Mother Knows Less

Fiction

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The living room of the Truman residence had a plain setup. Three brown, stainless couches surrounded a large, wool carpet that no one was allowed to use shoes on, lest they muddy its deep-white coloration. On the side where no couch was placed, a glass TV stand stood, its nooks filled with a pile of spare remote controls, ornate cups, and a sleek game console that sat comfortably in the largest nook. It hooked up to a 80” flatscreen TV that was attached to the wall, fitted with a variety of excessive features that made the electric bill skyrocket.

Miranda remembered how excited John and Charlie—her husband and son respectively—had been when the delivery truck dropped it off. They’d saved up for an entire year to buy it, replacing their small box TV of twenty years. In her eyes, it was unnecessary, but the boys were happy and they made up for the time they spent playing video games by doing house chores and cooking dinner. Who was she to stop them?

Well, that was then. Now, she stared at the wall where the TV should have been and realized that her son may have a problem. Miranda sipped at her tea, letting the hot steam ease her stress. Then, she placed the cup on the TV stand and assessed the situation in full.

The game console and TV were gone. Charlie had moved them—by himself, mind you—to his room upstairs. That alone was bad enough, but Miranda hadn’t seen Charlie in *days*. Not since the funeral. It didn’t take rocket science to see the problem. A grieving boy succumbing to his addictions, becoming a shut-in who did nothing but game all day.

Sharon’s boy was like that. Miranda considered Sharon to be one of her best mom friends so when she told the horror stories about her son, Miranda was always ready to listen. Every night, they’d come running down the staircase, startled by a scream or sob or something pounding the wall, only to find their son hunched over a computer cursing at someone he didn’t even know.

Charlie wasn’t like that. Not yet. Miranda wasn’t keen on just taking the TV and console from him. For one, they were way too heavy. More importantly, he was always around and Miranda didn’t want to fight him over it. That, along with his uncle on speed dial, was the last resort.

Instead, she sought to understand. She didn’t know all the games he played or bought, but she did vaguely remember his most recent purchase. He and his dad had played it for months, building structures with their pixel armies into the night hours. Now he played it alone, but Miranda surmised he might appreciate a new player 2.

Which led to the current “now”. Miranda stood outside Charlie’s door, her stomach twisting in knots and her neck slick with sweat. An hour scrolling a wiki page wasn’t nearly enough time to prepare herself for hardcore gaming, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to live with herself if Charlie’s situation worsened while she struggled to discern false gold blocks from real gold blocks. So, with a deep breath and one final look-over at the wiki, Miranda pushed open the door.

“Charlie?” Miranda called out cautiously from the entrance. “Are you awake?”

No answer, yet Miranda could hear the clicking and clacking of a controller. The woman took a step into her son’s domain and looked around, instantly regretting not coming sooner. His closet door was opened wide, revealing rumpled clothes and scattered shoes. His bed was now moved to the wall, acting as an impromptu couch for the TV that was screwed haphazardly to the entire left wall. Worse, all the things that should have been on the left wall were moved into boxes that littered the floor. Posters, photos, all his trophies—there were even the remains of his wall-mounted shelf, its broken form making Miranda even more curious on how Charlie had managed to do this all by himself.

Speaking of Charlie, the teenage boy looked utterly unkempt. He was dressed in a gray singlet that barely covered his top half, while below the belt he just wore fluffy pajama bottoms. His hands were stained with Potato chip dust, sweat, and oil, yet he unabashedly used them to scratch his side and sweep back his long, blonde hair. Thankfully, he wasn’t overweight, though Miranda didn’t like that the alternative was for his ribs to become visible through his skin.

The boy also had his headset on, his head bobbing to music only he could hear. It made Miranda happy to know that Charlie wasn’t ignoring her purposely. The woman walked around the boxes, high heels clacking against the floor before she gently tapped her boy on his shoulder, chuckling quietly as he nearly leapt off the bed. Miranda watched as he pulled his headphones down and stared at her, his breaths heavy.

“Mom?” Charlie asked, surprised and blinking. “What… what’s going on?”

Miranda smiled sheepishly, “Well I just came to check on you, but then I noticed what you were playing. It’s Brick… brick…”

“Brick By Brick?”

“Yes, that.” Miranda clapped her hands together. “You know, when I was in college, I was quite good at building games. Got the top scores in my dorm every time we played.”

Charlie gave her a dubious look. He cocked his head to the side.

“So you want to play?” Charlie asked, looking her up and down. “With me? While wearing that?”

“Sure. It’ll be fun.” Miranda smiled. “Or are you afraid that your mother will outdo you?”

“...You know what. Sure. Let’s play.” Charlie said as he grabbed a second controller from under the bed. “It’ll be good for you.”

*For her?* “You mean for you.”

“Both of us. It’s nice to see you.”

Miranda hummed rather than reply. She plugged her controller into the box and watched as her squadron appeared on the screen. Rather than the blue blots that made up Charlie’s squad, Miranda’s were red and triangle-shaped. She cautiously moved the joystick and watched as the little men marched in unison, tripping over each other as she made quick turns.

“You ok over there?” Charlie asked.

“I’m fine?” Miranda replied, quickly. “Just getting used to the controller. I’m a keyboard-and-mouse gal at heart.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow, but said no more. Miranda watched as he flicked his joystick, his squadron moving in perfect harmony, even splitting up to do tasks. She quietly mimicked him, cringing as her squad ran into a tree.

Put frankly, it did not get better from there. The next few minutes were a downward spiral. Miranda would gain control of her squad, complete a few tasks, then somehow manage to lead them off a cliff. It made Charlie laugh each time, but one could only suffer their child laughing at their incompetence so many times.

Slowly, she began to get a hang of it.The “A” button made the squad pick things up, the “B” button made them jump, the joystick made them run—she hoped it wasn’t too obvious what her actual skill level was. Even so, she persisted, pushing blocks around and following Charlie as he went about his business.

Eventually, they made their way to a large stone figure. Miranda adjusted the camera and blanked as she recognized the person memorialized here. How couldn’t she? He was just as she remembered him to be. His long beard that reached his belly, the smile that was missing one too many teeth, even his favorite cap—the blue one with stars that she’d bought for him when they were still dating.

“There’s just no way.” Miranda said quietly as she stared up at a perfect replica of John’s face. “How?”

Charlie smirked, though his head dipped a bit. “Dad was always trying to make realistic things in the engine. I thought it was impossible too, but then he showed me the ropes and this was the result.”

Miranda gave Charlie an incredulous look.

“This… this is beautiful. And you did it? From scratch.”

“Well it was mostly Dad, but yeah, I’m the one who finished it .” Charlie said, his eyes brightening a bit. “Hey, mom? There’s actually a place near the bottom where you can write stuff on the statue. Wanna leave a message?”

“M-me?” Miranda stuttered. “Is that a good idea? I wouldn’t want to mess up your work.

“It’s fine.” Charlie said, gently nudging her. “Just hold ‘A’ around the base of the statue and wait for the ‘scribble’ option to come up.”

Miranda frowned apprehensively, but moved her squad forward. Once they were situated around the statue’s base, she held down on “A” and let out a heavy breath as the correct option showed up. She turned to Charlie, who was placing more blocks on the statue.

“Am I supposed to select it?” Miranda asked.

“Of course,” Charlie said. “That much should be obvious.”

“...I knew that. Just testing your game knowledge.”

“Uh huh. Just write your message so we can move on.”

Miranda rolled her eyes. She hit “A” and watched a prompt enter her screen. Miranda read it to herself and was confused. *Are you sure you want to do this?* Why wouldn’t she be sure? She pressed “A” again and waited for the text box to pop up, but all she heard was a hissing noise. She poked her son.

“Is this normal?” Miranda asked.

Charlie blinked at the state of the game and calmly looked back at his mother, “You seem to have set ‘Explosives’ at the base of the statue.”

“What was tha—” Miranda started, but was cut off as a large boom reached her ears.

Miranda looked at the screen and watched in horror as the statue began to vanish, the structure slowly cracking and collapsing from bottom to top. She squeezed her controller, trying to think of anything she could do, but her despair caught up with her. The woman gently placed the controller on the ground, watching despondently as her husband died for the second time.

At least, that was what she was doing, until the game paused. She turned to Charlie, bowing her head.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to. It was an accident. I swear I’ll help you rebuild it. Just give me another chance. I’ll make it right.”

When he said nothing, Miranda was sure she’d truly screwed up. However, the boy just tapped her shoulder and pointed at the screen. Miranda looked up and felt her jaw drop.

Standing right before her, was the statue, which she thought she had destroyed. It wasn’t all there, yet Miranda could see the roots, see what it would be again. Charlie waved his controller.

“I just returned to a previous save.” Charlie admitted. “Stuff like this happens all the time, so I made sure to set-up some backups.”

“So you can just… go back whenever?” Miranda asked, her head beginning to hurt.

“Mhm. It’s still a bit annoying that I have to rebuild it, but it’s not a big problem.”

Miranda nodded slowly. She stood up, her mind still replaying that moment. He was gone and then he was back, *but only in the game*. Didn’t that bother him? Her eyes drifted to his clothes. His utterly unkempt body. *Aha*. *This was her moment*.

“Well that might take a while.” Miranda stated slowly. “Maybe take a shower before you do anything else. Freshen up. Wouldn’t want you to stink up the whole room.”

Charlie blinked, moving to sniff his pits, “Do I really smell? I just took a shower an hour ago.”

Miranda’s eyes widened, “That’s—you’re lying. Why are you dressed like that then? You look homeless. *Not that you are*. I’m just saying, you know.”

Charlie shrugged, “I like wearing singlets when I’m alone. It’s not like anyone will see me anyway. If I have to go outside, I’ll throw on a shirt.”

“You’ve been going outside? Why?”

“Well I have to eat something. Mrs. Sharon always has some odd job I can do for some spare cash, so I drop by her house and then head to the grocery store down the street. I’m not an amazing cook, but I manage.”

Miranda just stared at him. Her hand found its way to his arm, yanking him upwards. The boy yelped in surprise, staring at her with wide eyes.

“Mom?”

“Then what’s all this, huh?”

“I don’t… what are you talking about?”

Miranda jutted a finger at the TV.

“Why else would you move the entire TV up the staircase? Wasn’t it heavy? What possessed you to do that alone?”

Charlie shook his head slowly, “I didn’t do it alone. I called a few of my friends to help me out. It took two whole days to move everything around.”  
  
*What.* “When? You never told me. You should have asked.”

“I—I know, but you were busy when I knocked on your door.” Charlie said, his free hand trying desperately to pry his mom off him. “You didn’t leave your room all week. I tried everything to get your attention, but the guys were getting bored and I didn’t want them to come only for them to do nothing.”

“So you just did—is everything alright with you?” Miranda asked.

Charlie paused, looking away. “I just wanted to be closer to him.”

“What?”

“It was *our* TV, Mom. We paid for it, played on it—I just wanted to be alone with it. It reminds me of him. It helps to stare at it sometimes. Makes it feel like he’s still here.”

Miranda stared down at the boy, *her boy*. She gazed around his room and realized despite the closet being open, all the things inside were in the right place. She realized the floor wasn’t that messy. She realized that the bed was made, that Charlie’s fingers were quite clean, and that he was actually putting on some bulk, gaining some muscle.

It wasn’t that bad. No, it wasn’t bad at all. You’d never even know from looking at the place that the sixteen-year-old had lost his father just a month ago. He looked too mature, too put together to be grieving.

Miranda froze. She felt Charlie slip away from her grip, rubbing at his arm. She couldn’t meet his eyes. She felt so small. Who was this young man?

Who was she to question him when she felt like this?

“...I’m going to take a nap.” Miranda said listlessly.

“You don’t have to do that.” Charlie said. “There are other games. Dad did so much cool stuff in them. Just wait and I’ll show you.”

Miranda shook her head, turned away, “Not now. It’s getting late and I should get to bed. I have a busy day tomorrow. Lots of work.”

Charlie was silent. She could almost feel him looking towards the window, seeing the bright sun peak through the curtains. She knew he knew she had taken time off work, perhaps, too much time.

He didn’t comment on it. Instead, he hugged her from behind.

“Well, when you’re done working we can play something new.” Charlie said. “I’ll find something that you’ll enjoy. I promise.”

Miranda hummed, “That’s good. I’m going to sleep now. See you in the morning.”

Charlie squeezed her harder, “Yeah.”

Miranda walked out of the room. She didn’t bother to close the door—didn’t want to see his face. She stalked down the hallway, the sound of her heels drowning out her thumping heart. She reached her, no, *their* room in a matter of seconds. She opened the door.

Miranda Truman did not flinch when the roach scurried over her onyx-black heels. Miranda Truman did not lie to herself like she had last week when she said she’d throw all the empty takeout containers in the bin. Miranda Truman did not bother taking off her once new black dress, nor did she bother to wash her face or hair. Miranda Truman fell face first into her bed, groaning as her body odor assaulted her nose. Miranda Truman fell asleep in that dark, dirty room, wondering who that young man living in her house was, wondering where her little brat of a boy had gone.

Miranda Truman cried in her sleep, knowing that when she awoke, her husband’s face would not return.