is that? What kind of mother goes around stopping her car on a busy highway to smoke? And with her hair all frizzed up like some kind of hippy.

“Don’t ever let me catch you looking like *that*,” said the mother to her daughter. “It just isn’t proper.”

The daughter nodded, and said that she would not.

“Good girl,” the mother said.