



**THE  
JENNIFER  
BURBIDGE  
SHORT  
STORY  
AWARD  
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## FIRST PRIZE

### MUM'S A MESS *by* ROSHELLE FRANCO

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I can feel it.

Before I open my eyes.

Before it even begins, I know what this day has in store for me.

And it's going to be shit.

I wonder sometimes if this is my punishment. Karma. For deeds in this life, or even a previous one, who the hell knows? All that I do know, is that it's a punishment, days like these. I look down at my legs, lying motionless in the bed. They look the same as the day before, showing no outward signs at all that they have quadrupled in weight overnight and have now sunk down in the mattress to an almost irretrievable level. The thought of swinging them out of bed with ease, as foreign as zooming to the moon, and just as out of reach.

Staying in bed for the entire day seems like the best option, until this latest relapse passes. I close my eyes, and open them again when I hear, from the next room, the hushed chatter of two tiny and unmistakable voices, the source of which are the reason that staying in bed all day is

not an option. Despite their attempted hushed tones, I can hear the excitement in their voices. They've obviously found the remote for the TV.

'Turn the volume down straightaway! Mum's still asleep, don't wake her!' It feels like this is the most repeated phrase in our household. I decide I need to get up.

Five minutes later, the decision is the same, but so is my position in the bed. Inhaling deeply, I finally gather the strength to push myself up. I stare down at my legs. I try to move them, but they're filled with lead, and I can't. I use my hands to scoop up my thighs and manoeuvre them over the edge of the bed, one at a time. I am already out of breath by the time I stand up. I slide my feet slowly across the floor, feeling the weight of the invisible shackles that hold me back, and drag me down. This day is already too hard, and I want it to be done.

I make it into the kitchen, grabbing door-frames, walls and chairs along the way for support. The empty space between the last dining chair and the kitchen bench fills me with dread. My legs wobble slightly, as if questioning if I'm really thinking about attempting that gap unassisted. I have flashbacks of watching *Outrageous Fortune* when I was little. Shelley

Long, running, trying to escape the bad guy, then doing an impressively beautiful split jump over an incredibly gigantic canyon. The triumph on her face when she makes it to the other side, and turning to see the villain, not so graciously, plummeting to his death. There's no villain, no gorge, and I certainly won't be trying to do a split jump, it's just me and the space between this chair and the bench. I can do it. I'm Shelley Long. I'm so close, when my legs give up and collapse underneath me. It hits me as I hit the floor. I'm not Shelley Long, I'm the villain. At least it's not a sharp, rocky gorge in the middle of the desert that I'm crashing onto. Just the kitchen tiles. Nothing hurts and nothing's broken, all I feel is that overwhelming rush of disappointment and exhaustion, all at once. Couldn't even make it two steps on my own. I knew today was going to be shit. Why didn't I just stay in bed? Then the answers come barreling into the kitchen.

'We didn't wake you did we?' the eldest asks with a look of concern that I've seen all too often for someone so young.

'Oh no! Mumma fall down!' exclaims the youngest as she waddles over, 'I kiss a boo-boo Mumma,' and she squats down to kiss my legs.

'I'm fine guys, just silly legs again today.' The eldest eyes me suspiciously as she tries to help me up.

'You can lean on me Mum, it's ok.' I laugh, knowing I'll crush the tiny child if I put all my weight on her, but I'm also fighting back tears, because I can feel the crippling weight of guilt on me now too. How many years will she have to support me like this? How many times will

she have to help her mum off the floor? How long will I be a burden on my family? This is not what I wanted. This is not the way it was supposed to be.

As my eldest cherub helps me to the kitchen counter, I hear the waddling and clinking sound telling me that my youngest cherub is on her way with help.

'Mumma tick! I get Mumma tick!' she exclaims with a huge grin on her face, waving my new, black walking stick in the air. I really hate that thing. It's for old people, and a reminder that I can't do a simple thing and just walk. But I love that my young cherub thought of it and wants to help.

'Thank you sweeties,' I say, and reluctantly take the stick.

'I hate that stick,' says the eldest suddenly, echoing my own thoughts.

'Why, sweetheart? It helps me walk when I need it,' I say, betraying my true feelings.

'It's black and boring and ugly, and I hate it,' she says in a huff, and then promptly folds her arms across her chest.

'Well, what if we fixed it up? So it wasn't black and boring and ugly?'

'What do you mean?'

'How about you get our box of stickers, and we can decorate it?'

'Tickers!' the youngest exclaims and runs for the cupboard to retrieve the precious box. I ask the eldest to grab the loaf of bread and bring it into the lounge room. Breakfast will be extremely basic this morning.

Despite the stick, I still fall down a few times on the short walk to the couch. On the last fall,

the youngest puts down the box of stickers and lays her head on my shoulder.

‘Mumma’s a mess,’ she says gently, with her hand on my back. This is too much. I don’t succeed in holding back the tears this time, and they, the only unashamed thing about me, race down my cheeks. My cherubs see my tears and their tiny hands and arms are around me in an instant. My gratitude for their presence, for their beauty, kindness and existence overwhelms my shame and guilt. I hug them back, with all the strength I possess in that moment.

‘Come on sweeties,’ I break the silence, ‘this walking stick isn’t going to stickerfy itself!’

‘Stickerfy? I never heard that word before,’ the eldest exclaims with wide eyes.

‘Really? Well, it means to cover in stickers.’

‘Tickerfy!’ shouts the youngest with glee.

‘Did you just make that up? It doesn’t sound real to me. And you are a bit of a tricker, sometimes!’

‘As long as it’s only sometimes, it’s ok then isn’t it?’ I smile and give her a wink.

The youngest delves into the sticker box and we start the stick stickerfying process. We cover every boring, black spot with beautiful, bright stickers. Happy cartoon faces stare back at us as we giggle and laugh. Images of the cards painting the roses red in *Alice in Wonderland* fill my mind.

Once we feel the stick is completely stickerfied, the cherubs take the updated stick for a spin, admiring their handiwork, while I hoist myself onto the couch to lie down. Despite doing hardly anything, I am desperately tired, fatigue folding over me like a heavy blanket.

‘Who wants to watch Play School while Mummy has a rest?’

‘Me! Me! Me!’ they cry in unison. I drift in and out of sleep, while Jay and Karen baby-sit my cherubs through a screen. Telling them stories I should be reading, taking them to parks that I should be taking them to ....

‘Shh, don’t wake her! It’s going to be a surprise!’ I wearily, and warily, open my eyes. They are both sitting in a large cardboard box in front of where I’m lying. They’ve covered it in stickers and their faces show their delight and pride in their creation, their bodies shaking from trying to contain the bubbly giggles that threaten to erupt from them.

‘What are you guys doing?’ I murmur.

‘Tickerfy!’ bursts out the youngest, pointing excitedly to the myriad of stickers that cover the box.

‘And we’re rowing to Paris!’ chirps the eldest.

‘Tum on Mumma!’ pleads the youngest, as she scoots over to make room in the boat-box for me. I smile and turn to push myself up, but a wave of fatigue ricochets through my body, making it difficult to even lift my head.

‘I’m so sorry sweetheart. I’d love to, but I just can’t,’ I mutter, feeling like the most useless parent in the world.

‘That’s ok Mum,’ the eldest says as she stands up and climbs out of the box, ‘We’ll just tug you along with this.’ She holds up my dressing gown cord, which they’ve attached to the boat-box, and ties it around the leg of the couch. I smile at the premeditated planning and thinking that had gone into the design of their creation, their

desire to not want to leave me behind, and make allowances for me to still come with them on their adventure. I can feel the welling of tears again, not from frustration, guilt or total sadness this time, but from a bittersweet feeling of gratitude for their resourcefulness and adaptability. I'm suddenly struck with the notion that maybe my guilt doesn't need to cripple me as much as this disease does. That maybe instead of feeling like a failure as a mother because of my illness, it is actually teaching them the knowledge that we all fall sometimes, and even the youngest and smallest can help lift us up. Maybe.

'Are you ok Mum?' the eldest asks, as she stands in the boat, ready to set sail. All of this has been nothing to them, but has had the most profound effect on me, and they really don't see it at all. I will have to try and explain it to them when they're older.

'Yes of course my cherub.'

'But you're crying.'

'Mumma's a mess,' says the youngest, solemnly. WHY does she keep saying that!?

'I'm fine guys. It's happy tears, promise. You're both so sweet and thoughtful, and I love you both so much.'

'Ok, love you too,' shrugs the eldest, 'now! Off to Paris!'

We spend the next hour rowing down the Seine, looking at pictures of the Eiffel Tower, the Moulin Rouge and the paintings from The Louvre. We travel to Versailles and Giverny to see Monet's Garden and the famous Japanese Bridge. Before I know it, my husband is home, smiling down at all of us, with the girls excitedly

dancing around him, telling him about our travels and then showing him the newly sticker-fied stick and boat-box.

'Sounds like you've all had a very exciting day. How about we let Mum have a rest before dinner?' He looks at me and knows instantly that I don't have the energy or desire to attempt to walk back to the bedroom. He scoops me up like a child and carries me to our room. As we leave the girls behind, I hear the youngest sigh, and again say 'Mum's a mess.' I bury my head into my husband's chest as he walks, hoping to at least hide some tears from someone today. Why does she keep saying that? Yes, I know I'm an absolute mess, physically, emotionally, all of it. Someone must be saying it in front of her for her to be saying that. Who would say something like that in front of a child? My eyes start to burn with hot, angry tears now, fuelled by this new knowledge that someone is ridiculing me, talking about me behind my back, yet right in front of our child. I try to quickly wipe away my tears as my husband lays me down on the bed, but he notices everything. Always.

'What's wrong?'

'She keeps calling me a mess,' I blurt out, 'and I am, I know I am, but she must've heard someone say it about me, and it's just so hard hearing it come from her.' I look up to see him smirking a little. I am immediately enraged and incensed again by his reaction, but before I can launch into an attack, he explains.

'The other day, she asked me why you get silly legs. So I told her it's because you have MS, but when she tried to say it, it kind of came out sounding like mum's a mess. Sorry, I should've

told you, but you went to bed early, and I forgot about it ...'

All the worry, anger and hurt fades, as I realize how ridiculous I was being. About all of it. I've spent most of the day worrying so much about being a burden, that I almost didn't see how this disease and its effect on me, is actually teaching our children empathy, resilience, compassion and understanding. Making allowances for me in their boat adventure, finding a way to include me when I didn't think I could be included, understanding that the disease is making me like this and their responses were to be inclusive, caring, and helpful. Their actions taught me that it's ok if I'm not ok some days, we will find a way to not just get through it but thrive. Together. I smile. Mum's MS. Mum's a

mess. I can see the funny side of it now.

'Sorry if you've had a shit day hon,' my husband says as he turns to leave and let me rest. I think back to the start of the day, the feeling of dread that filled me in the morning, the belief that nothing good could come on a day like today and the weight of the guilt. But then I remember stickerfying, how we turned something we hated into something beautiful. The boat adventure with my cherubs, the love and care they showed me and how it shattered my misheld beliefs. My husband, understanding exactly what I needed and how I felt before I even uttered a word. My amazingly beautiful family. And I feel lighter, happier, because I am so incredibly lucky. I smile and tell him no it wasn't at all. Today really was the best day.