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Feralucce Savage
University of New Orleans

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Tea Time

by Feralucce Savage

I gotta tell you, it's difficult being single and childless in this day and age. Seriously, people get downright offended when you don't have children. And what's worse, they tell you just how offended they are. In great detail. At length. Without ceasing.

"Imagine if your parents didn't want you!" they say.

For me, this one is easy. My parents *didn't* want me. They put me up for adoption as soon as I could survive without my mother's milk. That doesn't stop the comments, though. Those who were blessed with crotch fruit have many gambits to play against the childless.

"There's still time!"

Not for me, there's not.

"Kids add meaning to life!"

I am an artist, writer, filmmaker, physicist, and philosopher. My life has meaning.

"Having children is the best decision I ever made."

Good for you. It would not be for me.

"I didn't know who I was 'til I had kids."

That would be because you have never been subjected to any significant amount of stress. Trauma has a way of showing us just who we are. I've seen my share of stress and trauma. I don't need a child to know who I am.

"You'd be such a great parent, though!"

No. No. I would not. I would be a horrible parent. I have all the parental instincts of a soggy Ritz cracker.

"Who is going to take care of you when you are older?"

Considering the sheer amount of weird medical things wrong with me, I don't think growing old is going to be an issue. And, if by some weird twist of fate, I live to be geriatric, I would not want to saddle kids with changing my diapers.

"You're missing out on the best part of your life."

Really? Okay. That's a risk I am willing to take.

"I said the same thing when I was your age. You'll get over it."

Oh, you poor, sweet, summer child. You are five years my junior. I will not "get over it." This is a conscious choice.

"Being a parent will teach you to be less selfish."

Listen, Karen, you don't know me. I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, selfish.

“What does your significant other think about that?”

When I am asked this one, I turn to my dog—a 232-pound bullmastiff—and ask her. “Roux? What do you think of that?” She is just excited to be considered.

“Children are *magical*!”

No. Unicorns are magical. Harry Potter is magical. Penn & Teller are magical. Children are children.

“What do you have against children?”

That’s it. That’s the one. I don’t have anything against children, *per se*. It’s just that, as these things go, children and I are not compatible. My particular flavor of autism renders the thoughts in my skull a chaotic, boiling mass of oatmeal. I have spent most of my life learning to wrestle my thoughts into a coherent pattern. All of this is to say, I tend to be exceptionally logical.

Children... are not.

I have arachibutyrophobia. Some people say this is the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth, but that isn’t right. It is a fear of stickiness in general. I know! I know! I know it’s silly. But phobias are like that. They aren’t rational. I have worked long and hard to overcome this fear. For the most part, I can deal with it, but if I grab a bottle of soda that is sticky or walk into an spider web, I react in a way that drastically betrays my generally cool exterior.

And here’s the thing. Children are sticky. I don’t know what it is about them, but they are *always* sticky. It’s like they have these glands in their skin, the kind that let snails and slugs stick to everything. You think I’m exaggerating, but it’s true. I once sat in the living room as my best friend bathed his child. He dried his spawn off with a towel, and then it toddled towards me and reached for me.

Guess what?

It.

Was.

Sticky.

Then people ask, “Hasn’t your biological clock started ticking?” The thing is. It hasn’t. I am gender nonconforming, asexual, and aromantic. I don’t think I *have* a biological clock, and if I do, it was certainly broken in shipping. I don’t feel the need to engage in romance or sexual activities. I’ve never had a twinge of thought about being a parent.

It is just not who or what I am.

“Don’t you want someone to carry on your family lineage?”

I don't have to. My brother has spawned several times. My sister also gave birth to one girl, my niece, who now looks up at me after answering the door.

"Untie Max! I didn't know you were coming over today!"

"Well, you know now!"

Over the years, people have insisted that if I just spent time with children, I would change my mind. I spend a lot of time with this child. While she is an exception to the rule, I have never even come close to changing my mind.

Her name is Maria. She is, well, child-sized. Like my sister, she has a tangled mass of black curls and piercing green eyes. I think my sister put headphones on her belly and played the collected works of Charles Babbage for her during the pregnancy. That is to say, Maria has never been illogical.

And best of all—*she's never been sticky!*

My sister and her husband deserve some time off. I have watched as the rigors of parenthood have worn them down from generally energetic people into the tired, shambling wrecks they've become. My sister used to be effervescent—practically perky—but now she is listless. Kind of like cabbage left out in the sun for a couple days.

Once a week, I give them a night off. My niece and I spend a pleasant, non-sticky evening together. We watch movies, play board games, play video games. You know, kid's stuff. It's been difficult to figure out, but Maria has made it relatively easy and pleasant.

This evening, she presents me with the handset of her Fisher Price phone and says, "It's for you!" I don't care who you are. I don't care how little parental instinct you have. When a seven-year-old presents that red plastic handset to you, you answer the phone.

"Hello?"

Maria smiles. "It's Nannette. She wants to have a tea party. I told her she would have to ask you."

"Why not your mom?"

"Because this is *our* night, Untie Max!"

I wink at her and wiggle my ears, an ability that she and I share, and say into the phone with my best British accent, "Nannette, your presence is requested at the behest of her most serene and dignified highness, the Duchess Maria. Tea and crumpets shall be served 15 minutes henceforth and forthwith."

Maria serves tea with a dignity that rivals the Queen of England.

The three of us, Maria, Nannette, and myself, dine on peanut butter and jelly finger sandwiches, tea, and crumpets. Evidently, “crumpet” is the word the nobility use for Twinkies, but they’re delicious, nonetheless. My sister had anticipated the tea party and purchased banana Twinkies. She knew these were my favorite. I was advised that the tea would be real if I believed hard enough, and that it was not the responsibility of the chef if I could not taste it.

I suspect that Maria enjoys my presence because I let her get away with things that my sister wouldn’t allow. After we have eaten our fill, we hold an impromptu salon, during which we watch a few episodes of *Bob’s Burgers* on my laptop. I do not think my sister would approve of such things, but she shall never know.

After that, I tuck Maria into bed. She’s asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow.

I walk back down the stairs, and open my laptop on the kitchen table. My sister and her husband aren’t due back for several more hours, and I plan to take advantage of the time to write. I have a story due soon, and I always seem to work better anywhere other than my office. I’ve hammered out about 500 words when the phone rings.

I stand and cross the kitchen in a couple steps. I pick up the phone as it finishes the second ring.

“Hello. Belcher residence.”

There’s a dial tone. People can be so impatient. Before I can hang up the phone, it rings again. No. It isn’t ringing again. The plastic Fisher Price phone is ringing. That seemed odd, but it isn’t the classic Chatter phone I had as a kid. It’s a newer model. Maybe that is something it can do?

I pick up the receiver, expecting to hear some cartoonish voice, but there is nothing. The receiver doesn’t seem to be heavy enough to have any real technology in it. I turn it over and look, but there are no speaker holes, either. I flip the phone over, looking for a battery compartment or switch. There is nothing like that. Weird.

I drop the phone when the doorbell rings. In and of itself, the doorbell is not a scary sound, but I was distracted by this silly, plastic phone. It rings again. Somehow, when it fell, it managed to land right side up with the handset on the cradle.

I shake it off and rush to open the front door. Walking away from me, toward the street is a woman in a dress that I can only describe as... well... decadent and ridiculous. The dress looks like a lavender pile of whipped cream, roses, and glitter.

“Hello?” I call out.

The woman looks back at me over her shoulder. If someone were to ask me what a princess looked like, it would be her. Her face lights up when she sees me standing there. "Oh, thank goodness! You're still awake. I was afraid you would be asleep!"

"Do you need help?"

"Oh, no! I just left something inside." With that declaration, she gathers up her excessively fluffy dress and brushes past me.

"Wait. No." I raise my voice, but not too loud, lest I wake Maria. "Stop!"

She is already standing in front of the table, which still has a couple Twinkies and Maria's tea set laid out on it.

"What?" she asks, seeming genuinely confused.

"Who are you?"

"Oh! You don't recognize me?"

"Should I?"

"Well, we did just have tea! But I understand. I removed my makeup. I'm so frumpy without it." She looks down at herself and lets the ruffles drop as she mutters, "Though, how anyone can mistake this dress for anyone else's is beyond me."

I laugh loudly. I've never been fond of my laugh. It sounds like a rhinoceros crossed with a car horn, and I snort when something strikes me as really funny.

I snort.

"You are telling me... you're..."

"Nannette. Yes. We had lovely finger sandwiches, crumpets, and the most delightful tea. I set my ring aside, so I didn't get it sticky. When I left, I forgot it on the saucer."

I look down, and there is indeed a ring laying on the saucer. I bend down and pick it up, turn it over in my fingers. It seems impossible, but this ring matches her dress: Dainty, red gold, featuring a lavender rose with a purple diamond in its center. What's really confusing is the inscription, which reads "Nannette."

I hand Nannette the ring without saying anything.

She slips it on her finger and sweeps from the room. The vacuum of her passing pulls me along with her, and before I know what is happening, we are on the porch outside the door.

"Thank you so much for the tea!" she says. "We really must do this again soon. Please tell Maria I will call her in the morning."

With that, she is gone, into the night.