

## Cayden

By Dr. Stephanie Anne Deutsch

Cayden cried too much this morning. And I think I lost it. I'm afraid of myself now.

It started out like any other morning since he's been born – I was alone with Cayden - John was on another cross-country trip, due back in 10 days. Gone by 5:30am, his truck-driving life seemed almost luxurious to me at times. He's no help to me even if he sticks around, so what would've been the use – his ex-wife and daughter were right about that, things weren't going to be much different with me. Gone a lot, at least his trucking paid the bills, with enough leftover – it kept him from nagging me about finding work, and I'd rather not call that truck-stop bar off Route 42 “home” again anytime soon. Plus, Maggie from the methadone clinic thinks we still have some work to do before I can hold down a job again anyway. *Postpartum depression*, she calls it - my fancy, certifiable diagnosis - but I'm not convinced. *I was using before Cayden was even born, Maggie. Life out here will do that to you...* but she's big-city, what would she know. There's more to my story than her college degree, and those letters after her name, could ever know, and will ever know - talking to her just always feels too heavy.

So, that morning started out like all the rest - John gone, me at the kitchen table, the flat horizon outside the trailer window glowing with hints of a rising sun. Addiction had made me an insomniac, cigarettes and coffee weak antidotes for my nerves. It was peaceful out there in the morning, that view from the window, those early sun rays like a revival prayer from the

minister – “*may the downtrodden find the strength to face another day, dear Lord*”. Face another day of responsibility sober, and alone. “*Centering*” -as Maggie calls it- the respite was short-lived. I heard him stir in his crib – he’s awake. *And now it starts, again*, I think. Those first, few, familiar utterances of his early morning cry- then a full-blown wail of hunger and wet diaper discomfort.

I pushed myself away from the kitchen table, its metal cold and unforgiving, with a heaviness felt deep down in my gut. *Reminds me of County* – and for a brief minute, flashback to orange jumpsuits and clanking plastic trays on the lunch counter offered me a distraction. It was brief, only a few months, picked up by police for possession; I was younger then, intensely naïve – *I probably could’ve gotten away with it now*. I made my way down the hall past Brant’s bedroom, careful to pry his door open just a crack to see him sleeping peacefully in his bed. Three years old now, hair the color of corn, his grandma had raised him really – I was too much of a mess. But things were better now, and I’m not even sure he remembered that time I was gone in jail – and if he did, he didn’t seem to care. *Goldilocks*, my nickname for him – my little golden boy.

Cayden’s playpen – like a large plastic cage – was now the focal point of the “master” bedroom, the 10 by 6 box advertised as the “luxury feature” of John’s shack trailer. Our wedding photos were taped on our dresser mirror, edges curled up with a layer of dust visible and thick, an almost cruel reminder of an earlier, far and gone-away time. That trip to Vegas immortalized had always offered some amusement for me during the dark times, when Cayden’s tantrums stirred familiar urges in me for escape. Cayden’s raven curls caked against his cheeks, and forehead wet with sweat and tears, he stood on his tip-toes and peered over the

side of the playpen, looking around intently for me. Fighting my urge to turn and hide, his wails grew louder as he heard my footsteps approach, volume full-blast as our eyes locked in the bedroom doorway. *Welcome to another day*, I thought, as I reached down to pick him up, the heat of his body and damp pajamas pressed against mine. Legs vigorously thrashing against his plastic imprisonment, loose Velcro from the mesh snagged the cotton of Cayden's leggings and ripped a tiny hole. "*Stop it!*" I remember yelling, the kicking increasing in intensity and Cayden struggling against my hold, fighting for his freedom. "*Want me to just drop you?*" - my voice got louder, and his body jerked in my arms. "*Now look what you did!*" I felt a familiar surge of warmth swell in my face and neck, anticipation that this uncooperative start to the morning would color our interactions of the day. A tiny figure hugged the doorframe, his blanket trailing behind him. "What's wrong mommy?" *Damn, now Brant's awake too. This kid is always so damn loud.* Lifting Cayden, I freed his pants from the Velcro and grabbed him tighter, trying to suppress the wiggling, kicking captive in my grip as I carried him back down the hall into the kitchen. *It's going to be a bad day. Go back to bed, Goldilocks.*

"*F- it*" I thought to myself, grabbing his bottle from the fridge and popping it into the microwave, slamming the door. The loud noise startled Cayden - *I don't have the patience this morning to use the stove - sorry buddy.* His kicking legs crammed into the highchair, frustrated, hungry screams turned into high-pitched shrieks, "*It's yours, now drink!*" I tried to fight the urge to cry, as guilt overtook my heart. Brant, used to the havoc and apparently disinterested, had settled into his usual spot on the couch, sounds of child laughter and musical cartoons filling the living room with an almost painful innocence. *I really need to work on my patience, for Cayden.*

It was like that for maybe another 20 or 30 minutes, I can't remember, its all a blur of crying and kicking, snorting and fussing. I sat with Cayden at the table, a lame duck target as he swatted and hit and threw the hot bottle across the room, refusing its scalding contents. Thrusting his fist into his mouth, chewing and sucking ravenously, my offers of rice cereal and pureed fruits were met with active resistance. Splattered contents decorated the otherwise bare kitchen walls Jackson Pollock- style. A familiar pang – *desperation, I need some pills* – pulsed through my blood, however fleeting. *I can't take this*, I thought to myself, as I shifted my gaze from the hair-matted, pajamas-soiled, tearful 8 month old next to me out the trailer window. The rays of sun, shining in full early morning glory, illuminated nothing but the highway gravel, empty of cars and signs of life; pure, cold stillness out there. *Alone again*, I think; nothing between us and the next trailer a good 15 minutes down the road. *Why the hell did we move here, John??- God I wished I could bang on a neighbor's door for sweet relief. Where's my goddamn phone-* fumbling with it I manage to text John, *God help this child*, heat rising on the back of my neck. *He better shut up soon.*

I don't remember well what happened next. Moving Cayden from the highchair to my arms, I stroked his knotted hair and patted his back with body pressed against mine, my sways side-to-side offering no relief to his funereal wails. *What's bothering him so much?* Pacing down the hallway, from the kitchen to the bedroom and back again, my renditions of lullabies and the soothing sweet-nothings of Brant's TV cartoons were drowned out by inconsolability. I felt my temper creep up, my efforts of love and affection unrequited, my reserve tapped. *I'll show you Cayden*, I thought, as my grip around his torso tightened. I looked back, assured Brant was engrossed by the TV, spotting an open cereal box and bowl on the armrest next to him. *Kid got*

*his own breakfast*, I thought – why couldn't Cayden be more like this? Cayden's small, sweaty fingers grasped and pulled a chunk of my hair from its ponytail, and I felt the anger well up again, flooded by an intense, almost primal desire to run from the trailer and never look back, never see him again, be free and lost in my old life. *None of this good enough for you?* With a subconscious conviction I headed towards the master bedroom, maybe to look at the wedding photo, maybe not, the pace of my gait unmatched by any conscious suggestion of nostalgia.

Gripping Cayden by the torso and neck, his cries increasing in intensity simultaneously, I thrust him against the bed, facedown against my cheap polyester comforter, his legs and arms kicking and thrashing as his nostrils and mouth inhaled the peach fabric. *This'll make you shut up.*

Holding firm, my right hand cupped against his neck and my left pressing his back down into the blanket, my thumb and pointer fingers could just make out the suggestion of vertebra.

Small and delicate, little bony projections almost like Lego pieces. Seconds passed, I don't know how many, but as the ferocity of his kicks and thrashes decreased slowly, slowly, I felt the release of anger from my body like a floodgate opening. Replaced by a surge of panic, I flipped him over, his eyes fluttering and lips a shade of grayish, lake blue. *Cayden! Cayden! Wake up baby! God, what have I done* - I shout - scooping his body onto my lap and bouncing my thighs and knees. Red-hot anger replaced by fear, I looked up to see Brant in the doorway, scratching his ear and looking on with innocent curiosity. "Whats wrong with Cayden, mommy?" *Nothing baby, go away* – my heart pounding and an involuntary "*Come on, come on*" audibly escaping my lips. Cayden's respirations slowly returned to normal – his chest rise slowly, slowly increasing in depth and strength - sensation returned to my lower body as the saw the signs of life

tangibly returned. A muffled, gurgly cough, ruddy cheeks and teary eyes, like a child pulled from the ocean, physiology revealed his revival. *Thank God*, I thought. *That was close.*

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