

## Story Fourteen

### *The God Child*

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Name: Susan H.  
Occupation: Schoolteacher  
Married at: 32  
Divorced at: 46  
Current status: Single  
Times married: Once  
Children from this marriage: 2 (one adopted)  
Ages at time of divorce: 14

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### *My Story*

I met Eliot at a church picnic. Neither of us were actively looking for partners. We just found ourselves sitting at the same table and started talking . . . and talking.

Eliot was a wonderfully engaging conversationalist, one of those people you could talk to about anything, and his presence made you want to keep the conversation going. He stood six feet, two, had a trim, athletic build, and chiseled features that recalled men on the covers of outdoor magazines. When he spoke, he leaned his tall frame forward, and the way he looked into your eyes you told you that he was intelligent. Eliot was a research biologist at a pharmaceutical firm—quite a package, as they say.

After meeting a few more times at church functions, Eliot finally asked me out to dinner. It started off casually, but quickly heated up into a torrid affair—the kind where you stumble around with glazed eyes and bump into things. That was in the early spring. By late September we married. Our courtship was admittedly short, but we were so head-over-heels in love that waiting any longer seemed pointless.

Everything flowed so smoothly. But on the honeymoon, I had my first uh-oh.

One afternoon, when we were in our hotel room, I called room service to have something sent up. As I was speaking, Eliot walked over and put his hand on the hook, disconnecting the call, and saying that it would be cheaper if we went downstairs. When I told him that I didn't feel like going downstairs and began to dial again, he reached over, grabbed the phone, and yanked the cord out of the wall. "*I said, we'll go downstairs!*" he snarled, glaring at me with fire in his eyes. I was so shocked, I couldn't speak.

A minute later, his anger subsided and he regained his normal calm composure, acting as though nothing had happened. Not wanting to provoke a reoccurrence, I also ignored the issue. We went downstairs together, and by the time we reached the lobby, things were back to normal, and the incident was all but forgotten.

Eliot's sudden explosions popped up in our marriage from time to time, but they were always rare and short-lived, and he never once acted violently towards me. Nor was there anything else in his behavior to belie a more serious problem. Eliot was clean and tidy. He ate healthily, drank only on social occasions, worked out daily, and never looked at other women. It was only when he felt pushed beyond certain limits that the demon surfaced.

It seemed odd to me that Eliot never apologized for his outbursts. In fact, for the most part, he seemed oblivious to them, and for this reason I never tried to discuss the matter with him—somehow I knew that it wasn't something we could talk about.

In our third year of marriage, Eliot started a new job which required us to relocate to another state. As luck would have it, just before the move, I became pregnant. The timing was less than ideal, but Eliot and I were deliriously happy

with the news and bought a house in a residential neighborhood that would be perfect for raising a family. By the time Jodi, arrived, we were comfortably ensconced in our new home and looking forward to our new life as parents. Things were going so smoothly that I'd almost forgotten about Eliot's explosive outbursts. But when it happened next, it was a big one, and that was when I became seriously concerned.

When Jodi was three months old, Eliot and I drove out to visit Eliot's parents, who then lived eight hours away. Eliot and I got into an argument the day after we arrived, and suddenly, without saying a word, he got into the car and headed home, leaving me and our daughter stranded at his parents' house. Like Eliot, his parents also ignored the issue, acting as though it had no particular relevance, which struck me as odd. Fortunately, I had family living in the area and went to stay with them for a few days to let matters cool down before going home.

When Jodi and I arrived at the house, Eliot greeted us with a smile and acted as though nothing had happened. As I was unpacking, I threw out a cautious, "Let's hope we don't have another incident like that one," to test his response. But Eliot said nothing. Once again we resumed our daily existence, this time for almost two years without a recurrence. During that time, Eliot was a model father and we enjoyed a good life together. But Lucas's arrival signaled a permanent change.

Eliot and I tried unsuccessfully for two years to have another child and finally decided to foster-adopt. In the foster-adoption program, you bring a foster child into your home and then initiate adoption proceedings, which, we were told, normally took about a month. Lucas came to us when he was only 6 months old, a bubbling, happy baby like Jodi.

The adoption process, however, turned into an embroiled legal mess because the biological mother first decided that she wanted her son back, then decided she didn't, then did, and so the process went. Since Lucas's biological mother lived in another county, each time she changed her mind, the paperwork had to be re-transferred between the two jurisdictions and the paperwork became hopelessly disorganized in the constant shuffling back and forth. The custody issue continued for two years, then four, then six, and there seemed to be no end in sight.

When you bring an adopted child into your home, you can assume that as the child grows, there are going to be some issues to deal with. As Lucas became more aware of his situation, the combination of the acceptance/rejection pattern of his biological mother, the desertion by his real father, and our inability to adopt him left Lucas with some pretty serious identity issues. As a result, his emotional development suffered.

With each passing year, Lucas's once jubilant face turned increasingly dour as the flood waters of rejection rose in his awareness and snuffed out his happiness, and Eliot's inability to hide his preference for our biological daughter, Jodi, only exacerbated the problem. Eliot and I both coached their soccer teams, but Eliot would involve himself only with Jody's teams and I, by default, ended up coaching Lucas's teams. This, of course, did not go unnoticed by Lucas, and it affected his playing performance, which further distanced him from Eliot, who couldn't hide his disappointment. Day by day, Lucas slowly grew into an emotional zombie and Eliot remained blind to it all.

Here might be a good time to interject what I believe to be two factors that shaped these events. Although Eliot's parents were still together, they were no model of cooperative parenting. Their marriage survived only because his

mother submitted to his father's every whim and demand. This dictator/servant relationship was the parenting model that Eliot grew up with.

The other element was Eliot himself. Eliot was a child prodigy who did well in academics, but excelled even more in sports: Eliot was an athletic super star of heroic proportions. Basketball, football, soccer, ice hockey, you name it. Eliot was an über-athlete of legendary proportions who was admired by parents, coaches and peers alike. None, however, idolized him more than his father and mother.

To this day, Eliot's trophies, pictures and awards bedeck their house like a shrine honoring a religious saint. Being the only child, his parents treated him like two awe-struck teenagers. If he threw a fit, they never reprimanded him, but instead soothed and stroked him, not wanting to offend their God Child. By his early teens, Eliot ruled the family. It was a curious dynamic. Eliot, his mother and father were about as opposite as three people could possibly be, but they all agreed on one thing: they all adored Eliot.

As a result, Eliot grew up with no shortage of self-esteem. But when it came to interpersonal skills and compassion for others, he was as flat-footed as a duck. With all his amazing accomplishments, and despite going on to earn a Ph.D., he had never been able to master the two simple words, "I'm sorry." Never once in our marriage did he apologize or even acknowledge a mistake—not one. For Eliot, it was difficult to understand that I wasn't just another doe-eyed fan, but a living, flesh-and-blood partner with my own feelings that weren't always the same as his. Several times I suggested counseling, but each time I did, he dismissed the idea. Eliot saw himself as a god who answered to no one, and when fate conspired to show him otherwise, his fragile world shattered into a thousand pieces.

While working at the pharmaceutical company, Eliot

came up with an idea for a device that could drastically cut the cost of pathogen testing. Convinced that he could turn his concept into huge profits, Eliot quit his job and formed a company, recruiting almost half a million dollars to build a prototype. Unfortunately, once the project got underway, the development costs kept escalating until he finally ran out of money. Still convinced that he could make it work, Eliot refinanced our house and went for broke. But there were certain obstacles that he just couldn't overcome, and the company eventually folded.

In the year and a half before the doors closed, Eliot behaved like the mad scientists from a 1950s horror movie, pushing himself beyond his limits and acting foul around everyone. His nastiness turned to ranting, and the ranting turned to raging as he assumed more and more of his father's dictatorial personality. No one was spared his wrath. Once, because of a minor comment Jody made about his project, he refused to speak to her for a month. Another time, just before Halloween, he tore down the decorations because of a comment made by Lucas. Jody and Lucas sobbed uncontrollably, but no one dared approach him. Nearing bankruptcy, we put our house up for sale, but Eliot was so ugly to be around that I couldn't take it anymore and took the kids and moved out.

With the few remaining dollars we had, I moved into an apartment. Eliot did the same. At that point he showed almost no interest in the family. In fact, he was so self-absorbed that I'm not even sure he realized he had one. Over and over again I tried to reach him, but it was like talking to a wall. Finally, I gave up and filed for divorce. When the papers arrived, Eliot vanished.

Three months later, a relative in North Carolina spotted Eliot's car. Through phone calls and friends, we found out he was living with an old college roommate. But by the

time the divorce papers reached him there, he was gone. A month later, he surfaced in Tennessee; after that, Virginia.

After much urging from his parents, Eliot returned to face the divorce proceedings. At one point he even suggested reconciliation, but by then it was clear that he was motivated not by love, but by desperation, and we'd been through the cycle so many times that I saw no real hope of improvement. Even then, Eliot still could not admit to any wrong-doing.

In the courtroom Eliot fell apart, making up one story after the other, some of which were clearly contradictory, and raised the judge's eyebrows more than a few times. If only he could have seen how poorly he presented himself—his fabrications were obvious to everyone. Afterwards, as we were leaving the building, Eliot turned and asked me out for dinner! Shocked, I said, "How can you possibly suggest dinner after you stood there and lied about me to the judge?" "That was just business," he answered.

In the end it didn't make any difference. Claiming no income, Eliot whittled his child support down to almost nothing, and moved out of the state. These losses would have been bad enough, but there was a still greater casualty in the making—Lucas.

Eliot and I received adoption rights to Lucas, but only after the divorce was finalized. As a result, Eliot, seeing no legal obligation towards Lucas, abandoned him completely. Having been rejected by both biological parents, and now the only man he ever knew as a father, Lucas lost it completely. I tried outpatient counseling, but he was beyond their reach.

Lucas ended up in a managed care facility for two and a half years. I don't know any other way to put it, except to say that he was a human being who had lost his soul. I visited him regularly and with the staff's love and coaching,

and my constant support, he returned to society. The experience, though, had left a permanent psychic wound. Lucas did not see Eliot for ten years.

On Lucas's 21st birthday, Eliot finally came out to visit him. Although he still refuses to discuss anything that happened in the past, Eliot is now trying to build a bridge between them and make up for the lost time. Unfortunately, there isn't enough time left in either of their lives to make up for all of it, but each letter, phone call and visit Lucas receives from Eliot is treasured.

Lucas now works at a foster home and finds the work very satisfying. He devotes his time to helping and supporting those who come from similar backgrounds and is now loved and admired by many. He may not have plaques and trophies adorning his walls, but there is no question in the eyes of the many children he works with, and particularly in mine, that Lucas is a hero.

### *My Regrets*

You can't see it when you are young, but later in life you begin to realize the fragility of children in their growing years. It's not the incidents of the moment, or the day, or even the year that break them. Nor is it the crises and losses in life. It's the constant feeling that no one is there to protect and guide them, and watching their family disintegrate in the face of adversity that causes them to lose faith in themselves and the world around them.

Problems in life are inevitable, but each time a child sees his or her parents defeated by life's challenges, a little more hope is lost. The process can take years, and often does, but one by one the defenses fall as the child witnesses his or her parents losing their battles in life. With each new setback, a little more uncertainty and fear creeps into the

child's heart, until the last bastion of hope is overrun and the child itself becomes a casualty, with no will or faith left to fight.

I do volunteer counseling work, and when I see couples with children contemplating divorce, I invite them to come have lunch with Lucas and me. The initial warm smiles fade as they see the two of us approach and they look into Lucas's eyes.

Lucas is now able to talk openly about his experiences, and his presence conveys an authority far beyond his biological years. When Lucas speaks, people listen. Occasionally, I'll pull out pictures of Lucas in his youth, the ones where his eyes twinkled and his jubilant little smile stretched all the way across his face. Often, after the pictures are shown and they look back at Lucas's deep-set eyes, very few words are spoken, and I've seen more than a few lumps form in the back of people's throats. I've never kept track of the number, but I can assure you of one thing: those twenty-dollar lunches have turned around more marriages than you could count. My biggest regret is that Eliot and I did not have the opportunity to sit down to such a lunch when we were first married.

Perhaps because of this, or out of her own experiences, Jody also became a counselor. I am deeply proud of them both, but wish it could have been otherwise. The fact that I saw the problem for so long and failed to take action haunts me constantly.

### ***What I've Learned***

Unqualified praise may seem like a wonderful way to assuage your child's ego, and it's a very easy thing to do. A few simple words of admiration can return a beaming face to the parent, who then thinks my, what a wonderful job I'm

doing. Look at how happy my child is! It also relieves the parent of the heavy work involved in raising a healthy child.

The smile they see, however, isn't a real one, but one based on false assumptions that the child will realize sooner or later, and when that realization comes, it can have profound consequences.

As parents, our job is not to make our children happy, or have them like us, but to prepare them for the adult world, with all the struggles and hardships that the adult world entails. No matter how perfectly you plan it, somewhere along the way, unexpected events will put your child's values, relationships and well-being at risk, and the better prepared the child is to deal with these adversities, the better will be his or her chances of living a healthy, productive life. And there is no better way to teach this than by example.