

Ode to Alex

There's a place in my heart that you hold,
It's a space so large—that you've been told
Time after time, day after day,
I care for you in a special way.
The moment I saw you when you were born,
A love light around you, and now that's been torn.
I'm convinced you're so special,
I'm sure that I'm right,
It goes on forever, this continuous light.
My son, my son, I love you so much;
The wish that I feel and cannot yet touch—
A chance to be with you, day after day,
Just a moment, a glance to see when you play.
The years are running out; I'm so afraid!
So often I've prayed, "Oh, God, please help me!"
I've done so much, not in vain,
To endure this horrible pain.
The most wonderful thing in my life has been you;
There's so much more for us to do.
Do what I must in this never-ending strain,
The torture, the torment, and the endless pain.
I lay awake nights thinking how it was and could be;
It's useless now and we'll never see.
A kiss and a hug, it's the end of the night;
You are my joy and my forever delight.

Katherine

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***Chi nasce tondo non muore quadrato.
Who is born round doesn't die square.***

The day was gorgeous, a California classic of brilliant sunshine and startlingly blue skies, with the scent of the ocean in the gentle breeze. The summer was fixing to be a hot one and of the endless variety from my standpoint. A few brief moments more, a couple tight hugs and hurried endearments, and the focus of my life would be removed for six interminable weeks.

I sat in the midst of a crowd of other parents, most of them beaming, pointing, snapping photos of the little scholars all lined up in the courtyard of Meadow Brook Elementary School. It was June 10, 1992. Alex had turned six the week before, and he'd been gearing up for the ceremony. The children's excitement was palpable, manifested in nervous grins and sporadic chattering, and although not quite understanding all that was going on, they were happy to be at the center of such attention and excitement. They reveled in their self-importance, parading past in their homemade paper hats, and shuffling forward one slow step at a time to receive a diploma that would usher them into the next phase of their education—from kindergarten to first grade. Immensely proud, I waved to Alex, giving my best fake happy face so I wouldn't ruin the moment for him. Through the smiles I could feel the tears wanting to come. *Later*, I told myself, choking them back. *Plenty of time for that tonight.*

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It was embarrassing—borderline outrageous, really—that his dad hadn't the interest to even show up for the ceremony. Massimo had dropped off Alex at school and left without so much as a word of greeting to me or praise for his son. For all the fanciful talk about the importance of "family," which I'd heard ad infinitum during my three years in Sicily, I'd found that Massimo ably modeled the opposite. I wondered if it even crossed his mind that he'd be missed at a gathering like this and that his absence would raise uncomfortable questions that I'd have to answer, when every other child there was represented by both doting parents. He had played his part so convincingly in the courtroom a week earlier that, with a smile, the judge ruled in his favor.

Massimo had been all humility then. Love for his son was written all over him. It was utterly disturbing, really, because I knew him for what he was. Three years of a tormenting marriage had convinced me of his true nature, and only leaving him and Sicily for the United States had been the saving of my sanity. But for those outside his immediate circle of relationships, his masterful charade offered up a character at once to be pitied and admired. He was misunderstood, after all, and now he was a foreigner in a strange country, having come all the way from his distant homeland to prove his father's love. Yes, he'd made his mistakes but that was all in the past, and now he was eager to make up for time misspent. All he wanted to do was make sure Alex had the opportunity to re-connect with his Italian heritage and spend some time with the grandparents he might never see again. The judge wholeheartedly agreed. It would be a shame to let such devotion be for naught.

Although outraged, I couldn't fault the judge personally. Massimo's performance was flawless. He'd had a lifetime to perfect it, and a courtroom was simply another stage to make it work.

And so this perfect, misunderstood father didn't even show enough respect for his son to stay a half-hour and tell him "Good job!"

What hypocrisy, I thought to myself.

On top of that, when Alex had been dropped off, he looked like he'd been up half the night. His eyes were puffy and ringed

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underneath, and his thick dark hair, which I always took special care of, was in shoddy disarray. I was concerned and a little angry. I didn't hide it well from Alex.

“What did you do last night?”

“I don't know. We watched TV, and Papa made me macaroni and cheese.”

I smiled. “You're kidding.”

“No, really. It was great.”

He said the last part with a child's flair for the dramatic. Alex loved mac and cheese, and Massimo hated the idea of it. He thought it a corruption of Italian cuisine. That Alex had talked him into making the meal for him was quite an accomplishment, and one I secretly enjoyed. The knowledge helped lighten my mood a bit.

During the ceremony, a young Christian woman approached me. She was the wife of a long-time friend, a mother with two of her own little ones standing in the graduation line. We chatted briefly, and when I told her Alex was going with his dad back to Sicily for part of the summer, she grew suddenly very serious. In a quiet voice she asked, “Katie, aren't you concerned about Alex being taken so far away?”

The question took me by surprise. Well, of course I was concerned; inwardly I was frantic. Alex and I had never before been separated, and the thought of him being taken some 6,000 miles by a man who detested me was almost more than I could bear. She had no idea how much self-control it took to keep from falling apart right in front of her. I was sick about the situation. Added to this was the creeping suspicion I'd had all along that something was not quite right. Fear had been nagging at me



Alex on graduation day

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since the judge had rendered his decision. I dismissed the growing anxiety as the product of my own mind, but still . . .

And then this kindly woman voices the same things I'd been feeling. What is it about mothers when their babies are threatened secretly? So much of the time, they know. Although unable to pin it down in exact terms, the heart instinct tells them when a setup is in progress. But I didn't want to entertain her fears as well as my own. To preserve my sanity I couldn't consider the implications.

I hunched my shoulders in a gesture of helplessness and looked away. "Sure I'm concerned, but what can I do? The judge said it was okay for Alex to go with his dad. How can I fight that . . .?"

We talked a bit more. Then as the ceremony ended, I reluctantly led Alex to the car for the trip back home. The time had come. His suitcase was already packed, and all that was left to do was grab it then go pick up Massimo who was staying at the house of an Italian acquaintance. And on the drive back to the house, with Alex sitting happily on the seat beside me, I kept hearing those words echo in an endless refrain: "Aren't you concerned . . .?"

Massimo was ready to go, eager, and on the drive to the airport he and Alex chatted nonstop. Inside, I was dying, but didn't want to spoil it for Alex, so I remained for the most part very quiet and tried to concentrate on maneuvering through California traffic. We had gone about halfway when Massimo asked for Alex's passport. I nearly slammed on the brakes. The passport! I'd completely forgotten it in the maelstrom of emotion. Massimo was livid. "How could you possibly have forgotten such an important document? We're almost to the airport! Katie, I know what you're trying to do and it won't work . . ."

He went on and on while I located a place for a turnaround, my stomach grinding. All this was doing was prolonging the inevitable. We got back to the house, grabbed the passport and lit out the door at a dead run.

We made it to the airport in good time, cleared security, and waited together in the departure lounge. By this time I was bawling

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like a baby. I pressed Massimo into photographer's service, and he grudgingly snapped a last photo of Alex and me before boarding. Alex held me tight at the waist, and we both faced the camera. The photo of me was absolutely awful, and it was a prelude to the rest of the night's crying. I barely slept at all.

I phoned Alex the very next day and told him all the motherly things that both he and I needed to hear, then I asked him if he liked some of the things I'd packed in his luggage. One was a hand-made calendar, prominently marked on the date he was to return.

"What calendar?" he asked innocently.

That's strange, I thought. "What about the picture of the two of us?"

Again, Alex hadn't seen it. Something passed over me briefly, like a breath of cold wind from an open window. I quickly dismissed



Worst day of my life—saying goodbye to Alex before his trip to Italy

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the suggestion and thought that perhaps it was absurd. Massimo wouldn't dare pull anything, not after the court appearance and the papers that lawfully restrained him from taking custodial liberties. No, he hadn't wasted any time getting in his digs now that he was out of the country, but I forced myself to rack up the incident as only borne of his contempt for me. I refused to let myself emotionally pursue it. But, like the proverb says, "Who is born round doesn't die square." How could I expect the round Massimo to change into the square good guy, on the order of a judge? Hadn't I filed papers with the California court system stating that I had felt threatened by Massimo, had been the victim of psychological and emotional abuse by him, and that, if I tried to divorce him in Sicily, he would likely have succeeded, in that convoluted court system, in taking Alex from me, permanently? But now I willed myself to believe that, since the California judge had given Massimo direct instructions regarding his returning Alex to me after his "vacation," that that was the end of it. I had yet to understand what many battered wives stalked by ex-husbands came to learn the hard way—that a court document, however official-looking, could never prevent the actions of a person intent on accomplishing the evil of his own heart.



Six weeks is a long wait when you're separated from the most important person in your life. For me, time seemed reduced to the barest increments. I learned not to think in terms of weeks, but in days, one tumultuous sunrise-to-sunset cycle after another. Although it never got easier, per se, I did find things to take up the slack. Foremost, I threw myself into my work. As a medical assistant, I put in a lot of clinical hours. A satellite for a larger facility, it provided a lot of distraction from counting the hours. I also went for bike rides and a lot of walks, and occasionally did dinner with friends. My most pressing need was to be around people, consistently. That interpersonal contact was the best medicine, and one person in particular stands out during that time—my

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apartment manager, of all people. He was so very kind. A perceptive man some years older than me, he'd make opportunities to come see me, not with any romantic intentions, but because he was just a nice guy who knew I desperately missed my son. Sometimes he'd even bring a stack of paperwork to my apartment, so he could sit and do figures while I enjoyed his just being there.

Five weeks crawled by, and the excitement about Alex's return began to build. I went through all the favorite things he'd like to do when he got home, what meals I could prepare, what little adventures we could go on as a kind of welcoming-home present. The apartment had been empty without him; my heart ached the entire time, and I still felt like crying whenever I'd imagine holding him, being near him again. Still, there remained that disconcerting something way back in my mind, that consistent little jabbing that would never quite let up but that I'd never admit. It was exacerbated by some then-inexplicable incidents. I'd called Sicily, trying to speak with Alex, but always there were excuses—"Oh, he's out playing with friends." "He's taking a nap." "He's somewhere with his father." There was always something that kept him from speaking with me directly. So, a week before his vacation was due to end, it was a relief to actually get him on the phone. We chatted only briefly, and after I told him excitedly, "Just one more week, honey, and you'll be back home again," Massimo bulldozed his way into the conversation.

"He's not coming back," he said matter-of-factly.

I felt like I'd been slapped but managed to stutter out, "W . . . what?"

I couldn't have heard correctly.

Massimo's hard voice slid into me like a knife. "He's staying here, Katie. This was planned the whole time. I had no intention of letting my son go back to the United States. He's Italian, not American. He never should have left Italy."

The vague fear I'd felt all along rose up and leered at me. My voice screeched, cracked. "You can't do that!"

Massimo flaunted his power over me, not even trying to soften the blow. "Oh, I can do it, all right. I've already got custody."

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“But the courts . . . !”

He fairly sneered. “Those documents I gave to the judge in California didn’t mean anything. The courts have granted me custody in Italy, and there’s not a thing you can do about it.”

At this point, I was in tears, pleading. “Oh, please, Massimo, please don’t do this. Not Alex. You can’t . . . *pleeeaaase* . . .”

The line went silent as I sat there, begging, crying into a dead phone.

I went completely hysterical, panicking alone in the apartment that now mocked me with its emptiness. “This can’t be,” I said aloud, over and over. “This isn’t happening.” Walking in tight circles, pulling my hair, I was hearing from a distance my voice as unintelligible screeches. In a panic, I grabbed the phone and, trembling violently, called my good friend Michael Constantine. Between sobs, I told him what had just occurred. He raced over; when he saw my condition, he wrapped his arms around me and held me. He spoke impotent soothing words, and geared into his own man emotions—seething about Massimo’s outrageousness. This was no longer a disagreeable custody battle. It was kidnapping. Mike’s take-charge personality kicked into overdrive. When I finally calmed enough to actually respond to him, he said determinedly, “Okay, we have to make a plan.”

I phoned several others, including my lawyer, James Finegold. He was furious, as was Massimo’s American attorney. From a professional standpoint it made him look foolish. He had no idea that Massimo had planned this entire fiasco. He realized he had been taken in by this smooth operator. “We should have asked for a bond,” he fumed.

Fat lot of good it did to suggest that now.

I went to work the next day in a fog of grief and rage, informed my boss of the kidnapping and somewhat tried to function. I’d take in a patient, go to the bathroom to cry, and then take in another one. Over and over, I portrayed a merry-go-round of stone-faced professionalism followed by a descent into the pit of anguish. The ache in my heart was almost more than I could

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bear, and having to hold it in even part of the time took great effort. In the privacy of the clinic bathroom, I hugged myself and doubled over, wanting to wail out loud but forced by protocol to keep the sobs within discreet boundaries. When needed in the office, I'd gather myself, attempt to dry my eyes and make myself moderately presentable until I could escape behind the bathroom door once again. My coworkers were very sympathetic but completely helpless. How do you comfort a mother whose young son has been stolen? What words will make it all better, retrieve the only child from a world away and render appropriate justice to the criminal who inflicted the torment?

In the following days a thought occurred to me, a remembrance of something that I'd been told (from Alex?), that in the next few weeks Massimo would be going to Malta for a hunt, and would likely take Alex along. When I relayed this to Mike Constantine, a "Bingo!" light went on in his eyes, and he got me a plane ticket to Malta. A fairly well-off man, he also purchased some call card minutes for me and told me to get on the phone to Malta and set up something.

At the same time, my lawyer followed up with another piece of the haphazard plan. "I've got a connection for you in Malta," he said, and excitedly told me of a new ally in the fight to regain Alex. An American, this contact co-owned a popular restaurant in Santa Cruz, and his business partner's brother managed a large industrial plant in Malta. This kind man signaled his eagerness to help me as soon as he was told the story. He requested that my lawyer send him recent photos of both Massimo and me. I prepared to leave Santa Cruz. In the meantime, Michael Finegold gave my story to a Santa Cruz newspaper in the hope that media exposure would result in some kind of America-Italy negotiations on my behalf. The paper hopped on the story and wanted to send over a reporter for an interview, but I dismissed the idea. I didn't have the time, and I wasn't really interested in anything other than shooting across the sea one day and coming back with my son the next.

At work the day before I left for Malta, I became engaged in conversation with a man whose infant son was a patient at

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the clinic. As he waited for the clinic to fill his prescription, and since it was also my lunch break (in the same building, one floor down), we both had time on our hands. We chatted idly for a few moments until the incident with Alex began spilling out. The man was fascinated. When I mentioned that a Santa Cruz newspaper wanted to do a story, he jumped up and said, “Stay right there!,” and made for the nearest telephone. The man turned out to be the newspaper’s photographer; he phoned the main office to send a reporter down there to get the whole story. That same day the photographer showed up at my apartment, and the deal was done. I still remember the photographer’s face, his look of genuine sorrow, and his efforts at consolation over the kidnapping. He was deeply moved by the whole rotten affair.

The next day I was at the airport. I had no real idea how we were going to get Alex away from Massimo, but this impromptu rescue team was a lifeline. After what had seemed like a forever of grief, here was a glimmer of hope. I wasn’t fooling myself. There was no plan, really; just board a plane to an exotic island, wait for Massimo to show, and somehow—somehow—get my son back. I was scared, but I was also really, really ticked off. Massimo may have thought he’d seen the end of it; he was used to having his way with me. But I thought it fitting that we’d face off while he was preparing for a hunt. As far as I was concerned, he’d better come armed to the teeth.

Mamma bear was about to show her fangs.