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The Sitter

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Short Stories

Two pieces in which the author explores the high personal risks inherent in seeking intimacy.

Susan Hubbard



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The Sitter

"You've had plenty of experience with six-month-olds, I guess?" Mrs. Ellis was standing in the center of her beige Indian carpet. Her hands were on her hips.

The sitter looked at Mrs. Ellis as if memorizing her. She looked especially hard at her hair, which was curly from a recent permanent, and at her lips, which were painted a deep shade of plum.

"Sure," the sitter said. She was wearing jeans and a dark blue sweater. The sweater had little balls of loose wool gathered along its sleeves and under the arms. She might have been a pretty girl, had she weighed sixty or seventy pounds less. But had she weighed less, she would never have been babysitting on a Friday night.

"You said you had references," Mrs. Ellis said. She knelt to pick up a baby bottle that lay on the carpet.

"You know the Bowens?" the sitter said.

"The Bowens, no. I'm afraid not." Mrs. Ellis stood up.

"I sat for them. You know the Dardellas?"

Mrs. Ellis shook her head. She was staring at a teddy bear lying on the coffee table.

"I sat for them," the sitter said.

Mrs. Ellis walked quickly to the coffee table and seized the bear. She looked around for a moment. Then she set the bear on a bookshelf, next to a shelf of mystery novels. She read them on nights when she wasn't tired enough to sleep.

"My name is Elizabeth," the sitter was saying. "Not Liz."

"Did I call you Liz? I'm sorry," Mrs. Ellis said. "Aspen is usually awake by now. Her normal nap time is two o'clock. But today, I didn't get her down until four."

The sitter shrugged.

"I'd have liked you to meet her at least before I left," Mrs. Ellis said. "But if I wait any longer I'll be too late." She glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner.

The sitter was pulling bits of wool off her sweater. She rolled them into little balls and dropped them on the floor.

"You remember what I told you?" Mrs. Ellis asked. "About the diapers?"

"I remember," the sitter said.

"Fine," Mrs. Ellis said. "The doctor's number is on the bulletin board by the telephone, just in case. And I'll be at the other number for an hour or so. If I go somewhere else, I'll call."

Mrs. Ellis picked up her purse. The sitter was breathing loudly. She exhaled with a rasping sound.

Mrs. Ellis tucked her ruffled shirt more securely into the waistband of her skirt. Then she went to the door and opened it. The sitter stayed in the living room, pulling more wool from her sweater.

"Well, good-bye for now," Mrs. Ellis said. "When Aspen wakes up, she'll be happy playing here on the carpet. She won't mind if the television's on. She's used to it."

The sitter said, "Bye."

"Don't forget about the diapers. And help yourself to the cookie jar," Mrs. Ellis said. She took a last look at the girl's face. The features were small and set close together, surrounded by puffy flesh.

"Good-bye, then," Mrs. Ellis said. She pushed aside the screen door. By the time it slammed behind her she was halfway to her car. She didn't look back.

"I just got back from Florida," the lawyer said.

"That explains your tan," Mrs. Ellis said. "You look so healthy, compared to the rest of us."

She was chain-smoking menthol cigarettes. The lawyer bought her another glass of wine.

"Are you a regular here?" he asked her.

"No. This is maybe the third time I've come in," Mrs. Ellis said. "I like to have a drink somewhere at the end of the week. It's nice to unwind."

"You like basketball?" he said, gesturing at the television set over the bar.

"No. I don't really understand it," Mrs. Ellis said. "I was just watching it for something to do." She knew she was saying the wrong things.

"What kind of law do you practice?" she said, determined to start again.

"Every kind," the lawyer said. "Civil, criminal, corporate. You name it."

"Divorce?" she asked.

"Yes, I handle divorces, too," he said. "Are you divorced?"

"Nearly divorced," she said. "Another couple of weeks and it should all be settled, they tell me."

"Who's handling it?"

"Bach, Lyman, and Cole," she said. "My husband has Pitman Bruce."

"It's a rough time," he said.

"Are you? Divorced?" she asked.

"No," he said. "No. I'm not even married."

"Not married?" Mrs. Ellis said. "Ever?"

"Never," he said, watching her drink the wine. His eyes were light gray and had a serious expression.

"That's funny," she said.

"What's funny?"

"To be not ever married," she said. "I mean, you must be thirty-five or forty, am I right?"

"You're generous," he said.

"It's just that past a certain age, nearly everyone is married," she said. "It's almost impossible to avoid it."

"Well, I did," he said.

The bartender was listening to them. "You know what his problem is?" the bartender said to Mrs. Ellis. "He's Irish. And he's Catholic. That's what his problem is."

Mrs. Ellis didn't reply. What a thing to say, she thought.

The lawyer laughed. "I live with my mom and dad," he said. "They're wonderful souls, both in their seventies. Another?" he asked, touching her glass.

"Thank you," she said. "Excuse me for a moment. I must make a telephone call."

The telephone was on the wall at the back, near the rest rooms. The corner had a strong smell of floral-scented disinfectant. Mrs. Ellis put in a quarter and dialed. The sitter answered in the middle of the first ring. "Hello."

"This is Mrs. Ellis," Mrs. Ellis said. She cupped her free hand over her right ear to keep out the noise from the bar. "Is everything okay?"

"Sure," the sitter said.

"Is Aspen up yet?"

"No," the sitter said. "No, she isn't."

"Heavens, I think you'd better wake her up then," Mrs. Ellis said. "Otherwise she'll never go to sleep later on."

The sitter didn't say anything.

"Hello? Are you there?" Mrs. Ellis said.

"Sure," the sitter said.

"Did you hear me? About getting Aspen up?"

"I heard you," the sitter said. "No problem."

"That's fine then," Mrs. Ellis said. "I'll see you later. Take care."

The line went dead. Mrs. Ellis listened to the static. She slowly replaced the receiver.

"Everything okay?" the lawyer asked when she returned to the bar.

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Ellis said. "I just had to check in with my baby-sitter." She added, "I'm just a worrier."

"In headaches and in worry," the lawyer said.

"Pardon?"

"It's a line from Auden. 'In headaches and in worry, vaguely life leaks away, and Time will have his Fancy, tomorrow or today.'" The lawyer spoke sonorously. When he stopped, he smiled with self-mockery. "Come along, madam, I'll buy you dinner," he said.

"Oh, I couldn't," Mrs. Ellis said. Then, afraid he wouldn't ask again, she said, "I couldn't, but I will." She finished her wine. "I'm a sucker for poetry," she said.

She telephoned the sitter from the restaurant. She said she'd be a little later than expected.

The sitter said, "No problem," and hung up immediately, as before.

"I'd ask you in, but it's late," Mrs. Ellis said. It was after eleven when they reached Mrs. Ellis's house. The lawyer had followed her home, in order to give the sitter a ride. He'd said, "I'll take the girl home for you. You wouldn't want to take the baby out, when it's so late."

Mrs. Ellis leaned forward slightly, her hand on the roof of the lawyer's car, to talk to him through the window.

"I enjoyed tonight," she said.

"Give me your number," he said. "I'll call you."

"I'm in the directory," she said. "Under James Ellis."

"I'll remember," he said. "I'll be in touch soon."

She said, "I'll just get Elizabeth." She walked briskly to the house, smiling. I can manage, she thought.

She turned the doorknob. The door was locked. She thought the sitter must be afraid of prowlers. She wondered why none of the other sitters had ever locked the door.

Mrs. Ellis knocked. She didn't want to waken Aspen with the door bell. She knocked again, more loudly.

Behind her, the engine of the lawyer's car was softly idling. She knocked once more. Then she rang the bell. She heard the chimes, their sound muffled, through the door.

This is my house, Mrs. Ellis thought.

She hammered at the door with her fist. She pressed the door bell again and again, listening to the chimes echo through the rooms.

The door swung open. The sitter stood inside. She looked over Mrs. Ellis's shoulder, toward the street.

"Where were you!" Mrs. Ellis said, her voice high.

"In the bathroom," the sitter said.

Mrs. Ellis strode past her. All of the window shades in the living room had been lowered. The kitchen curtains were drawn. The rest of the house looked neat and ordinary.

"Did anything happen?" Mrs. Ellis said.

The sitter said, "It went okay."

"What time did Aspen finally go to bed?"

"Nine," the sitter said.

"Did you give her the bottle?"

"Sure," the sitter said. She was staring at the carpet.

"Were there any problems?"

"No problems," the sitter said.

Mrs. Ellis looked around the room again. She heard the lawyer rev the car engine outside.

"All right," Mrs. Ellis said. "All right. Let's see. I picked you up at five." She glanced at the grandfather clock. "It's eleven-thirty now. That makes it—"

"Nine seventy-five," the sitter said.

Mrs. Ellis did some mental calculations. "Yes. That's correct," she said. She took out her wallet. "Well, let's call it ten, shall we?"

The sitter took the money. She held it loosely in her hand, without looking at it.

"Now, Mr. Morrissey is going to drive you home," Mrs. Ellis said.

"He's waiting outside."

The sitter moved toward the door. Her footsteps rattled the china in the glass-doored cabinet.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Ellis called after her.

The door slammed. Mrs. Ellis shook her head.

She yawned. She stepped out of her high-heeled shoes and stooped to pick them up. Carrying them, she walked upstairs. Her feet made no sound on the thick carpeting.

She put the shoes away in her closet. Then she tiptoed toward Aspen’s room. The door had been left ajar. Mrs. Ellis stopped on the threshold. She peered inside. It was too dark to see. The overhead light would waken the baby. She went back to her room, found her flashlight, and returned to the nursery. She switched on the flashlight.

Aspen was asleep. She was lying on her back. Her round head was white in the flashlight’s beam. Her small hand was pink, curled against a blue blanket.

Mrs. Ellis took a deep breath and exhaled silently. She turned off the flashlight and quietly shut the door.

She was in the bathroom, taking off her makeup, when the telephone rang. Startled, she looked at her face, half-coated with cold cream, in the mirror. No one ever called her at night.

She ran to the upstairs extension in her bedroom. She removed the receiver, then plugged in the telephone. “Hello?”

“Is Lizzie there?” The voice was thin. It belonged to an elderly person. Mrs. Ellis couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman.

“Do you mean Elizabeth? Why, no,” Mrs. Ellis said. “May I ask who is calling?”

“This is her father,” the voice said. “Lizzie said she’d be home by midnight. It’s 12:27. Now, where is she?”

“Why, I don’t know,” Mrs. Ellis said. “She should be there. A friend of mine drove her home, and that was half an hour ago.”

“Mrs. Ellis,” the voice said. “Where’s my daughter?”

“She left here half an hour ago,” Mrs. Ellis said. “She must be there.”

“Mrs. Ellis, you get hold of your friend,” the voice said. “You find out what’s going on here.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Mrs. Ellis said. “I can’t imagine where she is.”

“You call that friend,” the voice said. “Then you call me. It’s 12:28.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Ellis said. She replaced the receiver. For a moment she sat on the bed, looking at the telephone. The digital clock on the bedside table clicked to 12:29. She picked up the receiver and dialed.

“Directory assistance for what city?” a voice said.

“Boston,” Mrs. Ellis said. “A listing for Patrick Morrissey.”

“Address?”

“I don’t have the address.”

“We show no listing for any last name Morrissey, first name Patrick,” the voice said.

“That can’t be,” Mrs. Ellis said. “He’s an attorney.”

“Ma’am, we show no listing for any last name Morrissey, first name—”

Mrs. Ellis hung up. Her hands were sweating. She was lighting a cigarette when the telephone rang again. She grabbed the receiver. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Ellis?”

“Yes, yes, is Elizabeth home?”

"No," the voice said. "No, she is not. What's the story on this friend of yours?"

"I couldn't reach him," Mrs. Ellis said. "I tried. There's some trouble with the telephone."

"Mrs. Ellis," the voice said. "It's 12:34, Mrs. Ellis. I've been waiting here since midnight. I'll wait twenty minutes more. Then I'm calling the police."

Mrs. Ellis twisted the receiver cord around her fingers.

"Your friend," the voice said. "Who is this friend?"

"He's a lawyer," Mrs. Ellis said, her voice weak. "His name is Patrick Morrissey."

"I've never heard of him," the voice said. "A lawyer, you say? Where does he live?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Ellis said.

"You don't know where he lives? And you let him drive my daughter home?"

Mrs. Ellis didn't say anything.

The voice said, "I'll wait twenty minutes. Then I call the police."

Mrs. Ellis pulled the receiver away from her ear. She looked into the tiny black holes in the mouthpiece.

The voice said, "You haven't heard the end of this."

She sat on the edge of the sofa in the living room, in the dark. She smoked cigarette after cigarette. The grandfather clock struck one.

Immediately afterward the telephone rang. The telephone was a wooden model, a replica of an antique, selected by her husband. She picked it up on the third ring.

A voice said, "Jane?"

"Patrick," she said. She sat down.

"I just wanted to tell you—"

"Where is she?" Mrs. Ellis said.

"Where is who?"

"Elizabeth!" Mrs. Ellis said. "The sitter! What have you done with Elizabeth?"

"I drove her home," he said. "What's wrong?"

"She's not home. Her father called. He's going to call the police!"

"Now wait a minute," he said. "Calm down."

"Where is she?" Mrs. Ellis said.

"Jane, I drove her home. I even waited while she went inside."

"Then why isn't she there? Her father called. She isn't there!"

"It was a gray house," he said. His voice was cold. "On the corner of Lincoln and Water Street. She went in by the side door."

"I tried to call you!" she said. "You don't have a telephone!"

"Of course I have a telephone," he said. "The number is unlisted. I'll give it to you now, if you like."

"I have to call her father," she said. She was looking at the windows, at the drawn shades.

"It's 637-9081," he said. "Jane? I wanted to tell you how much—"

"I have to go," she said. She pressed the cradle firmly. When the dial tone resumed, she read the sitter's number off the bulletin board and dialed.

"Hello." The old man answered at once.

"This is Mrs. Ellis," she said. "I've just spoken to my friend. He

tells me he dropped off your daughter, just as I said he did.”

“Your friend,” the voice said. “This friend of yours—”

Mrs. Ellis interrupted. “He says she came in by the side door. Have you checked her room?”

“The side door? The side door? I would have heard her if she came in—”

“Have you checked her room?” Mrs. Ellis repeated.

“You hold on,” the voice said.

Mrs. Ellis tapped her fingernails against the receiver. She glanced at the window and automatically reached for the shade, to raise it. Then she stopped. She didn’t raise the shade. She looked across the room, at the other window. She thought of the minutes she’d waited outside, pounding on the locked door.

She let the receiver fall into its cradle with a thud. She went upstairs, directly into Aspen’s room. She switched on the overhead light.

The baby hadn’t moved. She was still lying on her back, half-covered by the blanket.

Mrs. Ellis drew off the blanket. Then, bending over the crib, she pulled apart the snap fasteners of the baby’s pajamas. Aspen stirred and murmured. Mrs. Ellis ran her hands over the baby’s shoulders, down her arms, over her belly, inside her diaper, down her legs. She turned the baby over and examined her back. The baby’s skin was smooth and white in the bright light.

Satisfied, Mrs. Ellis snapped up the pajamas. She switched off the light. She picked up the baby and went to sit in the rocking chair by the window.

She rocked back and forth. Through the window she could see the silhouette of the water tower on the hill and, past it, the lights of the office buildings downtown. The lights seemed to flicker in the darkness. She rocked back and forth. Aspen’s eyes slid open. The pupils were dark and unfocused. Almost immediately they closed again. Mrs. Ellis held her tighter. She listened to the baby’s breathing. Far away, the telephone rang. She watched the lights of the buildings. They made her think of stars. The telephone rang and rang, as regular a sound as the baby’s breathing, or the ticking of the grandfather clock downstairs. From outside came the vague roar that was always there on quiet nights. She knew it wasn’t trains, or cars, or factory noise. And it wasn’t the sea. It was noise that came out of the dark. It came out of nowhere. She listened as she rocked.