

The Teen Factor

When you look into the bedroom of a teenager, you do so at your own risk. You peer as cautiously as a gazelle who knows the lions are awake and feeling a little hollow in the middle regions. You know that you are the interloper in this space.

And Marileze knew this as she allowed her gaze to sweep the room, ironically the only thing that had actually swept in here for some time. Regardless of the fact that the sun was high, the blinds were still drawn, clearly designating the room as the lair of the occupying species.

She was not surprised by the shambles. She was not even angry any more. She knew, everyone knew, and the Literature reinforced it, that the kneecap layer of assorted clean/dirty clothing, discarded foodstuffs and the containers they came in, was standard stuff for teens. The musical instruments, books and mystical technological devices for listening to and illegally downloading ear-shattering sound-bites were what the average teen considered vital to being both 'real' and 'authentic' on his/her planet. Neither was she surprised by the hunched body bundled to near-invisibility on the rumpled bed.

She knew better than to attempt to clean up again, let alone try a tentative triage from Least Disgusting Substance to the Substance Most Likely to Foment an Undiscovered Virus That Will Eventually Wipe Out Humanity. And even though she hadn't laid eyes on Kelly for a couple of days now, she knew better than to disturb the dormant body. It was, after all, Saturday and Saturdays are sacrosanct, so the Literature assured her.

She hesitated in the doorway, grateful that the cause of the localised biological disaster perpetrated on the unsuspecting neighbourhood did not stir. She'd done her best. She'd tried to be both understanding and supportive but stepmothers have a built-in likelihood of relationship-failure. In fact, she knew that in this she was on a par with the Titanic, the Hindenberg and Donald Trump's first Executive Order – she was going down, baby, going down. All politicians and stepmothers know that "making good" on election promises doesn't always work out and she was the one who was going down in flames.

The "election promises" that she had made were to Marcus on their wedding day when a younger Kelly had stood by his dad, still sweetly innocuous and clean. She'd chosen Marcus, the love of her life. She'd chosen him. She'd got him. But she had also got the smaller, less hairy, less blonde version into the bargain.

She didn't really understand where the sweet little person who had drawn birthday cards for her had gone – when was it he'd morphed into a sullen adolescent? The memory of dear little twelve-year-old Kell, if nothing else, continued to keep her committed. If only the current Kelly would commit too.

She'd gone through the whole performance recommended by the Literature of laying down some Rules to help manage the health hazard down the passage - the room, not the boy - to give him his due, he seemed to shower frequently enough and from what she saw of his hair beneath the ubiquitous beanie, it was clean and presumably free of insect life. The rules were a) No food left lying around, as it attracted bugs and cockroaches. b) Nothing wet that accumulated moulds and might possibly cause a mushroom field to populate the carpet. c) Nothing large enough to trip over

and cause injury that might require hospitalisation of either the room's incumbent or any stray visitor or stepparent on the warpath.

The atmosphere in her kitchen during the Rules Discussion had been relaxed and friendly, or so she'd thought, but while Kelly had listened politely, his eyes had held the slightly glazed look that comes over every teen's face when being harangued by really, really old persons, like more than two years older than they are. Then when she'd asked: "Are you ok with this, then?" Kelly had removed his beanie and the previously undetected earphone buds from his ears, blinked his pale eyes and said: "Awesome. Got to go. Things to do."

She'd wanted to scream in frustration and disappointment. She really was disappointed because she actually liked Kelly. Or rather, she'd liked him when she'd first joined him and Marcus in the family unit – her first, their second. But now she was relegated to the step-mom nuclear waste dump and her attempts to reach out, as the Literature called it, to him had failed yet again. She'd never liked the phrase "reach out". She'd tried it not long ago, literally, but the silent rigidity of his frame had told her not to do that again.

She sighed; gently pulled the bedroom door closed and nearly died of shock when she turned to find Kelly standing right behind her. They were closer in this instant than they'd been in a while, and she was doubly shocked to realise that she had to look up to meet his eyes.

Kelly said nothing but Marileze jerked back reflexively. She was furious with herself when she started to chew her way through an ill-assorted selection of defensive half-sentences, finishing with a garbled apology "Sorry...sorry". Then she gave up, hands raised in involuntary imitation of a police series on TV ("Step away from the teen with the ice-blue eyes and place your hands on the car..."), and tried not to actually run towards the kitchen, the door and an escape from her embarrassment.

She sat outside in the garden with a Coke Zero and reflected morosely on her current failure. Caught snooping, doing exactly what stepmoms ought never to do. Did he think she was going through his things? Examining his rubbish bin – if she could even have found it? Searching his sock drawer for dagga, or pills, or fine white powdery substances of unknown origin and mind-altering effect?

Why, then, had she been considering going into his room in the first place, if not to snoop into his life while she pretended to clean up? She cringed again as the old arguments come to the fore – he was not really a boy – he was nearly old enough to vote, nearly old enough to die for his country, definitely old enough to have – wait, wait just a frigging moment!

She re-imagined his room, the chaos, the dimness and the huddled sleeping body on the bed. She'd thought it was Kelly but he had been standing right behind her.

A few Life Truths from the Literature suddenly crash into her consciousness. She jumped to her feet, sat down again, hesitated, undecided. Kelly, the solitary, moody, silent creature had a friend, a partner, a lover? Whatever that body was, it was unknown to her but known to him. She slumped back on the bench, closing her eyes and the Literature, for once, provided the answer – *don't do anything*. Just leave it. Give the boy – person - she couldn't bring herself to call him a man just yet – give him his space and back the hell off.

When the bench rocked slightly Marileze knew it was Kelly beside her. She kept her eyes closed. Embarrassed silence enveloped the garden, except for the pair of thrushes that bounced indignantly about in the hibiscus bush, irritated by the disturbance to their family life.

Then Kelly said, a little gruffly: "So, you saw Mel."

It wasn't a question. She opened her eyes and turned to look at him. She didn't often see him in such bright sunlight. He was looking straight ahead. She stared at his profile, so much like his father's but softer, more vulnerable.

She nodded. Then, because she couldn't help it: "Who is she?"

He turned toward her and she was amazed to see a faint smirk.

"Not she. Mel's a guy."

Her face must have shown how she instantly jumped to all the usual conclusions, for the smirk turned into a grin and she suddenly saw that younger, laughing Kelly from happier times.

"Come on, Marileze, it's not like that. He's a friend from school. His mom and dad've just split up and he's like, kind of in a mega-bad place. I know what it's like to lose a dad so I offered him a place to crash while he sorts himself out."

The boy morphed back into the serious young man she knew was in there somewhere, someone with insight and compassion. He looked away over the garden again while she gaped in silence.

"It's OK, his mom knows he's here. He's going home today but he's still a bit, like, shattered. I should have told you this morning but I went out to get some chow."

It was an apology and an explanation. Marileze grabbed it gratefully with both metaphorical hands.

"That's, that's ok," she stammered, "I'm sorry for him. You did a good thing, Kell. I'm sorry I was nosing in your room. It's your space but, it's just, I haven't seen you for a while." She tried to keep it light. "Just please don't let things get to the stage where the Department of Health comes knocking on the door. If you can."

"Sure," said Kelly. "That's cool."

He stood and she looked up, sure he had grown even taller in the last half hour.

"Gotta go feed Mel. See ya." She watched him all the way down the path to the kitchen doorway where he suddenly turned back and said: "Thanks for not, like, going ballistic, Mar," and he disappeared.

Marileze sat motionless, scarcely breathing. Had Kelly just shorten her name to Mar, or had he maybe, just maybe, called her 'Ma'? Nothing in the Literature had prepared her for the wonderful, tentative, warm feeling that her whole world had just shifted slightly and realigned, turning now on a sturdy axis of hope, tilted a bit off-centre, of course, as it must be when there is only one parental figure but nevertheless humming quietly like an expensive engine.

Life after Marcus had been tough, for Kelly too, but the two of them had had to make the best of it and after this morning, maybe 'the best' was starting to happen at last.