

MOTHER'S LITTLE HELPER

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Paul Druce was a math teacher. He taught high school math. He had been doing it for so long, he stopped counting. It wasn't always fun, or even worth the paycheck. It seemed with each passing year, the kids got dumber and more screwed up, as did the administration of his school. Math is not the science of numbers, rather it is the science of thinking, something to which Americans aren't really accustomed. It seemed as if people just wanted to be entertained. Most people just went through life on mental autopilot and let someone else do the thinking for them.

Thinking was just downright un-American.

His days consisted of babysitting and hand-holding. Most of the kids just typed their problems into the internet search bar and it gave them the result. It was going to be a hard sell to try and convince a group of teenagers to bust out a pad and paper and slog through a calculus problem when the tech companies could give them the correct answer in microseconds. Guys like Paul were a dying breed. He only had two years left until he could retire. He was trying not to count the days. The sooner he was out of public education, the better.

There weren't many bright spots in his day. Most of his top students came from overseas, particularly Asia, where math and science are a daily part of everyone's life. He had sisters from Taiwan a few years back who were brilliant. He had an exchange student from South Korea who was doing vector calculus in the ninth grade. None of them, however, were on the same level as the young lady in his class, who was at the top of the cerebral food chain. Her name was Janet Prager.

She was a shy, socially awkward teenager, who rarely spoke in class and rarely interacted with anyone. No one had any idea how brilliant she really was until she scored perfect on her ACTs.....as a sophomore. Paul took her under his wing. She was doing graduate-level math as a 15-year-old and almost seemed bored with it. One day, he convinced her to take an IQ test. She scored 180. He gave her very difficult problems from the math Olympics and she solved them within minutes. She had taken up chess and was trouncing almost anyone she faced. She was one in a million and became the only bright spot in his otherwise very dark career.

She almost became his adopted daughter in many ways. Like many highly intelligent people, she had a very hard time fitting in. Paul let it be known that anyone that screwed with Janet would have to answer to him, and he meant it. He saw her crying once in the hallway and asked what was wrong.

"Mr. Prager, I just don't belong here. You're the only friend I have in this place," she said

"Ah, you can do a lot better than some old fart like me," he said, trying to lighten the moment.

"Why do all these people see me as some kind of freak? What the hell did I ever do to them?"

"You didn't do anything, Janet. You're right, you don't belong here. I think anyone with morals and a good head on their shoulders doesn't belong here either. Don't let the haters bring you down. Stick to your guns and ten years from now, you won't even remember this place or these idiots."

"It's not them. My battles are a lot closer to home," she said

"What do you mean?"

"My mother. She's going off the deep end. Ever since my father left her, she's been self-destructing. It's just getting worse. I hate even being there."

"Well, I certainly know the feeling. My mother was uh.....well, she was not the best mother in the world, that's for damn sure. She was a mean and abusive drunk who took out her failures on me and my brother whenever she could."

"What did you do?"

"I ran away when I was 17 and joined the Army. She was glad to get rid of me. I didn't have any contact with her for almost twenty years until she reached out to me when she was dying of cancer. I guess we sort of made up and reached an understanding, but some wounds never heal." said Paul

"I guess we have more in common than I realized," she said.

"Janet, some of the most toxic people you will ever encounter in your life come disguised as family and friends. It's a tough life lesson to learn. All I can say is that you should never let the pigs of this world drag you into the trough with them. You can't sink to their level, cause once you do, you won't be able to get out of it. I know for a young person, it's hard to understand, but you have to be the better person. You can't give into their blind rage or hatred. You'll end up just like them."

"Well, that's easy for you to say, you haven't met my mother."

"On my tenth birthday, my mother got so drunk, she actually locked me in a hallway closet for two days. I'm not sure if she did this to hurt me or protect me from herself. Two days with no food or water. Thankfully, there were two juice boxes in there. I think they saved my life. That's what I remember from my tenth birthday."

"Jeez, how did you end up being such a stand-up guy? I mean it seems like you were destined to wind up in prison or something."

"I very well may have. I was going down a very dark path. If it hadn't been for this one teacher, Mr. Clancy, I don't think I would be where I am today. I had gotten into a fight with two other students. I was going to be expelled. His math class was the only one I liked. I was good at math. He grabs me and slams me up against the wall and asks me why I'm so angry. I guess I didn't

really have an answer for him. I'll never forget what he told me. It was over thirty years ago and I still can't forget it."

"What did he say?"

"Our life is the result of the choices we make. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Wow, a teacher who cared about the kids?"

"Yeah, he was the only one who did care. I never got a chance to thank him. I was basically homeless, stealing to survive, but still trying to graduate. He was the one who suggested I go into the Army. He even drove me to my appointments with the recruiter. The guy saved my life. I guess I'm just trying to pay it forward."

"I don't know Mr. Prager. My mom wants me to become a nun. Me, a nun. She's kind of a religious nut. Alcoholism and religion can be quite a deadly combination." said Janet.

"Is that what you want?"

"No, not now. I want to go to a university and get my doctorate. I just know it's going to be ugly when I tell her I'm not going to become a nun. there's no telling what she'll do."

"You know, you can always come to me if things get bad. If we have to go to the administration, we'll do that. As a teacher, I'm legally obligated to report incidents of abuse. If I think that's what it's come to, I have to act."

"Yeah.....that's going to be fun," said Janet wiping away her tears.

Paul only saw her sporadically for the remainder of the school year. She sent him a card in the mail, thanking him for being such a good chap. He could only hope she was able to work her way through her problems at home and school. He was offered a sabbatical in Greece for the summer and decided to take it. He and his family would live on a Greek island while he would teach at a local high school. It was the opportunity of a lifetime.

When classes resumed in the fall, Paul had pretty much forgotten about Janet. The school had a new principal and a new administration. His calculus class had only a dozen students. Most were from other countries. He was delighted to see Janet's name on the list. As the students filed in one by one, he was waiting to see Janet. She came into class, much as she had the previous year, quietly, without anyone noticing. She looked like she had matured several years. He could tell something was very wrong. She wasn't smiling and kept her head down for most of the class. She smiled at Paul and when he passed out his class syllabus, she put her hand over his. He smiled at her.

"Janet, I have something for you. Just wait till after class."

Some of the other students were somewhat suspicious. Paul decided to nip it in the bud before the rumor mill was in full production.

"Janet was the winner of a brand new graphing calculator. Top of the line. these things go for over two hundred dollars." he said holding it up in its box.

The class was over fifty minutes later. As the bell rang, the students quickly left the room, leaving only him and Janet.

"Hey kid, how was your summer?"

"Not good. My mother sent me to my cousin's house in New York. I was only there for a week and ran away. My cousin was a pervert." she said

"Sorry to hear. How's the homefront?"

"Fine," she said. As she lifted her arm, Paul could see several bruises on her arm.

"Fine huh? That doesn't look fine to me."

"Come on, Paul.....Christ, just let it go," she said. Paul was surprised by her choice of words.

"I can't let it go. You know I have to report this."

"You're just going to make it worse. I'll be eighteen in a few months and I can get the hell out of there if I want."

"Janet, I have to report this. What she's doing to you is a crime. You have to understand that."

"She's sick. She doesn't understand what she's doing."

"That doesn't matter. This has to stop. Do you want to go with me to Principal Evans's office, or do I have to go alone? Either way, somebody will be wanting to see those bruises on your arm."

"Why can't you just let it be?"

"I made excuses for my mother for a long time. It didn't help me one bit," said Paul

Janet knew what was coming and figured there wasn't any way out of it and followed Paul down to the principal's office. He called the school resource officer, who contacted Child Protective Services. They escorted Janet home, where she packed a bag and was taken to a temporary foster home. She had a court date in thirty days. That was it. Paul had done his job and tried to help his favorite student. He just wasn't sure Janet was going to see it that way. He wasn't sure if he had helped, or just made things worse. Janet dropped out of his class and avoided him completely from that point on. It hurt, but Paul knew something had to be done, even if that something was not ideal.

Thirty days later, Paul sat in the courtroom, along with the principal, Mrs. Evans. They saw Janet come in and sit down in a chair right near the court official, who wasn't even a judge, only a referee. Paul then knew exactly how this was going to play out. He watched Mrs. Prager come into the courtroom and sit down. she gave him a very cold, almost evil look, before sitting down. She had a well-known family attorney with her. Child Protective Services sat down next to Janet.

Mrs. Prager was well dressed, albeit very conservative. This battle was over before it had even begun and Paul was on the losing side.

"She might be crazy, but she's no dummy. That's Gloria Devries, that big family and divorce attorney. I doubt we're going to come out on the winning side of this one." whispered Mrs. Evans.

The judge, or fake judge, asked Janet a bunch of questions and then heard testimony from a CPS worker handling Janet's case. All in all, it took less than fifteen minutes, before Janet was sent back to live with her mother. Paul was surprised to see Janet approach him after the hearing. she had changed her appearance and was dressed like a normal teenager. she even seemed to be smiling.

"Hi, Janet."

"Hey, Paul.....I mean Mr. Prager."

"We're not in school, you can call me Paul, it is my name after all."

"I just want you to know, I'm not mad at you anymore. I was at first, but I know you were just doing your job. I hope you're not mad at me."

"No, not at all. You seem to be doing a whole lot better. You got your sparkle back."

"My foster family was so cool. Their daughter Molly is my age. She's kind of my new bestie. She goes to Rosemont Prep. I'm thinking of transferring there to get away from you know who." said Janet.

"Well, good luck to you Janet. Don't let your studies slide. I'm expecting big things from you." said Paul

"Oh, here. Take this. It's just something I was working on. I thought you might enjoy it." she said and handed him a manilla folder.

Mrs. Prager walked by Janet and stopped. she put her hand on Janet's shoulder, which seemed to make her uncomfortable.

"Come on Janet, let's get you home," she said coldly as pulled her away. Janet waved at them as they walked away down the large courtroom hallway.

"Well, I guess there was a silver lining in this after all. I haven't seen the kid that happy.....like ever," said Paul.

"She turns eighteen in three months, then she can get out of that cesspool permanently. There won't be a damn thing her mother can do at that point.

"Let's just hope she makes it that long," said Paul

"What's in the envelope?" asked Mrs. Evans

Paul pulled out the papers and began to look them over. Janet had written a thesis as to what caused the Pioneer Spacecraft to end up hundreds of thousands of miles away from where it should have been. Paul was floored. This kid was smart on a level very few people even thought possible.

Graduation was now only a few months away. Paul and Janet would see each other in the hallway and wave, sometimes even making small talk. Janet had finally blossomed into a real person. She ditched her religious clothing and now dressed like every other girl in the school. She wore makeup and dyed her hair. Most importantly, for the first time, Janet now had friends. She had gone from being a wallflower to being.....almost popular. Paul had heard from Ms. Winters, the home ec teacher, that Janet was bragging about getting hammered the night before. Paul wasn't alarmed. Janet seemed very happy. They ran into one another a few weeks before graduation. Janet was hanging out with cheerleaders. She was holding hands with someone on the football team. Janet had done a complete 180. He wasn't sure if he had anything to do with it or not.

"Hey, kid? How goes it?" he asked

"Hey, Paul...I mean Mr. Prager. It's going great. I've got a boyfriend now."

"So, I hear. You got any plans after you graduate?"

"Yeah.....my dude and I are thinking of taking off for California. I want to live on the beach and learn how to surf. He wants to go to UCLA."

"So, no college?"

"No, not now. I'm too busy living my life."

"Oh, well, you're still young. Good luck. You know you can call on me anytime. You're my favorite student."

"I know. Thanks for everything."

"How are things between you and your mother?"

"That bitch? I haven't seen her in a few months. She met some guy at a church function and they went to Syria to feed refugees. I don't care if she ever comes back or not."

"Well, I guess that's good for you."

The bell rang and he and Janet went their separate ways. Paul figured that would be the last he saw of her until graduation. That, as it turned out, did not go according to plan either. It was a week before graduation, when Heather Mills came to him after class and asked to talk to him.

"Mr. Prager, can we talk?" she asked

"Sure, what's up?"

"It's about Janet. She's been AWOL now for a week. She broke up with her boyfriend. At first, we just figured she needed some time to be alone, but no one has heard anything from her since then. I just hope her whacko mother didn't do something. I drove by her house the other day and rang the doorbell. Her mother answered and gave me some bullshit excuse about her not feeling well. She was lying. I just hope she didn't do something to Janet. I just can't imagine she'd go completely silent like this."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just make sure she's okay. I'm worried about her."

Paul was now worried too. He went straight to Mrs. Evan's office and filled her in.

"She's had no contact with anyone in over a week. Won't respond to calls or texts and her mother won't let anyone see her. I'm a little worried." he said

"Paul, Mrs. Prager's pitbull attorney has threatened to sue us if we intervene again."

"So, let her sue us. At the very least, I think we should report it to CPS."

"Paul, Janet is eighteen now. As far as the school board is concerned, she is not our responsibility. This is kind of a grey area as far as family law is concerned. The school administration has made it abundantly clear that they do not want another lawsuit, even a frivolous one, after the last fiasco."

"Come on, Janet could be in real trouble. What if we just called the police and asked them to do a welfare check? We don't even have to involve the school."

"That's up to you Paul. I just don't want to see you on the wrong side of this administration, not when you're so close to retirement. Look, we have twelve hundred kids in this school, we can't save all of them."

"If you want to give up and throw in the towel, fine. That kid could be in real trouble. Don't you understand how special she is? I've never met anyone that even comes close to her ability. If there was ever a student worth fighting for, it's her." he said angrily

"Are you sure that's the real reason?"

"Yeah, what do you mean?"

"Come on, Paul, let's not hide our cards now. I've heard that you and she were close.....maybe a little too close."

"I'm just worried about her, that's all. I was her once, a long time ago. I know how tough it can be to have an abusive mother. I just don't want her to end up on the wrong side of the tracks, not with her ability."

"Paul, I can trade sob stories with you all day long. As I said, we can't save everybody. Some kids are just going to have to figure it out on their own." said Mrs. Evans.

"I'm not ready to just give up on this kid. She's come so far already."

"She's not your kid, Paul. She's just a student. Next year, you get a whole new crop of misfits and screw-ups. All we do is process them. We're just babysitters."

"I was just a student and Mr. Clancy was just a teacher, too. Only one day, he wasn't. I'm not going to give up, even if it costs me my job." he said defiantly.

"Well, it very well, might."

Paul did call the police. The police did do a welfare check on Janet. Problem was that Janet was eighteen and no longer a minor. One of the cops just happened to be in Mrs. Prager's prayer group and never even bothered to look around the house. If they had done their jobs, they would have heard Janet screaming from inside her mother's bedroom closet. Her mother had drugged her food. When she woke up, she was locked in a closet, with just a sliver of light coming in. She was beginning to lose her mind. The door was solid oak and very dense. She tried and tried, but couldn't get it open.

She had been locked in there for over a week. Her mother had made a small hole in the door and attached large hinges to it, so she could slide food and water to her daughter. Janet was in a nightmare and the monster turned out to be her own mother. Once the cops left, she went upstairs to have a little chat with her daughter.

"Jesus is looking out for us, child. He's always looking out for us." said her mother as she poured a glass of water and slid it through the small hole in the closet.

"Why are you doing this?" said Janet sobbing

"It's what the Lord commanded. I prayed and prayed for you child and this is what he told me to do. You're going to stay in there until the power of the holy spirit is flowing through your veins and coming out of your eyes. You're going to forget your sinful ways and get back on the path to righteousness." she said

"You're insane. You can't do this to me! I'm your daughter for Christ's sake!"

"I know that's just the devil talking. Oh, yes, he sure is a clever one, but the good Lord is always one step ahead of him. I'm going to make you want to repent. I'm going to make you forget your evil ways. I'm going to return you to Lord." said Mrs. Prager

"Mother, please.....please let me out. It's so dark in here. I'm pissing all over myself. I stink. Mother.....mother, I think there's someone else in here with me. I know it sounds crazy, but I can hear voices, mother. Please.....please just open the door! I'm begging you." said Janet hysterically.

"When Jesus tells me to open that door, I will open it and not a second before. Just hush your mouth and say your prayers. Remember, Jesus loves you, child."

"Mother.....please, I'm claustrophobic, I can't stay in here any longer, I'm going to lose my mind."

"Hush now and get to praying. I'll be back tonight with some supper and we can pray the rosary together."

Janet did nothing that afternoon but sob. the voices in her head were becoming louder and louder. She finally decided just to hear them out and see what they have to say. She was fighting hard to maintain her sanity at this point.

Paul hadn't heard back from the police in a few days. He just couldn't sit back and do nothing. Janet had missed graduation rehearsal and no one had seen or heard from her in over two weeks. Enough was enough. He decided to take matters into his own hands. He drove over to Janet's house and have a little one-on-one with Mrs. Prager. It might cost him his job, but the stakes were worth it. He knew something was wrong and her life very well depended on him. He parked his car and walked up to the doorsteps. He rang the doorbell. a minute later, Mrs. Prager answered the door. As soon as she saw him, he knew Janet was in trouble. He just had no idea how bad it was.

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to speak with Janet."

"She's not here," she said and tried to close the door. Paul grabbed it and pulled it back open.

"I think she is. How about I call the police and they can come here and look for themselves?"

"They were already here. I told them, I don't know where Janet is. She told me she was taking off for California. That's the last I saw of her."

"So, you admit it."

"Admit what?"

"You're the last person who's seen Janet alive?"

Mrs. Prager's face suddenly went white. Paul knew he had her. He couldn't push too hard. He had to get her to tell him where she was.

"Look, Mr. Druce. I got a good nose for men like you. What kind of a relationship do you have with my daughter, anyway? Afraid she might start talking, perhaps?"

"We have a teacher and student relationship, nothing more. Now, where is she, or do I call the police?"

"I think she gave me the number where she will be staying. Come in if you want. This is the Lord's house just as much as it is mine." said Mrs. Prager. She opened the door for Paul and disappeared into the kitchen. Paul sat down on the couch for a minute and then looked up when he thought he heard something tapping or knocking from the floor above. He walked up the stairs and tried to trace the sound of the noise. It seemed to be coming from a bedroom closet. He unlocked and opened the door. the smell immediately hit him and made him recoil. there, in the corner, curled up in a fetal position was Janet.

"Jesus. Janet, come on, we're getting out of here!" he said and helped her to his feet.

"Paul, look out!" she said.

Paul spun around just in time to see Mrs. Prager lunging right at him with a large kitchen knife. He ducked out of the way but was still cut on his shoulder. He grabbed a lamp, and swung it at her head, smashing the lamp and knocking his attacker unconscious.

"Oh, shit.....Janet, call the police," he said and ran over to Mrs. Prager and checked her pulse. He wasn't even watching Janet at this point. He felt the knife plunge into his back. It sliced the nerves and part of his vertebrae. The pain was enormous, but he was unable to move. He collapsed on the floor. He rolled over and saw Janet standing over him. She pulled the knife out of his back, which caused him to scream in pain, and watched her plunge the knife into her mother's chest.

"Janet, what the hell are you doing," he said weakly, as Janet picked up his hand and began slicing some of his fingers.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Janet?"

"I'm not Janet anymore. Don't you remember me, Pully? Don't you remember all those years ago when she locked you in the closet? I wanted to be your friend, but you didn't want to play with me. I had to find new friends. Janet is a great friend." said a very sick and evil voice coming out of Janet's mouth. Paul thought she sounded like a monster. It looked like Janet, but it wasn't Janet anymore.

"No.....No, you aren't real. You can't be real. This isn't happening!" said Paul.

"But it is happening, Paul, I mean Mr. Prager.....and you're going down for my mother's murder. Then I'll finally be free of the both of you," said Janet in her normal voice.

"Janet.....dear God, what have you done?"

"I finally have a real friend, Paul.....he's the best friend in the whole world!" she said as she dialed 911.

Paul tried to sit up, but couldn't. The blood was everywhere. Janet kicked him and sent him back to the bedroom floor.

"Hello, police.....please help me. My math teacher Mr. Prager just killed my mom.....I don't know what happened, he just went nuts!" she said, trying to make it sound believable.

"Please hurry, I don't want him to kill me too," she said and hung up the phone.

"*See you in the closet, Paulie.*" said the monster's voice coming out of Janet's mouth.