

## All Is Peaceful, All Is Quiet

By Emily Rems

Jacob wasn't sure exactly why his brother Ethan had decided to stop speaking to him. He knew Ethan had been pissed off for a while after his wedding. (When it came time for Jacob to give his Best Man toast, he was nowhere to be found. Later, he was discovered face down under the sinks in the men's room, suffering the ill effects of a mixture of Champagne and Xanax.) But that was years ago.

Maybe it had something to do with this past Fourth of July. All of the New York cousins had gotten together for a rooftop barbecue over in Greenpoint. Jacob had arrived four hours late with a date he had picked up that afternoon, and on their way to the keg, he introduced her to Ethan and Ethan's very pregnant wife Caroline. They all stood around, making the kind of awkward conversation that often plagues people who are supposed to be close but aren't. After they had exhausted the subjects of how much the city had reportedly spent on fireworks that year, and whether or not it was a waste of taxpayer money, especially considering how fucked up the trains out to Brooklyn were over the holiday weekend, the foursome hit a lull and then they were all just staring at each other. To fill the awkward gap, Jacob chimed in with a news story that he had recently read online that had totally creeped him out.

Apparently, a woman was seen at dusk pushing her toddler in a swing in a park in Baltimore. Neighbors reported seeing her pushing the child in the swing well past nightfall. And when witnesses saw that the woman was still pushing the child in the swing at dawn, someone called the cops. When police arrived on the scene, they discovered the child in the swing was deceased. When they tried to question the woman about what had happened to her child, she was unresponsive. So they carted her off to the state hospital pending the results of an autopsy. "I just can't stop thinking about it," Jacob remarked, slurping the foam off the top of the solo cup his date had acquired for him. "The unbreakable focus of the mother, keeping her dead kid in motion like that, hour after hour. It's as if she thought she could somehow stop time

from moving forward. Like, she knew on the other side of that moment on the swing, a world where her kid no longer existed was waiting for her. So she stretched that final moment into hours. I wonder how long she would have kept it up if someone hadn't called the cops on her." Jacob had mostly been addressing the story to his date, a purple-haired bartender whose name he no longer remembered. He didn't even notice that Caroline had started to cry until Ethan slammed down his bottle of O'Doul's, shouted "Jesus, Jacob!" and stormed off toward the elevator with Caroline weepily waddling after him.

That had been over seven months ago. Jacob knew he was now an uncle, since carefully posed, softly lit portraits of his new nephew Preston had been making the rounds on Facebook. But Jacob hadn't heard one word from Ethan. He had tried reaching out; a congratulatory text once the first baby pictures had surfaced online, followed by an email suggesting they get together, and then a comment beneath an Instagram post of Preston's first Christmas in which Jacob asked publicly "When can I meet the little guy?"

At this rate, Preston would be attending an elite boarding school by the time Jacob got to meet him. Which sucked, because when he had found out the baby was coming, he had dropped a bundle on a fancy baby monitor. It was the kind where you placed a high tech HD camera near the crib, and then you could log in with an iPhone app and spy on your kid anywhere, any time.

Jacob had been trying to impress the salesgirl at Babies 'R' Us with the extravagant purchase. But the more it sat on his shelf, the more resentful he got that he had not been invited over so he could hand it graciously to the new parents. After all, his few transgressions against Ethan and Caroline had been thoughtless, yes, but not malicious. Surely nothing so major that he should be totally shut out of their lives.

At least that was his rationale when he showed up at their apartment building near Columbia University with the dusty baby monitor box tucked under his arm. "I know who you are!" the doorman exclaimed as soon as Jacob entered the marbled lobby. Considering his shaky standing with Ethan, the greeting made Jacob's stomach flip. But when he saw the

doorman was smiling, he realized it was probably another shocked observation of his resemblance to Ethan. They weren't twins, but they had been born less than a year apart. Their similarity to each other was so striking, friends and family often commented that they looked like the good and evil siblings in an afternoon soap opera. But to Jacob, the fact that he and Ethan looked practically interchangeable felt more like a cosmic joke.

"I'm here to drop off a present for the baby," Jacob responded casually. "OK if I go upstairs?"

"They're not home right now," the doorman said, his smile fading. "It's just Dominique up there watching Preston. Were they expecting you?"

Jacob nodded as if he and Dominique were already old friends, then reached into the pocket of his distressed Levi's and palmed two 20s. "I know they're not in," he said, lowering his voice as he approached the doorman's podium. "Dominique is expecting me. I'm here to install this baby monitor as a surprise for Ethan and Caroline." Jacob held up the box. The package was decorated with the photo of a perfectly round, pink child in bed. In an adjacent panel, the kid's mother took a break from doing dishes to lovingly check him out on her smartphone. Jacob nudged the two bills out toward the doorman.

"Sure, sure. Let me help you with that box," the doorman said, lifting the package out of Jacob's arms and pocketing the money in one smooth motion. The doorman pushed the elevator button, pushed the correct floor, and then handed the box back before returning to his podium. It was a good thing that he had pushed the floor button out of courtesy, since Jacob had never been to Ethan's place before. Once they had both moved out of their parents' crowded house on Long Island, they became more like cousins than brothers. Running into each other and catching up at family functions, but otherwise living completely separate lives on opposite ends of Manhattan Island.

Jacob got off on the seventh floor, shifted the monitor box from one arm to the other, and then stood still in the library silence of the carpeted hallway. He had no idea which door was Ethan's and there seemed to be a lot of doors to choose from. Jacob had resigned himself

to knocking on every door until he had found the right one when a piercing infant shriek split the quiet like a fire alarm. “Thanks little guy,” he mumbled in the direction of the sound, and followed it to the end of the hall. When he got to the door, he could hear the lilting sound of a Caribbean woman’s voice cooing melodically beneath the escalating screams.

“All is peaceful, all is quiet. All is peaceful, all is quiet. All is peaceful, all is....” the crying died down to a mournful whimpering. “Shhhhhh, shhhhhh, there you go babydoll, there you go,” she continued, shushing and soothing until everything was, in fact, peaceful and quiet.

Then Jacob fucked it all up by ringing the doorbell and the baby went wild again, filling the entire hallway with howls of discontent. When Dominique opened the door, she was obviously irritated. But when she got a good look at Jacob, her expression melted into something more friendly. “Wait! Don’t tell me. I know who you are!” she said, jiggling the infant up and down on her hip.

“Hi!” Jacob said, trying to stay calm even though the screaming was making his upper lip sweat. “I’m Ethan’s brother Jacob. I’m here to install this baby monitor.” He thrust the box at Dominique, even though she obviously had her hands full. She stepped aside and let him in.

“I told you not to tell me!” she said mock angrily while trying to disengage the baby’s tiny fingers from the dreadlocks at her hairline. “They already have one of those things set up. I’ll try not to take it as an insult that they sent you here to set up another one so they can check up on me from even more angles.”

Sure enough, as soon as Jacob entered Preston’s pastel blue room, the first thing he noticed there on the window ledge was the exact same camera he now held in his arms. The bulbous lens was perched up on its stand like a runaway eyeball placidly resting on a rigid optic nerve. Jacob wondered if Ethan was watching him right now from his desk at the architectural firm. Part of him hoped he was. More of him hoped he wasn’t.

The instructions for setup were pretty straightforward. Jacob found a spot for the cam on a shelf crammed with stuffed animals that had an outlet behind it. The fuzzy bodies of a pensive-looking rabbit and a high-end Steiff bear almost covered the device completely. And

when Jacob paired the camera with his iPhone to test it out, he noted that the image on his screen was of a crib bordered on either side by fuzz from the animals' encroaching ears.

"That was fast," Dominique said from the doorway as Jacob folded up the empty box. "Can you watch Preston while I bring that to the recycling chute? He's in the living room in the baby bouncer."

Jacob handed the flattened box over to Dominique, tucked the instructions inside his pocket, and followed the sounds of Sesame Street until he discovered Preston on the floor strapped into a tilted little chair supported by rods. The baby was trying to shove his entire fist inside his gummy, drooling mouth, and his wriggling made the chair gently rise and fall. "Hi buddy," Jacob said cautiously, easing down onto the floor beside the baby. "What's up?" Preston's eyes stayed riveted to Ernie and Bert up on the wall-mounted flat screen. "Those dudes are gay, you know."

As Jacob leaned in toward Preston, he caught a whiff of some delicate, delicious scent that seemed to originate from the top of the boys' head. It was light and sweet like talcum powder, but also slightly sour like cheese. He got a little closer and inhaled deeply. Then he closed his eyes and did it again.

"They smell good, don't they?" Dominique commented from the hallway. Jacob hadn't heard her come back in over the din of televised ABCs and 123s. "That is, when they don't have a full diaper."

Caught off guard and embarrassed, Jacob scrambled to his feet and headed for the door. As he said his goodbyes to Dominique, he could smell that she had snuck a smoke while out at the recycling chute. His kind of girl. Back in the carpeted hall, he could hear Preston start to wail again, and he hoped it was because the kid was sad that he was gone.

In the following days that stretched into weeks, Jacob checked his phone more often than he'd like to admit, expecting some kind of message from Ethan. "Thanks for the gift!" or "Sorry I missed you!" or "Stay the fuck out of my apartment!" or "Don't ever sniff my son's head again!" But no message came. After three weeks had passed, Jacob assumed Ethan and

Caroline had found his (very expensive) gift and trashed it out of spite. In fact, he was sure of it. But just to double check, he selected the little baby cam app on his phone and booted it up to see what would happen.

Much to his surprise, an image popped up immediately. It was after midnight, so the crib's outlines were described in vivid, night vision green. And there, behind the bars, was Preston, lying like a starfish with his tiny limbs spread out in all directions. "Hey buddy!" Jacob cooed, surprised at how happy he felt to see the little guy. "Are you having nice dreams about Ernie and Bert redecorating their condo?" Preston stirred, moving his head one way, then the other, before thrusting a few fingers in his mouth. "I see you," Jacob whispered at the image on his phone, as if he didn't want to wake the infant. "I see you."

A few nights later, Jacob woke up soaked in sweat out of a drunken nightmare where he was alone on the side of a dark highway and didn't have any memory of who he was or what he was supposed to be doing or where he was supposed to be. He couldn't remember the name of the girl snoring beside him and didn't want to wake her, so he grabbed his phone and crept into the bathroom. He didn't even bother to turn on the lights. He just sat down on the closed toilet lid, turned on his phone, and jabbed at the baby app until green night vision light came pouring out of the little screen, bouncing off the tile. Preston wasn't sleeping either. His tiny face was bunched up in an old man grimace of exhaustion and discomfort, and his mouth was a gaping maw of silent screams since the camera provided only video, not audio. "Hey buddy, don't cry," Jacob whispered. "I had a bad dream, too! Isn't it funny that we both had bad dreams at the same time? It's like we're secret twins." The ghostly form of Caroline came shuffling on screen. Her breasts hung unflattering low beneath her oversized night shirt, and Jacob could almost see them in all their untethered glory as she leaned over the edge of the crib to pick up Preston. Caroline draped him expertly over her shoulder and started walking in slow circles around the room, patting and rubbing little circles into the boy's back until his scrunched up face appeared to relax. Jacob wondered if his own mother had ever held him like that, walking and rubbing and patting until the bad dreams faded away. Frankly, he couldn't imagine it.

A soft knocking came at the door. "Dude, sorry to bother you, but I really need to pee." Jacob got up off the toilet, tuned on the lights even though the sudden extra brightness stabbed at his eyes, and stepped out of the bathroom so the naked girl on the other side of the door could get in. While she washed her hands, he mentally rehearsed how he would explain that he had an early day tomorrow, and maybe it would be better if she got dressed and started heading home now.

This was obviously a lie. Jacob couldn't remember the last time he'd had an "early day." His band played and practiced at night, followed by long circuitous journeys to various after parties where you had to know someone to get in. The earliest Jacob had been up in a while was the afternoon he dropped off the baby cam, and that had been after three previous attempts to get up at an acceptable baby-cam-dropping-off time.

It was at one of these aforementioned after parties that Uzi, the bassist in Jacob's band, busted him reaching once more for his phone. "Who's the girl?" Uzi leered, gesturing at the phone with an empty shot glass. "She must have your huevos on lock, bro. You've been checking that thing so much, she can probably smell the stink of desperation through the phone."

It was true that Jacob had been preoccupied with his phone. But he certainly didn't need to justify his actions to the dirtbags in his band. He told Uzi to fuck off and left the table to get another drink. The line at the bar was long. So in the interval, Jacob let his thumb instinctively twitch back over to the app.

Preston was awake, but he wasn't crying. He was using the bars of his crib to pull himself up to a sitting position, and he was fiddling with a fuzzy ducky. "Awwwwwww!" exclaimed a girl who looked like a 12-year-old dressed up in her mom's party dress. "Lemmeeeeesssseeeeeee!"

She grabbed the phone out of Jacob's hand in that bratty way young girls think is fun and flirty but is actually super annoying, and held it up to her slightly-older-looking friend. "Loooooooook!" she giggled in an intoxicated drawl. "A wittle baaaaaaayyyyybeeeeeee."

Her friend grabbed the phone and they both started to wordlessly squeal.

Jacob placed his drink order, waited patiently for the shot to arrive, downed it, paid, and then eased his body through the crowd until he was behind the girl now in possession of his phone. He didn't say anything. He just reached down, closed his hand around her hand that was holding the phone, and squeezed hard. She yelped in pain, dropped the phone, and called Jacob a dick. He scooped the phone up off the floor and took off out the fire exit.

When he got home, Jacob moved his futon over to the opposite wall where the outlet was. That way, he could keep the phone plugged in all morning as he slept, and he could tap the app whenever an uneasy dream made him momentarily regret whatever life decisions had led him to waking up alone on a futon on the floor of a decently filthy Lower East Side efficiency. He made a mental note that in the future, if he got home by 10, he would have at least eight or nine hours of quality time with Preston before Dominique or Caroline (but not Ethan, never fucking Ethan) came and took him out of his crib for another busy day.

Jacob placed the phone gently on the pillow beside him and whispered to Preston about how he had started writing poetry in junior high, and how all his buddies had called him a fag. But once he'd learned to play guitar, his poems became songs, and his songs were so good he started getting laid. By the time that vivid tale of triumph over adversity had run its course, Jacob and Preston were both asleep. And for Jacob, it was the kind of deep, black, dreamless death-sleep he thought he'd never experience again.

In the morning, Jacob had the shakes. But he'd always been wary of day drinking, so he decided to walk it off instead. In dark glasses, black jeans, and last-night's T-shirt, he walked north, then west, north, then west. He stopped outside The Strand to look at discounted art books. He stopped at The Bean for iced coffee. He stopped at a random bodega near Penn Station for cigarettes. He walked with his headphones on, bouncing between old playlists and the baby app, even though he knew the crib would be empty.

It took a few hours, but eventually he found himself outside Ethan's building just as Dominique was pushing a stroller the size of a Honda out onto the sidewalk. Jacob waited at

the corner, pretending to text someone, then followed at a discreet distance as Dominique rolled Preston to a small playground four blocks west.

She took Preston gently out of his stroller and got him all strapped in to a baby swing while singing him a song about different kinds of animals. Dominique kept singing under her breath as she pulled out her phone, and soon she was texting with one hand and pushing Preston on the swing with the other. About 20 minutes later, she was joined by another Caribbean nanny with a white baby, and then another. Jacob pretended to read news items on his phone on a bench just outside the playground area, while listening to the nannies gossip and laugh with one another. He tried to send a few messages to Preston telepathically, but the gentle back-and-forth motion of the baby swing soon had the little guy snoozing away, and Jacob didn't want to wake him with intrusive thoughts.

When the nannies finally packed up the babies and headed back to their respective high rises at dusk, Jacob decided to stay on his bench instead of following them. He scrolled through text messages he had been ignoring all day. Some were from girls whose numbers he had assigned descriptions to instead of names: Skull Shirt, Trash Bar, Lotus Tattoo. The more recent messages were from his bandmates regarding their gig that night in Williamsburg. It was already getting late. If Jacob wanted to shower and put on something that looked good on stage before sound check, he'd need to get going now.

But he didn't leave. Instead, he strolled over to the rack of regular swings for bigger kids now hanging empty next to the baby swings. Jacob sat on one, just to try it out while nobody was looking, and pushed off with his feet. At first, the motion made his insides slosh around unpleasantly. But he got used to the sensation after a bit of rhythmic pumping with his legs.

The streetlights seemed to glow brighter as the dusk deepened around them. And as Jacob swung higher and higher, he felt as if he could almost touch their glowing bulbs on his way down. The phone began to buzz in his pocket. He slowed the swing down enough to ease it out, but he didn't answer the call. He just hit "Ignore" and swiped over to the baby app just in time to catch Dominique arranging Preston carefully in his crib before heading home for the

night. Caroline stopped in briefly to smooth the corn silk strands over Preston's forehead and to feel the familiar curl of his miniature fingers around her one big finger. After that, Jacob had Preston all to himself.

"Hey buddy! Did you have fun today?" he whispered warmly at the screen. It was a nice night, with cool breezes ruffling the leaves on the oaks nearby and fluttering the edges of Jacob's shaggy hair as he swung. At the top of the screen, text alerts began to appear over the baby app, accompanied by buzzing phone vibrations that sounded like an angry insect. First they were curious: "Sound check starts in 5. U on ur way?" "Where r u man?" Then they were pissed: "WTF J? 2 good 4 sound check now?" "U bttr b ded or I'm gonna kill u." Then, an hour or so later, the messages were mostly worried. "Pick up yr phone dude." "R U OK?" "Just let 1 of us know where U R. We can come get U."

That last message from Defonte, the drummer, seemed to snap Jacob out of his meditative haze a little bit. If he kept blowing them off, he might return home to find cops tossing his apartment or something. So he texted Defonte back: "All is peaceful. All is quiet." Vague as it may have been, the message seemed to do the trick. Finally his phone fell silent and Jacob once again had an unobstructed view of his nephew.

Preston was hard at work pulling himself up to standing with help from the crib bars. "Go for it buddy!" Jacob whispered to him. "You're a champion!" In no time the kid was standing, and was sort of yanking his body towards and away from the bars as if he were doing some form of baby calisthenics. The boy seemed agitated. Or maybe just excited. There was a gleam in his bright, night-vision eyes as he used one little foot to kick his fuzzy ducky closer to where he was standing. The ducky was pretty big, as far as stuffed animals go. So it provided a substantial platform once the kid got it into his head to steady himself with the crib rail and stand on top of the duck. From that height, the crib rail now only came up to Preston's chest, and the kid was leaning forward, forward, forward, flexing and straining toward the darkness outside his baby cage.

Jacob closed the app, quickly scrolled through his contacts, and called Ethan's home

number. It rang a bunch of times and went to voicemail, even though he was positive somebody must be home with the baby. Then he tried Ethan's cell—no dice. He would have called Caroline's cell if he'd had the number, but he didn't, so he just started running. He flew through an intersection and hurdled over the leash of a cranky-looking bulldog that had created a trip line across the sidewalk. He was so out of breath by the time he reached Ethan's lobby, he could barely speak. So he just held up his phone to the doorman, as if that were all it would take to get waved upstairs.

"Is your brother expecting you sir?" The doorman asked. He was much stiffer and more formal than he had been before. Like maybe it wasn't cool that he'd let Jacob up the first time, and he wasn't about to get in trouble for the same guy twice.

"Please," Jacob panted. "Preston's in trouble. I need to get up there." The doorman picked up the receiver of the phone on his podium warily and dialed a few numbers.

"Sorry to disturb you Mister Ethan," he said. "Your brother is downstairs and says he needs to see you. Something about trouble with the baby." Ethan started replying on the other end of the phone and he wasn't saying, "Tell him to come up." Jacob grabbed the phone from the doorman's hand.

"Ethan!" he shouted into the receiver, interrupting some condescending lecture his brother was in the process of delivering. "It's Jacob. Go check on Preston. Seriously dude, now!"

Ethan didn't answer. The line just went dead. But on the baby app, Jacob could see Ethan flick on the lights and scoop the kid off the crib railing before he hurt himself. Slowly, the adrenaline started to leave Jacob's system and was replaced by nausea. "Mind if I sit?" he asked the doorman, and sagged into an uncomfortable, ultra-modern chair in the lobby that was clearly just for show.

Once the kid was settled back in bed, Ethan started rummaging around all the shelves in Preston's room. He really did look so much like Jacob, for a minute, it was as if he were watching footage from some bizarro alternate universe where he was actually a dad instead of a problematic relation taking up space where he clearly wasn't welcome.

Ethan found the second camera peeking out from behind the bunny and the bear without too much effort. He checked his own baby app on his phone to make sure he knew which camera was the one he and Caroline had installed, and then with a look of blank resolve, he ripped Jacob's camera out of the wall.

The image on Jacob's screen disappeared. "OK, time to go," the doorman said, and extended a hand to help Jacob out of the uncomfortable chair and back onto the sidewalk. Jacob walked a block and then pulled out his phone again to check his messages. Clearly, the gig was a bust. But there might still be an after party somewhere, and he could definitely use a drink. He sent a few texts to find out where everyone had ended up, then caught a cab heading downtown.

The End

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