

Sidney grabbed today's mail from the kitchen table, looking over a pile of unpaid bills.

To Abby, he warmly said, "A zip is a pretty cool device. Saves you from including the city and state, saves you time. What's more valuable than it, time? Gramma W. recalls the days before zips, that is what she tells me. Like the Pliocene Age, the old britch," said Max's dad. Sidney was being witty, but watching his language. "The Pli-o-cene was before You-Know-Who maybe did not create the world," he said. He was being overly sarcastic in front of his son, Abby said, talk like this made him sound like a punk.

Abby was Max's mom. Twenty-nine, she was a dirty blond with a thick waist and broad shoulders. Thirty-two, Sidney was tree tall. He was dad. Max had to put up with them, their ideas, their behavior. What better choice had he? He lived with all of it. Max was three and a half.

Max's home was apartment #1, 34 Benevolent St., zip 87501. A zip was a code, but it was not a secret. It also was a number. Thirty-four, Max told himself, was a number. He climbed into his wooden highchair in the small kitchen of their ground floor apartment. It was the last time he was to make this climb, if he had squat to say about it. He had outgrown this baby chair, in his opinion, eons ago.

Apartment #1 was a three-room pad with low ceilings of Styrofoam panels from Costco. Its kitchen was dated. It had a yucky brown carpet that no one likes. A single bathroom was tiled in a pattern of small black and red squares. The larger of the two bedrooms had been converted into Sidney's noisy workshop. He, Abby, and baby Lizabeth slept in the smaller bedroom. It had a large walk-in closet with a window, and this was the sleeping quarters of Max and Leo.

Leo/JAGoodman

Abby fronted their well-used white Kelvinator, standing tall in her plain kitchen. She had time to fix a healthy lunch, she told Sidney, from not cleaning the fridge perfectly. Abby did not get high on house-cleaning, she said, but she eventually got 'round to it. She was, after all, a civilized adult.

Sidney grabbed a Tecate from the fridge. To him, Abby said, "I could care less about perfect. I am getting ready for tonight's seminar with my time." Abby cinched her white apron. It said, "Feminity Rules," she told Max, shutting the fridge door left wide open by her man.

Abby wore a peasant's skirt from Oaxaca, a white cotton blouse with threads of gold and red embroidered its short elastic sleeves. Leather mocs from the Trading Post were happy on her feet. She might never have afforded moccasins of this quality, if not for a super sale. Max's mom had the habits, she confessed there in the kitchen, of an earth mother at times. Abby was an entomologist practicing her trade, in her opinion, at a low level.

Abby had one prestigious degree, one was not enough. She broke her brain at the stinky Great Books College for a second degree on Monday and on Thursday nights. It was useless for her professional, but useful hypothetically for her personal growth. What was a second degree, Max asked himself? He waited for a healthy lunch, was malcontent in his highchair.

A second degree? It was when a kid, like himself, was quizzed about private stuff. Earlier today, a nosy Richard had nooded Max to tell a secret about Leo. It was at Richard's bungalow. Max ignored it. If he had a secret about Leo, he was not telling a living soul, Abby or Sidney. He was a guy able to keep a secret assiduously.

Max was tall for his age. His bod' had the toned physique of a swimmer. His leonine hair fell over large ears and a slim neck, hiding mom's sea blue eyes and dad's pale skin. It needed a

Leo/JAGoodman

haircut from the barber at the mall, Mr. Arnold. Funny Sidney called him the barbarian, Matthew Arnold.

Leo's looks? It was debatable. But not too dissimilar from Max's, especially if you looked inside him. His activities, the same. Leo, the lion, was Max's friend.

Max kicked the heels of his Keds against the legs of his scratchy wooden highchair. His sneakers were green. They had Velcro, not laces.

Abby slaved away at the kitchen counter, dropping two slices of Bunny Bread into the toaster. It is the only bread, she muttered, the kids eat, darn it.

To Sidney, she said, "Meant to tell you. Visited with Richard this morning on the way home from the mall. Pleasant visit, cookies and a strong coffee. Civilized conversation," she said, whipping up a nice batch of egg salad.

"Visited with Richard? How's he doin' these days, the dufus?" Sidney asked. "Can't make up my mind, is he a plus or a minus in our lives?"

Sidney spread four green placemats on the kitchen table. He was dressed in a pair of paint-splashed, white overalls and the tan work boots. He had substituted the boots for the polka-dot flip flops earlier in the morning. Sidney often wore the stinky old flip-flops in the studio summer or winter. They were a good luck charm. He now snipped wire-rimmed glasses onto his pudgy nose. On his chin was a dark goatee nicely trimmed. Sidney's preferred dress was a Dead-Head's tee, faded jeans, and leather sandals, not the flip flops when not creating in the studio. He, loosely speaking, was a starving artist with an MFA from NYU.

Sidney was seen as clever, Abby witty in the Santa Fe arts community, as long as it not over-kill. They hardly wished to be dilettantes. Each was the curious type, shy about being taken as pedantic. They were mommy and daddy, Max told himself, kicking the wooden chair. He had

Leo/JAGoodman

to live with them, hang in there -- what else? -- unless he like ran off to an orphanage or to friend's house, if he had the stuff. It is the plight of every child that has parents living with him. He is stuck. He puts up with their talk (which he echoes) their ideas (he accedes to), their values, their weaknesses, food, housing, G-d help him, and a thousand other burdens!

Sidney had a funny anecdote about this side of childhood. It was about his cousin James. James' dad grew up poor during the Depression of the 30's, his family a bit short of food, he repeatedly told James, he had few toys, little spending money. Today James' dad was a busy doctor, made a nice living, and the family had a plentiful life. How lucky James was to live in this family, his dad reminded him once more, telling James of own his privations as a child, until James, age six, said,

“Dad, aren't you glad you're living with us now?”

Abby chopped away at the hard-boiled eggs. Sidney leaned against the Kelvinator.

To him, she said, “Can't make up your mind about Richard, plus or minus? Big plus, surely. And don't you call him a dufus. What if Richard had the Gyges ring on his finger with its power to make him invisible, he heard you say this?” she asked, giving Max a wink. Max squirmed in his highchair. He hungered for his half of an egg-salad sandwich, please. He was being patient, didn't like it much.

Sidney dropped a glass of apple juice on each of three of placemats. He said, “If Richard were standing here, invisible, not sure he would do anything. Half the time he reminds me of his stories. Lots of talk, little action, Jackson,” said Sidney.

“Better than action, Jackson, no thought,” Abby said, cas-u-is-tic, giving her man the look. It was a pert look, hinting that Sidney at times slacked in the thought department, Max guessed.

Leo/JAGoodman

At the porcelain sink, Abby said, “I like Richard’s stories. Maybe not for you, if you are looking for an action hero. They are about folks like us doin’ our thing, hanging around the house, being private, working on our passions, talking out problems, hanging onto principles, and not selling out to the man. Doin’ it, slowly but surely. They reveal the beauty and the value of conversation and of ideas. They might even show us happiness in sorrow. If a reader does not relish listening to a good conversation, contemplating important ideas, he needs to find another writer. Like to see Richard write a book about us one day, Max, Liz, Leo. Knows us intimately. He is crazy about Max. It’d be Richard, if I had not married you, if he’d have me. Sid, you and Richard are quite simpatico. You are able to speak your mind with Richard, vice-versa. That’s not nothing, that’s a friend. Can’t speak your mind, not a friend. Is Richard immature or precocious at times? Maybe. He’s retained the inner child. Has a tendency toward depression? So? It’s when he forgets or refuses to take his pills. Each of us gets depressed, some more than others. Our forefathers got this, relying on the humor theory. We’re up, we’re down. Some more down than up for the duration. Pessimist, optimist. Need both for the survival of the species. One warns of danger, the other brings promise.” said Abby in talkative flow. She was being a bit pe-dan-tic, Max advised himself, not kicking his chair. Abby was speedy today. His mom downed a couple of espressos at breakfast.

Abby slopped the Hellman’s into the chopped eggs. She said, “A bigger issue, Sid? Filter the real from the illusory, especially in a time of danger or of promise,” she lectured. “Richard is my friend, your friend. Don’t disrespect it. We’d lose something money can’t buy, it we to lose Richard from our lives. Something valuable and spiritual. Richard is likely the brightest, most intuitive among the three of us, isolated as we are. Here’s a guy with a sense of humor. How rare is that?” Abby said.

Leo/JAGoodman

It was Sidney's turn to get in a few words, please. He was giving Max a neck message. He said, "Richard has a sense of humor. It's rare, agreed. Still, he's a bit of a spoiled rich kid, bit soft."

Sidney's tone with Abby was curt on this winter day. That was Max's take on it. His dad was grumpy over the d-mn messy apartment (to quote him) or something, who knows?

"Richard soft, a rich kid?" Abby asked. She was no longer mixing. "Don't believe it. It takes a hardy soul to work at the shelter. I've seen him dish out some tough love there. Don't doubt it. Then, this spoiled rich kid you refer to. Don't engage in a presumption, before you've the facts. Richard had a job during all four years of college, always took a summer job, was on scholarship. He has evidently built up a bit of bankroll. How's he done it? His business. He happens to be our loan company, loan officer, and our financial safety net. God forbid, he calls in our debts. We'd be busted, in danger of losing the kids. Might come any time with his roller-coaster personality, up down, down up. Your parents and mine agree on nothing. Yet they have each separately threatened to take away the children. They don't want their grandchildren to starve, speaking of hyperbole! Don't under-estimate Richard. There are many sides to Richard, you've only seen one or two. I've witnessed him going from very down to very up in a matter of hours ... minutes, or the reverse.

"Then, he is ... or I should say, was a visionary. Believe it. At Swarthmore, he told me days in advance of the results I'd get a ninety-four or -five on a final. Got a ninety-four and a half. A week before graduation, he predicted the college Prez sick on graduation day. The stuffy dude had a minor heart attack that morning. Richard has had visits *of a kind* from the great writers and thinkers of the past. He has of course never exactly told me this. I've picked up hints. Knows

Leo/JAGoodman

their work by heart. Richard is a keeper. Losing Richard would be like losing Leo. You surely do not want that to happen,” Abby said.

“Lose Leo? No, of course not,” said Sidney. He scrunched into one of three plain wooden chairs at the shaky table, saying next, “It is not every parent, though, that encourages this Leo sort of thing. Take my dad. He might crush a child’s fantasy before it got off ground, maybe with a brief tongue-lashing. I am not going to repeat that behavior with Max or Liz. Okay, you win. My uncle Brady was quite the realist. He used to say, ‘if you have one real friend in a lifetime, you will be a lucky man.’ Maybe he was right. I really do love Richard. I mean it,” said Sidney.

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2/ An Healthy, Organic Egg

While he plopped the plastic forks and the spoons, paper plates, and a glass salt shaker on the lunch table, daddy had spoken to Abby *insolently*. He was being noisy, said Abby, purely noisy. It was for no good reason, Max was sorry to learn. Max was minding his own business, had to hear it.

Sidney liked to hand out nicknames. He had called Max's mom, Simone de Bovine, the big philosopher. It, apparently, was an attempt at wit.

"That was a snarky remark, if there ever was one," Abby told Sidney. It came out of the wild blue yonder that was called nowhere, she reiterated.

Sidney said, "The pad needs tidying up, Abby. If we will set aside the studio (my beeswax), what's left? A single bedroom, a small kitchen, a bathroom. What's the big deal? It is your week," he added.

Abby bit her lower lip. She wiped the Hellman's Light from her long fingers onto the "Feminity Rules" apron. She lifted her middle finger straight into the air. She aimed it at Sidney. It was a stern gesture.

Abby said, "I'm Simone de Bovine ... my week for cleaning? See this finger. Perch, little birdie. What's the big deal? The small deal is firstly this crummy low-ceiling, three-room joint we can't afford. Then this *minute* kitchen, this stinky carpeted floor, in case you had not noticed, Sid, after living here a year," Abby said. She pointed her same finger at the models of He-man and She-Ra sprawled beneath the kitchen table among a gobble of Max's plastic toys scattered there. She pointed her finger to the carpet stains impossible to erase, Abby said.

Leo/JAGoodman

Sidney nursed his Tecate. He half circled the kitchen table, stopping behind one of its chairs. Max and Leo were underneath the table, listening in to the a-cri-mon-y (which does not mean a *marriage*).

To Abby, Sidney said, “The carpet is incorrigible, I don’t disagree. Who likes a clean-up? Goes back to the cavemen. Take the Gila cave dwellers that lived south of us a thousand years ago. They *enjoyed* clean up? There’s more to life, though, than pure thought,” he said. He twirled his dark handlebar mustache with one finger and thumb. Reaching into a front pocket of his white overalls, he grabbed a tortoiseshell pipe. He lit it by striking a wooden match on a boot sole. The kitchen was full of pipe smoke. The room smelled, to Max, like burnt cherries.

Sidney’s quip about “Simon de Bovine, the big philosopher” had started the bad trouble between mom and dad. It was not as a negligible crack. Abby was reading too many books, it said, doing too much *thinking* perhaps. She should feel guilty for ignoring the dirty laundry stacked up a couple of inches high? Abby didn’t wish to hear it, any of it, she told her man. You are reading, said Sidney, too much into it.

These two grown-ups might have easily, Max had to think, side-step this bellicose palaver. It was trivial, compared to the big stuff. The big stuff was their lack of real dough (not the dough of biscuits). It put a mom and a dad on edge, half-ready to jump off the earth like Felix the Cat in the Saturday morning cartoons. The typical financial strain on a young family does bad things to the best of us, Abby told him days earlier.

Abby smoothed the egg salad on a slice of Bunny Bread for Max (sharing with Leo). It was on whole wheat for herself and Sidney.

She said, “Sid, you accuse me of engaging in pure thought. Call me the big philosopher? That’s a dig. For what? Being self-involved? Look who’s talking! What about this g-d studio

Leo/JAGoodman

of yours? Who cleans it ever, speaking of self-absorbed? What do you believe is happening in that sink hole, if it's not pure art? It stinks of stale pipe smoke and onanism," she said.

Stale smoke? O-nan-ism? Max's mom was irritated. She was ripped. Abby dropped her knife full of egg salad on the kitchen table. She jogged from the thinly carpeted kitchen into their single bathroom. She'd had enough of acrimony. She looked for her red cell phone on a shelf above the bathroom sink. She pulled it from a beaded cloth purse. She was wrathful. Max had jumped down from his highchair. Action, Jackson! He trailed behind his mom as loyally as a Rin-Tin-Tin. Abby's POed fingers punched a number on the cell. She did it, despite the fact numbers are not that meaningful, they merely quantified our lives. It was Richard's phone number. Abby dialogued with Richard discreetly, it seemed, for about a hundred hours. It was the lack of conciliation and of respecting difference that troubled her, was the children coming first, saving the marriage, she screamed. She, then, chilled out.

Max chowed down his yummy sandwich at the wobbly table. It was cut into quarters. Quarters were also money. Money talked. It spoke to your needs and your desires. Abby handed Max three peanut butter crackers, funneling the apple juice from a glass pitcher into a plastic safety cup. She slipped the left-over egg salad into the fridge. The safety cup was for a sleepy Lizbeth plopped now into her own highchair at the table. Built by the man himself, daddy, the table was a tad unstable. Liz had awakened from her nap minutes earlier, she swept from her carry cot in the studio into the kitchen by daddy. She firstly was to be hydrated, Abby said, then her diaper changed, please. Liz was eighteen months, slim, bow-legged. She had a square jaw, green eyes, and a little bit of hair. Liz was learning to sit up. Just now she was tilting in a *smaller* highchair than Max's. Max climbed down from his bigger chair, having knocked off the last crumb of his lunch. Sidney had picked up Max's highchair for a song (that

Leo/JAGoodman

lacked a tune) at the Goodwill on the same day he miraculously found the electric bread-maker there dirt cheap.

Abby faced the kids. She said, “Best chow I have. Better than yesterday. I’m improving, I trust, at this motherhood business. It is Oreos later on. For supper? Left-over egg salad. Or grilled cheese. It’s nap time for you, Max. For Leo, too,” she said. “The first of you big guys to nod off is a healthy organic egg! Isn’t that what every pregnant mother wishes for,” Abby quipped. She hoped to be up-beat. To Sidney, she said, “Liz needs a change, pronto. She’s as wet as the ocean.”

Sidney had his fork in hand. He dug it into the egg salad bowl snatched from the fridge. It was tonight’s dinner. He was quiet about it. He leaned on the fridge door he had again left open.

To him, Abby said, “Liz would love to help daddy in the workshop. For a few hours, if I may drop a strong hint, after a change, a fresh diaper. Mommy desperately needs time to herself. Alone time,” Abby said. She grabbed the mixing bowl from Sidney, edging it beside the low-cal strawberry and chocolate shakes in the Kelvinator.

The low-cal shakes meant Abby was dieting again, except for a casual brew. She was, it seemed, always dieting. It was the beautiful, amazing pregnancies that did it, piled the extra twenty pounds on a thick waist harder to get rid of than a sense of guilt for ... for not holding a full-time job, being overweight, for not being the master mommy, not giving her parents Ted and Amelia enough time, not cheer-leading Sidney’s career, for being imperfect, and how many other secretive, puritanical reasons, Abby whispered only to Max, schoolgirl giggly. Sidney and Liz were off to the studio. What was guilt? Lots of the responsibility for a little wrong, Abby said out loud, on this icy afternoon in swishy Santa Fe. Max’s mom was quite a kidder, all right.

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