

IT'S 16:35. I'M STARING AT THE LIVING ROOM CLOCK, THE SOUND OF THE CLOCK'S HANDS SEEM DEAFENING AND, COMPETES WITH THE DRUMBEAT OF MY HEART.

He is ironing his and his son's clothes while speaking on the phone to a woman, I presume, because he's flirting: "Oh, you know you're sexy. Why do you always need to hear me say it?" I can't hear what she says in response but I can hear her laughter and I think, "That was once me."

Well, that can no longer be me, because I'm sitting stiff on the couch as his son watches "Naked and Afraid." The poor boy is only 11 and allowed to watch such a programme. Well, I don't have a say in what he does or doesn't do, because my daughter and I have been banned from interacting with the boy even though we live under the same roof and our children go to the same school.

I'm sitting here because I've been commanded to do so, until I come up with N\$400 for electricity before 17:00. I'm all panicked and all cried-out, although glad because my eldest daughter is at a sleepover at her friend's and doesn't have to witness this, again.

I have just launched my online magazine and landed my first big client who needs an invoice and quotation from me before 17:00. It is now 16:56 and I'm on my knees begging him to let me use the WiFi or the laptop I've just borrowed from a former colleague. I have to return the laptop by tomorrow morning after doing as much work as I can, but that may not happen, because he won't let me use his WiFi or the laptop. One, because, the laptop will consume the electricity I haven't paid for and two, because if I use the WiFi and beat my deadline, I'll "start earning a little money, get a big head and start disrespecting' him," he has said.

"Just because you're the mother of my daughter doesn't entitle you to anything, you know?" He tells me this in front of his son whose countenance tells me the situation has become unbearable for him. The boy's kind eyes bring me to tears.

"Stop with the crying. You're causing my child unnecessary heartache."

The baby starts to cry from our room. She's awake. Finally, I can get a much needed embrace. I get up to go and attend to the baby before he says: "I'm not kidding – you're not sleeping in this house today without that money."



"Could you kindly let me access the internet, so I can I sort myself out with my clients? It's the only way I can make the money you want from me. Please," I plead.

"I don't want. Go and use a cyber café, for all I care," he responds then hangs up the phone as though to let the person on the phone in on what the situation is in the house. I hold back tears and go into the small room I share with my two girls in his three-bedroomed house. I head into the kitchen with the baby on my hip. She reaches out to touch my swollen eyes. My heart beats so fast, because I know what's coming.

I get the baby's food from the fridge to warm it in the microwave and as soon

as the microwave starts, he storms into the kitchen; "What have I told you about using electrical appliances in this house, huh? There you go disrespecting me in my own house again, huh?"

"I need to feed the baby."

"I don't care," he says as he switches off the microwave. "This is my house. Not yours, don't you get it?"

"So I shouldn't even use the microwave for the baby's needs?" I ask.

"Not if you don't ask for my permission," he cuts in briskly.

I stare at him in awe. I'm shocked at the new 'development', because this baby is his. He's never denied her anything. Where's this coming from? Does the person on the phone with him earlier

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have anything to do with this? Is tending to the baby's needs with the resources of this house part of the 'entitlement' he spoke about earlier, that I apparently claim?



In an effort not to worsen the situation, I ask him what to do with the baby's frozen meal. “Let it defrost and give it to her at room temperature,” he replies with a smirk before he puts a casserole of pork strips in the oven.

“Without warming the food?” I ask in shock.

“Look, there are lots of children who do not have the privileges of electricity,” he says before heading back to the living room.

“For Pete's sake, she's your child!” I follow him to the living room. “You've banned us from watching the television, using hot water, using your utensils or fridge... You've banned us from taking more than one shower a day, being

anywhere else but our small room in this house or even laughing or talking, and we suck it up and follow the rules because we have nowhere else to go. But when it comes to this baby, I won't let you play monster to please your crowd,” I blurt out in raging sobs.

“That's where you get it all wrong – trying to challenge me,” he says with an even meaner smirk than the last.

In carefree defiance, I head for the kitchen with the baby still on my hip, fill the kettle to boil the baby's bath water since we're not allowed to use the hot tap water – wait for it to boil before pouring some of it in a bowl to warm the baby's food then head to the bathroom to prepare her bath.

“So you think you're just going to disrespect me and get away with it?” he says, standing by the bathroom door.

“Can't do this with you now, I need to attend to the baby before she gets cranky. Get out of the way,” I say firmly. He moves. I attend to the baby and before I finish with her, he storms into the kitchen again as I clean the baby's mouth.

“I won't let you disrespect me,” he says. I ignore him, because I'm emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausted right now. I've had a long day, walked to town from Khomasdal and back and have had to wait at the gate for him to open while he was still entertaining his lady friends who looked at me like I was a piece of rotten steak.

“Did you not hear me?” He asks, standing by the kitchen door now.

I dry the baby's mouth and make for the kitchen door but he pushes me back in. “I'm talking to you, lady, and you're walking away?”

“This is you looking for a reason to start a fight in which you win every time, because you only feel manly when physically handling me. It makes you feel like you're living your fantasy of becoming a real-life tyrant. My life, my children's well-being, our living here in your house, my losing my job, our relationship that never was – it's all a game of thrones for you. It is how you prove your self-confidence, your manliness... I play by your rules, for Pete's sake. I play your little game at the expense of my children's well-being. Not my proudest moments, but I suck it up,

because we have nowhere to go. I don't have any family here or anyone to defend me and whenever you find out I've shared with anyone the horrific things you do to us, you punish me. I...” I attempt to add before he cuts me off.

“Oh shut up! I don't have time for your sobs. Stay in here and listen,” he says, pushing me back into the kitchen with the baby on my hip. I hit the back of my head on his fridge door. The baby starts crying. She holds me tight, looking away from her father. I can tell that she's scared now.

“You're causing the baby distress. What is this about today? What have I done today? You lock me in the house like a prisoner and only let me out when you know where I'm going and how long I'll take, we don't watch your TV, we stick to the timeframes you've set for our bath times, we don't cook foods that take up too much electricity, we don't do laundry on the machine... I play by your rules and it's all because I don't have a penny in my name. I'm trying to start a business, but even that you won't let me do, yet you want money for the amenities we use without giving me the chance to earn the money. What do you want from me?” I ask in sobs then make for the door again.

“You do not get to walk away from me, woman,” he says sternly then pushes me to the ground before slapping me in the face. The baby starts to cry again, louder this time. “Shut that baby up when I'm talking to you. Shut her up, now!”

The baby keeps crying despite my effort to soothe her. Now I'm crying too. I think the baby's hurt, because she won't stop crying. The pain in my back is unbearable. I try to stand but he tells me to kneel on the floor and talks away. I switch off mentally, still trying to soothe the baby. I can see his lips move, but I can't hear a word he says. There I am on the floor, kneeling before the man who once adored the ground I walked on. I'm at his mercy and all I keep asking myself is, “How did we get here?” He's still talking and pointing me in the face. I can feel myself bleeding but I don't know from where it is coming. I feel dizzy. Suddenly, everything goes blank, dark, quiet. Somewhere in the oblivion, I wonder; “Will I wake up tomorrow?” ♀