

Cleanliness is Next to Godliness

(September, 1997)

I knew it. I knew, the moment I stepped into the bath, something would happen. The only thing I didn't know was what form the interruption would take: the doorbell, the phone, the smoke alarm or maybe flying saucers landing on the roof of the building.

It's the phone. I probably shouldn't have brought it into the bathroom with me; I suppose I was tempting fate. But I answer it anyway.

I don't recognize the woman on the line. "Mrs. Alderson?"

"Dr. Alderson," I say, automatically.

"I'm sorry," the caller says, in a tone that indicates she's not sorry at all. "I'm Principal Keating's assistant. She needs you to come down to the school. We're having a problem with your daughter."

Already? I expected to get a call at some point about Lizzie, but not on the very first day of kindergarten! I only dropped her off an hour ago, and she was excited and happy and we'd gone over how she ought to behave a thousand times.

"I'm leaving right now," I sigh. I don't wait for an answer; I hang up the phone, climb out of the tub and start drying off. This was supposed to be a restful day. I don't have to be back at the hospital until tomorrow afternoon; Mom's got the twins for the day, and I wasn't scheduled to pick Lizzie up until after noon. Oh, well...

I walk into the Principal's office, but she's not there. "Dr. Alderson?" A weary-looking middle-aged woman calls to me from behind a desk. It was her voice on the phone.

"Yes."

"They're in the nurse's office. Four doors down, on your right."

I'm already headed out the door. "Thank you," I say over my shoulder. I follow the directions, and, sure enough, there's the nurse's office. Sitting in an armchair, clutching the arms so tightly that her hands have gone white, is my daughter. She's somehow managing to look both frightened and defiant at the same time.

Standing behind a cluttered desk, turning their heads to me, are the Principal, who I met last week, and a tall woman with kind eyes, who I assume must be the nurse.

“What’s going on?”

The nurse answers me. “One of your daughter’s classmates cut himself, and she followed him here. It was just a scratch, but she insisted on staying to watch me take care of him. But when I did, she had a fit. She shouted at me. I’ve never seen the like in fifteen years working at this school.”

“Lizzie?”

Lizzie looks up to me, the defiance winning out over her fear. “She was doing it wrong, Mommy!”

Oh, God. This is my fault. It’s all my fault. This is what I get for bringing her to the hospital and encouraging her. “Lizzie, that’s very wrong,” I say. I try to keep my voice soft; it doesn’t really match the words or the situation, but I don’t want to traumatize her.

“Mommy!” She’s almost wailing. “She didn’t wash her hands first! You say and say and say, if you’re gonna be a doctor, you have to wash your hands! You say it all the time always!” She has to stop to take a breath, but before any of the adults can speak, she starts up again, “And she didn’t! I was watching! You say and say and say! If you don’t wash, then people get infested!”

What am I supposed to say to that? She’s absolutely right. I have told her that, over and over. It’s second nature to her – and she’s also right that the nurse ought to be doing it.

“Lizzie, I understand. But you can’t yell at your teachers. We talked about this,” I say. “It’s just like at the hospital. You have to be on your best behavior, and you have to listen to all the grown-ups. Even when you don’t want to. Do you understand?” I’m staring hard at her, trying to impress on her how important this is, without raising my voice.

She starts to say something, but I don’t relax my gaze, and she closes her mouth, thinks for a minute, then, very softly and extremely reluctantly says, “Yes, Mommy.”

“Good girl,” I tell her. “And I want you to apologize,” I add, reaching down and patting her arm.

“I’m sorry,” she says, after another moment’s consideration. “But my Mommy *is* a doctor, and she really does say all the time you have to wash your hands or else you get infested. And then you have to go to the hospital. I didn’t want Tommy to go to the hospital.”

I turn away from her and give the nurse and the Principal an apologetic look. “I do tell her that,” I shrug. I can’t read either of their expressions.

The Principal finally speaks. “Lizzie, are you going to behave, like your mother said?”

“Yes,” Lizzie answers.

The Principal smiles. “Good. Why don’t you go back to your class? Your mother can walk you there,” she says, then, to me, “It’s two floors down, room 109.” Obviously I’m expected to come back up here after I’ve dropped Lizzie off.

“Come on, honey, let’s get you back to class,” I tell my daughter, and she obediently follows me out of the office. “I’m proud of you for remembering about washing hands, but what I said about listening to the grown-ups is really important,” I say as we walk.

“I’ll listen,” she agrees.

We get to her classroom, and I open the door. “You be a good girl, and I’ll be back when school is over to pick you up. I love you, honey.”

“I love you, Mommy! I’ll be good!” At least for the next two hours, I’m absolutely certain she will. I close the door, wave to her and head back upstairs. The Principal is still with the nurse in her office. “I am sorry,” I say again. “I’m doing my residency at Children’s Hospital, and I’ve been bringing Lizzie with me sometimes. She - well, she loves to help, and she’s picked up so much. I guess when the little boy hurt himself, she just couldn’t help herself. But I’ll talk to her again when I get home, so this won’t happen again.”

The Principal smiles indulgently at me. “It’s a big adjustment for many children, starting school, having to follow rules for the first time and so forth.” I don’t respond to the veiled insult there. I can’t get into an argument with Lizzie’s Principal, certainly not on the first day of school!

“Like I said, I’ll make sure she understands,” I say, keeping my voice calm and level. “And I’m very sorry she shouted at you,” I say to the nurse.

“It’s fine,” the nurse says. “She seems like a very sweet girl. She’s just a little excitable, but she’ll learn.” Lizzie is not – oh, who am I kidding, excitable is the perfect word to describe her.

“Well, I *am* sorry, but it won’t happen again,” I say, turning to leave. But – I can’t help myself – just as I’m through the door, I look back to the nurse. “She was right, though. You really do need to wash your hands before every patient you take care of.”

I don’t wait for an answer; I’m down the hall, down the stairs and halfway to the car before it hits me. With one smart remark, I’ve gone and made life much harder for myself than it needed to be.

Oh well, it’s not as though it’s the first time I’ve done that.