

An AB Discovery Book

A woman with brown hair, wearing a pink t-shirt and blue denim overalls, stands in a nursery. She is smiling and has her hand in her pocket. The nursery features a white crib with a pink and white patterned blanket and a brown teddy bear. Shelves in the background are filled with folded clothes, baby bottles, and other supplies. The walls are decorated with a pattern of clouds, stars, and a crescent moon. A mobile with stars and a crescent moon hangs from the ceiling.

# Nursery Rules

*diaper version*

EVELYN HUGHES

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Evelyn Hughes

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## *Nursery Rules*

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## Chapter One — The Call

The hotel room was nicer than she needed and quieter than she was used to, and Sheila had come to appreciate both of those things about business travel. Forty-one floors above the city, with the curtains half-drawn and her laptop open on the desk, she felt competent in a way that was hard to explain to people who hadn't experienced it. It was a specific, clean competence that came from being good at her work in a place where no one needed anything from her personally. No one here knew her name. No one here left wet towels on the bathroom floor.

She was on her second coffee and midway through a spreadsheet when her phone buzzed. Ros. She nearly let it ring through, then picked up at the last moment, the way you do with someone whose calls you can't quite bring yourself to miss.

“You're working,” Ros said. It wasn't a question.

“I'm always working.”

“It's half seven.”

“Some of us have presentations in the morning.” Sheila leaned back in her chair, pulling the laptop closer from habit. “What's wrong? You sound strange.”

A pause. Ros was not a woman who paused. She talked like she walked, which was quickly and without much concern for what was in the way. A pause from Ros meant something was being chosen carefully.

“Nothing's wrong with me,” she said. “I'm fine. Are you sitting down?”

“I'm always sitting down, I just told you.”

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“Sheila.”

Something in the way she said it. Just the name, flat, with a weight underneath it. Sheila sat up straighter without meaning to. The spreadsheet stopped mattering.

“Tell me,” she said.

She didn't sleep that night. Not properly. She lay in the dark of the hotel room listening to the distant sound of the city below and staring at a ceiling she couldn't see, running the conversation back through her mind in pieces, checking it for the gap where she might have misunderstood, where Ros might have been wrong. There wasn't one. Ros was not a woman who made those kinds of mistakes, and she had not been mistaken. She had seen what she had seen.

His name, apparently, was not important. The woman's name was Carla. Ros had not intended to see them together. She had been in the wrong place, or the right one, and she had seen enough to be certain. She had sat with it for two days before she'd called, which told Sheila something about the weight of what she was carrying.

Sheila had not cried. She noticed that. She had felt instead something that she could only describe as a kind of cold settling, the way a house goes quiet in winter, not empty, exactly, but very still, and with a particular clarity to the air.

She thought about Daniel.

She had met him at a work function, not hers, one of those loosely networked evenings where everyone circulates with a drink and an agenda and talks mostly to the people they already know. He had been standing slightly apart from a group, and she had noticed him before he noticed her, which was unusual because Daniel had a quality that made rooms

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orient toward him without quite knowing why. He was tall, with the kind of easy confidence that looked effortless until you spent enough time with it to see the engineering underneath.

She had liked him. She had more than liked him for several years. She had found his certainty attractive because her own certainty was hard-won, and she had respected the quality wherever she found it, not yet having understood the difference between the kind that came from character and the kind that came from never having been properly tested.

Daniel was good at surface-level interactions. He was handsome, charming, professionally capable, and comfortable in rooms full of people he wanted to impress. At parties, he held court without appearing to and laughed without appearing to need anything. He was the sort of man who seemed to have moved through life without the particular humiliations that quietly shaped most people, and this, Sheila had thought, was a kind of freedom she found appealing.

She had been wrong about that, as it turned out, though she hadn't known it for some time.

She had found out about the diapers by accident, three months into their relationship.

She had come home a day early from a trip, not unlike this current one, and he hadn't been expecting her. She still remembered the exact quality of his face when she'd walked into the bedroom unexpectedly, hoping to surprise him. They weren't yet living together. The way the arrogance drained out of it so fast was like watching something structural give way. He'd been standing by the wardrobe in just a t-shirt, and she'd

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had one disoriented second of simply not understanding what she was seeing before understanding arrived all at once.

The silence had been considerable.

What followed was the only time she had ever seen Daniel without his armour completely. He was thirty-eight years old, and he stood in their bedroom, and something in him went young and cornered, and she had felt, inconveniently, more tenderness toward him in that moment than she had in any of the months before it. He had tried to recover himself, the chin going up, the tone going careful, and she had stopped him by crossing the room and kissing him before he could construct a sentence.

Later, when he had said it was medical, not entirely a choice, a thing he had managed since boyhood, she had nodded and asked no questions he didn't want to answer and told him it changed nothing. She had meant it.

The full history came out in pieces, over months. She had never pushed. She knew there was a mother involved, and a long and difficult childhood, and a shame so deep and old it had calcified into something deep, something load-bearing. She had let him give her what he could and had filed the rest away without asking for more.

What she understood was this. Daniel, for all his performed ease, was held together in part by the absolute privacy of this one thing. It was the room inside the room. The door no one opened. As long as it was hers alone to know, he could be who he was everywhere else.

He had never, Ros had mentioned almost as an aside, the way Ros delivered the things she thought were most

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important, he had never slept over at Carla's. The affair had been daytime only. Lunches. Afternoons.

Sheila stared at the ceiling.

She understood exactly why.

At some point, without quite deciding to, she opened the notes app on her phone and typed a single line.

He can't sleep anywhere but home.

She looked at it for a moment. Then she put the phone face down on the nightstand and closed her eyes and thought, with a cold and focused deliberateness that was new to her, about Daniel in his diapers. About the mother. About the shame. About the long and complicated architecture of a man who needed to be seen as untouchable.

She thought about what it would mean to reach into that architecture and begin, very carefully, to remove things.

She fell asleep just before three.

She did not dream, or if she did, she didn't remember. What she remembered was waking at six with the alarm, looking at the ceiling, and feeling, underneath the grief and the anger and the cold, something else. Something that did not have a name yet, but that felt, when she pressed on it, quite solid.

Quite decided.

## Chapter Two — What Ros Saw

The café was Ros's choice, which meant it was loud enough to talk privately and good enough to justify the price of the coffee, and when Sheila arrived, Ros was already there, sitting with her hands wrapped around a cup she hadn't drunk from, watching the door. She stood when Sheila came in, and they held each other for a moment without speaking, which was not something they usually did. Then they sat down.

“You look terrible,” Ros said.

“Thank you.”

“Did you sleep?”

“A little. Not much.”

Ros studied her. She was a small, direct woman with close-cropped hair and the kind of face that people frequently underestimated, which suited her. She had been Sheila's closest friend for eleven years, through a previous relationship that hadn't worked, through the early years with Daniel, through promotions and bereavements and one memorably disastrous holiday in Lisbon that they still couldn't discuss without laughing. Ros knew her well enough to know when not to ask questions. She also knew when to ask them.

“I need to tell you everything properly,” she said. “Not just the phone version.”

“I know.”

“And I need you to tell me how you are. Actually.”

“Tell me first,” Sheila said. “And then I'll tell you.”

Ros had seen them on a Wednesday. Three weeks ago, which had been, as she explained it, the longest three weeks

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of her adult life. She had been coming out of the Italian place near Daniel's office, after a lunch with a former colleague, nothing remarkable, and she had seen them on the pavement across the road. Not kissing, nothing so obvious. Just standing close, in the way that people do when proximity has stopped requiring justification. His hand had been at the small of her back. Something in the angle of his head.

Ros had stopped walking.

The woman was younger than Sheila, not dramatically so, perhaps late thirties, with dark hair and the kind of look that took time and intention. She was laughing at something Daniel had said, and Daniel was wearing the expression he wore when he was performing, the expression Sheila had privately catalogued as his *room-working face*, which was not his real face but was undeniably effective just the same. They had walked together to a parked car, her car, Ros thought, and he had leaned in through the window after she got in, and then the car had gone.

"Three weeks," Sheila said.

"I know. I'm sorry. I needed to be sure I wasn't..." Ros shook her head. "I know what I saw. I just needed to know I wasn't going to blow your life up on the basis of a feeling."

"So you made sure."

"I did."

Sheila looked down at her coffee. "How long has it been going on?"

"I don't know exactly. At least a few months. She works near his office. I looked her up, I'm not sorry. Her name's Carla Briggs. She's in property. They have lunch, sometimes more

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than lunch.” Ros paused. “I asked around carefully. He's never...” She stopped again.

“Say it.”

“He's never stayed over. With her. It's always been daytime. Lunches, afternoons. He's always home for dinner.”

The café noise continued around them. Someone at the counter ordered something complicated. Sheila sat very still.

“Always home for dinner,” she said.

“Yes.”

Sheila said nothing for a moment. Ros watched her, waiting for the grief or the anger to break the surface, preparing herself for whichever came. She had seen Sheila cry exactly twice in eleven years, and she had seen her angry more often, a quiet, focused anger that was in some ways harder to be near than the shouting kind. What she had not prepared for was the smile. It arrived slowly, and it wasn't a happy smile exactly, but it was entirely real, a complicated, inward thing, like someone turning a key.

“Sheila. What?”

“Sorry.” She wasn't. “I'm sorry, it's just...” She stopped. She picked up her coffee cup and put it down again. “Ros. Can I tell you something about Daniel?”

“Given the circumstances, yes.”

“Something that he told me in confidence. A long time ago.”

Ros looked at her. “Something relevant?”

“Something that explains,” Sheila said carefully, “why he is always home for dinner. Why he has never once, in the entire time I have known him, slept away from our home

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voluntarily. Why he would not have stayed the night with Carla Briggs if she had begged him.”

Ros set her own cup down. “I’m listening.”

“Daniel,” Sheila said, “still wets the bed.”

A pause.

“He’s forty-one years old, and he wets the bed. Heavily. Every night, without exception, which is why he wears a diaper to bed every night without exception. Has done so his entire adult life. He will never stop.” She met Ros’s eyes. “Carla Briggs has no idea. Nobody knows except me.”

The pause extended. Ros’s expression went through several stages in quick succession.

“He wears...”

“Diapers. Yes.”

“Daniel.” Ros seemed to be checking this against her internal portrait of him. “Daniel, who spent forty minutes at your cousin’s wedding explaining why he preferred a particular whisky.”

“The very same.”

“He goes to bed every night in a diaper.”

“He does.”

Ros sat back in her chair. She looked at the ceiling briefly, then at Sheila. Then something loosened in her face, and she laughed, not unkindly, but with the full-bodied relief of someone who has been carrying something heavy and has just been given permission to put it down.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, that’s... I’m sorry, that’s...”

“I know.”

“The *confidence* of that man.” Ros was shaking her head, caught between laughter and something more precise.

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“The absolute unearned *confidence*. And all this time he's going home to put his diaper on.”

“Every night.” Sheila's smile had settled into something cooler. “He needs them during the day sometimes, too, if I'm honest. He manages, mostly, but he's not... reliable. He has products for that. He's very careful about it. Very secretive.” She paused. “His mother apparently had a very difficult time with it. He was still in diapers when he started school. Full-time. She wasn't... er... kind about it.”

“Wow!”

“He was still wetting the bed every night well into his teens. Beyond his teens. She never quite let him forget it.” She looked at the table. “Which is, I think, where a great deal of that confidence comes from. It's load-bearing. He built his whole personality on top of this one thing that he is absolutely terrified of anyone knowing.”

Ros was quiet for a moment, her amusement settling into something more thoughtful. “Carla Briggs,” she said slowly, “is sleeping with a man who goes home every night to put on a diaper because he can't be trusted not to soak the bed.”

“Without exception.”

“And she thinks she's...” Ros stopped. “What does she think she's getting, exactly?”

“Charisma. Control. A man who has everything managed.” Sheila's tone was without emotion, which was its own kind of emotion. “She's getting two afternoons a week with someone who performs very well for limited engagements. She has absolutely no idea what comes home

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to me. To her, he is a good fuck, and that's all he knows about him."

They sat with that for a moment.

"What do you think she'd say," Ros said, carefully, like someone placing a glass on a surface they're not sure will hold it, "if she knew?"

Sheila looked at her.

"I think," she said, "that she would be surprised. I think she would find it very difficult to reconcile with the man she thinks she knows." She paused. "I think the word *embarrassing* would occur to her. And I think she would understand very quickly that she had been given a very partial and very flattering version of someone who is, at his foundations, a forty-one-year-old man who cannot get through the night without a diaper."

Ros looked at her for a long moment. "You're not just going to leave him, are you?"

It wasn't a question.

"Not immediately, no," Sheila said.

"You have something in mind."

"I have the beginning of something in mind." She wrapped her hands around her cup. "He cheated because he thought he could. Because he's spent his whole life constructing a version of himself that's invulnerable. Because nobody has ever..." She stopped. Started again. "He is not invulnerable, Ros. He is a man with a very specific and very exploitable weakness, and he was foolish enough to give me four years of intimate knowledge of it. I've seen him in wet diapers for years now."