

The first incident occurred when David was eight. I'd dropped him off at football practice for a couple of hours while I ran to the shops. Without his father around David and I had been adjusting to life *just us* and I was trying to use my time wisely.

We'd practiced this routine for a while now and I was doing my best to manage his blood-sugar. I'd already stuffed his kit-bag full of chocolate bars and Lucozade, I'd already reminded him to take breaks and keep his levels up. I'd already reminded the coaching staff, who knew, and would remind him.

About an hour or so into his practice I was at the supermarket and elbow-deep in frozen whatever when I got the call. I dropped the whatever, abandoned the trolley and rushed back to the club. David had collapsed by the side of the pitch, he was pale and trembling and in the grips of a hypoglycaemic attack. He was surrounded by the other children and coaching staff who were plugging him with the Lucozade. An ambulance had been called.

After a moment's scrutinising by me, the coach informed me he *had* intentionally sat David on the subs bench and *had* reminded him to drink and eat something. He'd watched David swigging at the bottle and eating at the chocolate, but when David collapsed and the other children fetched the Lucozade from his bag, it was near-full. David had faked it, aggravated his condition, and the presumed-dog-muck on the side of the pitch was revealed to be an abandoned Mars bar punctuated with boot studs.

Following the event I proceeded with caution. I didn't want to make a bigger deal out of it then it was. Perhaps this was a blip and he needed me close-by at this time. My cousin had done something similar when we were children. If she couldn't get her way she'd hold her breath with her cheeks all full until she began to faint. Then my aunt would dive over the room to catch her and soothe her and perhaps she'd get her way. I tried it myself once but chickened-out and my mother just laughed as I blew the air out of my cheeks and sulked off. I lacked determination, perhaps I still do. I remember lying in bed that night trying time after time to hold my breath and hoping I'd die because *that'll show her*. I must've been five or so.

So I assumed David's situation was similar, and I kept him close, maintaining a watchful eye over his eating and drinking and blood-sugar which worked fine for a while, for a year in fact. Just enough time for me to let my guard down.

We had all been at a sort-of school party in the park. It was more of an informal gathering for the parents really that happened to have the children annexed nearby; the kind of party with competitive-looking salads and shallow wine in plastic cups and *no thank you(s) I'm driving(s)*.

I wasn't driving. And I'd been having a lovely chat with Peter the orthodontist as we all sat around on the grass by the playground. Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw David at the top of the large slide all pale and weak again. He was observing the playground and his companions all doing their own thing. He wasn't looking for me, he just observed the scene like some ill site manager, trembling. I called his name but he didn't respond. I got up and shouted and all the other parents swivelled. Then we all watched as his knees gave way and he casually let go of the hand rail, tipping awkwardly with a clunk onto the steel slide like a lump of meat, posting down the metal chute and folding into a weak clump on the soft wood-chip ground. An ambulance was called, and David had broken his arm.

I hadn't seen him so happy in years. Wouldn't, in fact, see him this happy again in years. He beamed as we sat in the back of the ambulance on our way to the hospital, the young paramedic chatting to him sweetly and me nursing him with my head boiled-dry from the sun and the cheap white wine.

"Mum?" He said, "I want to be an ambulance driver." He said.

"Of course you can." I told him. And of course he could.

David enjoyed his plaster-cast, dragging it against the bannister as he came downstairs to fetch his snacks, trying to navigate the kitchen cabinets and swinging it around, but I couldn't get over it, the performance. I had to know. One day I set up an ambush in the kitchen. I sat at the table and waited until he came clacking down the stairs to get his snacks. He reached into the cupboard.

"David?" I said. "Why do you do this?"

I waited for a moment for him to answer. He didn't.

“David look at me.” I said, and he pivoted cautiously with his cast pinning a plastic cup to his chest. I asked again with my eyes, “Why?”

He released himself from my gaze and studied the floor for a moment.

“I like the feeling.” He said.

*Factitious Hypoglycemia* is what he called it, the specialist. A shade of *Münchhausen syndrome*, and I knew what *that* was straight away. That was depression. And it was clear, of course, that David *was* depressed. David was depressed, *I* was depressed, my son and I — depressed. So we talked to the specialist and I had a *me oh my what's a girl to do?* and was told to ‘not panic’. I was told to ‘stay vigilant’, to ‘keep an eye on him’, and to ‘let [them] know if anything changes in his behaviour.’

But there were no changes in David’s behaviour. Just my slightly sad young boy who remained my slightly sad young boy for eight more years; only now near-mute, diluted and aimless, as he bumbled along in a delicate mist of Fluoxetine.

And I did stay vigilant, I was a *vigilante*, in fact; armed with a glucose meter and ready to stick-the-sad-boy three times a day or whatever to keep him safe. Eventually, at age fourteen I handed over the goods and he could take readings on his own, and show me. He did well.

But then the time came, at seventeen, where he would have to make some decisions about who he wanted to be and where he wanted to go from here. And with limited prospects after the tentative-though-uneventful years of secondary school we managed to get him a job at a local supermarket, where he would have to be a little more responsible for himself again.

He took to it very well. Regular procedure with clear instruction was good for him it seemed. And when I asked him about his colleagues he reported that they, ‘are nice.’

It was six months before I got the call.

The ambulance had already arrived. Some staff and a few customers were gathered around as David was propped up on the footstep of the response vehicle, being talked to by a paramedic.

Never at home, always public. A silent cry for help that was always at hand. His performance to all the oblivious onlookers who twisted their faces into the flashing lights and applauded his fainting bows with sirens and chatter. David's exhibition, of himself, and me.

Well I just snapped.

"David what the *hell* do you think you're doing?" I said, as I elbowed my way through the shallow audience to shake him down.

"Miss would you step back please—."

"No that's *my* son. David why?" I couldn't bare it, the people, the resources,

"*Fucking why* David?" I burst into tears.

He didn't say a word.

It wasn't as serious, this episode. It'd been some time and perhaps his body could cope better. After about an hour he'd recovered and the audience dissipated, no hospital this time. I drove him home.

I was in shock, it'd been so long, and he'd been *good*, he really had. We were approaching the house when in my peripheral vision I could feel what seemed to be a great smile spread across David's face. I couldn't believe it. I turned to him to *I don't know what*.

But I looked at him, and it wasn't a smile, it was a kind of grimace that spread wider and wider as his eyes tightened and teeth clenched at the sky.

"David?" I said, cautiously.

He heaved inward loudly from his chest like a donkey.

"David?"

He heaved again and coughed all over the dashboard, choking-up on his sinuses which had begun to stream. He was turning red.

I stopped the car.

"David what's wrong? Tell me now."

He heaved again, his nose was running over his mouth, he was shaking. He heaved again.

"Breathe David!"

"Mu—!" He spluttered out. And heaved again.

"David shall I call an ambulance?"

He heaved again, and shook his head.

“I’m sor—” he coughed.

I took his shoulder and knee tightly and held him there.

“I jus—” he heaved again.

My lips tightened and filled. I welled up. He was in such deep pain. My boy. I couldn’t bear to see it. I nodded and tightened my grip.

“It’s okay,” I said.

He looked confused. Like an abandoned child. He kept shaking his head with his mouth wet and gaping in anguished disbelief. His hands cupped the space in front of the windscreen as he sieved the air for words.

They came to him broken and drooling,

“—*Sad!* I’m just—*so sad!*”

I grabbed his head and yanked it into my chest without thinking, holding on as tightly as I could. He let rip, balling like an infant into my cardigan and I just began to rock. I held him so tight I could’ve suffocated him. Crushed him. I *wanted* to suffocate and to crush him, small, squeeze the life out of him, end his pain and crush him small and into me like a baby, fold him down and crush him coiled-up like a spring and perhaps he’d snap-back to life without this cruel affliction.

I stared out into the windscreen, into the twisted reflection of us both and shook my head in dull surprise.

“I know…” I said, plainly, because of course I knew, “I know.”

We stayed there in the car for a while until David managed to calm down and wipe his nose. I parked the car and we got inside and David took a shower and changed while I waited for him on the sofa in my damp cardigan. Eventually he emerged shyly and sat down beside me. We didn’t talk, there wasn’t anything to say. We just sat, his weeping head on my shoulder and my arm around him.

There was nothing here for us anymore. We’d go. Take the money and run. Get help. We’d go and we’d find something else, something new. Something that didn’t belong to his father. Something ours.

