

It's Too Quiet in Here

by

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It was too quiet for them to be up to any good.

“Carol, I have to get off now. I have to make dinner, and the kids are in the tub, and I need to check on them. I’ll call you later.”

When I opened the bathroom door, what confronted me was one of those straw-that-broke-the-camel’s-back moments. I was tired. The day had begun early, as usual, and included getting the dog out the back door, the kids to school, and myself to work. After eight hours at the paying job, I had arrived at hearth and home to begin the unpaid work of housekeeper, laundress, chief cook and bottle washer, bill payer, and homework helper/enforcer – in general, the work of a typical single mother with too little money and never enough time. First on my list this night had been to get the “angels with dirty faces” bathed. But now I faced three clean and shining faces with frightened eyes sitting in a tub whose water had turned cotton candy pink because of the unrolled roll of toilet paper that now decorated the children, the bath water and the rubber ducky.

“What have you done? You guys are really in trouble now!” I shouted with frustration.

Pulling them one by one out of the old, claw-footed tub, I had to pick wet toilet paper pieces off their bodies and out of their hair before I could dry them off. Stevie, the youngest, was first and he remained silent and shivering – from fear, I suspect – throughout the process. Kyle, my middle child, was next. He tried to explain the reason he had proposed and implemented this experiment. “I just wanted to see what it would look like!” he wailed. Kerry was last. As the oldest, she was most often the instigator of the “experiments” that would result in all three of them being reprimanded at the least or taken to the emergency room at the most extreme. Surprisingly, she was also the child who most hated getting into trouble – or, to be more exact, the consequences. She always suffered terrible remorse.

“Don’t worry, Mommy. We’ll clean it up. We’re sorry. Don’t be mad,” she pleaded.

I was so upset at the mess and waste – even a squandered roll of toilet paper could cause a budget crisis – that I ordered them to put on their pajamas and wait in the bedroom for a spanking. Immediately they each began the distinctive rituals they each had developed to prepare for whacks from the wooden spoon.

Stevie, who was only four, tried cunning: Can I talk her out of it? If I put on six pairs of underpants, it won’t hurt too much. Can I divert her attention? Can I make her laugh? His big brother Kyle’s way was quiet, sad acceptance. He was the one who always tried the hardest not to cry, stiffening

his body and holding his breath. He was also the thinnest so he had the least natural “padding.” Kerry would start to snivel before I even got the spoon. She would beg. Over and over she would cry, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Sometimes she tried to hide. Once she even sneaked out of the house when my back was turned and was found, after some angry and scary moments, in a neighbor’s yard in the next block.

I gave them each their spanking and told them to stay in their room. I cleaned the tub of the toilet paper one clump at a time, pulling from the sides and bottom as gravity tried to suck it down the drain. I finished cooking and finally summoned them for supper. The two boys trotted out with meek but hungry faces, ready to get on with life – food, too, can soothe the savage beast. Kerry did not follow. I called again. Reluctantly she emerged with head down and tears still falling on her sweet, six-year-old cheeks.

“Kiki, it’s time to eat,” I said gently, putting my arm around her.
“Come on, sweetie pie.”

“I’m not hungry,” was her whimpering reply.

“Why not, honey?”

“I swallowed too many tears.”