

# The Coward

by [Buddfred Levi](#) (June 2025)



Portrait of Alexander J. Cassatt and His Son, Robert Kelso Cassatt (Mary Cassatt, 1884)

**That phone call has always bothered me. I didn't use protection, but when Marsha asked, I said I did. She had just**

missed her period. I could hear the panic in her voice.

There wasn't a callback. Marsha dropped out of sight. The gang wondered where she had gone. I had lied so easily. It embarrassed me when I thought about it.

Time moved on, and Jamie and I began to hang out. She was a delight. We eloped and started out family of two boys right away, Eric and Kevin, now ten and eleven.

Last night, after dinner, Jamie asked me if I remembered Marsha White. "She hung out for awhile with our group."

"Yes," I said, "I do."

"She was just killed in a car accident. It was on the news."

"That's sad. She was young. She was our age."

"Her son survived the crash and is in the hospital."

"Her son?"

"She was raising the boy by herself. According to the news, Marsha was a single mother."

I started thinking about the boy. "Did they say how old the boy is?"

"Thirteen."

I excused myself and walked out into our back patio. Dusk. There was a chill to the wind. *Thirteen.*

Back after Marsha called, I had worried for several weeks. And I had revisited the phone call on and off over the years. We had had an impromptu coupling in the cemetery next to the park where we all hung out. I should have used a condom. What was I thinking?

The next day I combed the newspaper for more information. The

boy's name was Alex. His grandparents were deceased. The case had been transferred to Child Protective Services.

Jamie was following the story, also, and with a more charitable interest. She was worried what would happen to Alex in the "system."

She said, "I'll bet that's why she disappeared from the gang – she was pregnant. I'm going to call my friend Iris and see if she remembers anything from back then."

I wasn't happy that Jamie was digging around. I didn't want her to know my concerns. *Did Alex resemble me?*

Jamie hung up the phone. "Iris thinks we should drive down to the hospital and visit with Alex tomorrow."

"Why are you getting messed up in this? I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"We just want to make sure Alex is okay."

I noticed that we were both calling him Alex.

"Wait til I get off work tomorrow. I'll drive you," I said without thinking.

"That would be great. Iris was worried about driving into the hospital zone. It's not a good area."

I looked in on the boys on my way to bed. Eric was asleep but Kevin was propped up and reading a book.

"What's up, Dad?"

"Just wanted to say 'good night.'"

"Good night."

I shut the door. My bastard son, if I had one, would be two years older than Kevin. I wonder how big a deal it would be

for the boys to end up with an older brother.

I imagined the three of them going into our entertainment room. "Let's watch a movie," Alex suggests.

The boys are all for it.

Alex says, "My favorite movie of all time is *The Godfather, Part 2*, but we can start with the first Godfather movie. There are three of them."

"What's it rated?" Kevin asks.

"Good."

"I mean, is it G or R-rated."

Alex thinks for a minute. "Probably R, although I'm not sure."

"Dad doesn't let us watch any movies that aren't G or PG." Eric says. "He says we're not old enough."

Kevin jumps in: "Let's watch *Tom Sawyer*. I'm reading that for school. Dad won't care what it's rated since I'm studying it in school."

Alex sits on the couch. "That's a kid movie. I don't watch kid movies."

"Dadddd!" Eric yells, "can we watch *The Godfather* with Alex?"

"What will I say?"

Would dinner time be a problem. Do 16-year-olds eat macaroni and cheese with chicken nuggets at mealtime?

"No way," I imagine Alex saying. "I like meat – hamburgers and steaks and chicken breasts."

And sex! I didn't do much except with myself until college. Hell, Alex might already be active.

Already I'm in over my head. And I haven't even figured out what I wanted to do for sure. I'm already thinking what Julie will say about a bedroom. We have already talked about moving Kevin into the entertainment room.

"We'll move the TV into the living room," Julie will say. "Lots of families watch TV in their living room."

"We will have to move to a bigger house. No, we can't afford that ... we can remodel the recreation room into two bedrooms!" I think.

I wonder what Julie would tell the grandparents. My parents are dead, but hers are still alive.

"Josh screwed a girl he knew and knocked her up. This girl raised Alex by herself until she died in a car wreck. Josh has decided he wants to take over parental responsibilities."

I realize that won't go over very well. But let Julie deal with it—her parents don't like me that much, anyway.

This paternity thing was getting complicated. I lay down and fell asleep.

The next evening when I got home from work, Jamie and Iris were waiting for their chauffeur. I still was debating whether to drop them off, or to park and go up to Alex's room with them. By the time we got to the hospital, I had decided to go up meet up with Alex. I walked into the room behind the girls. I recognized myself right away, but I didn't say anything. His hair was dark and tousled and his eyes were brown just like mine in high school. He wasn't near as tall as me, but I hadn't shot up until college. I felt elated and saddened at the same time.

Iris introduced us.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

Jamie answered. "We were friends with your mom in college. We wanted to visit and make sure you were okay."

"I don't remember meeting you."

"We knew her many years ago. Before you were born."

"Why are you bothering me? Mum is dead."

"We know. We wondered if you needed anything."

"I don't. I'm okay. Mum's friend Henry is going to look after me."

"Henry Blain?" I say. Henry had been a friend in the day.

Alex nodded. "He's always been there for Mum."

I was light-headed and already anxious to return home. But the girls stayed and visited a while longer. Jamie and Iris chatted happy on the way back.

The next day, Jamie was on her phone when I came down for breakfast. She mouthed to me that she was talking to CPS. I poured myself a cup of coffee and escaped to the back patio. I wanted to say "leave it be," but when Jamie got an idea in her head she was ruthless.

The spring breeze was brisk. I figured Henry had been there for Alex, and would be for many years to come. But that didn't settle my struggle with paternity. I was pretty sure Alex was my son. Did I want to walk away? Did I want the abandonment of today to stretch into a lifetime? I was already thinking how Alex would fit into our family.

Jamie was off the phone and suddenly by my side. "CPS suggests that if we are concerned about Alex's welfare, that we should go to court tomorrow. A tentative program custody will be established then."

"Are we concerned?"

"Iris remembers Henry was heavy into drugs in the day."

"We all experimented."

"But Henry spent a couple of months in rehab—don't you remember?"

"What does that have to do with us?"

"You're impossible," Jamie said, and she walked back into the house.

I skipped work the next morning. Iris, Jamie and I went to court. Alex and Henry were both there. CPS outlined the case for the judge and submitted a recommendation that Henry be appointed as Alex's guardian.

No one voiced any objections. I looked over at Alex. He was smiling.

That night I said to Jamie: "I need to take a paternity test."

"Why?"

"I'm pretty sure Alex is my son."

"You're not serious."

"I am. It was a one time thing. We were drunk."

"Why would you get a test."

"If he's my son, I want him in my life."

"I don't believe you fucked Marsha! She was such a skag. And, let's face it, in those days you were a twerp. I'm going upstairs. You can sleep in the family room."

*Ouch!*

I made coffee the next morning and had just poured a cup when Jamie came downstairs.

"I don't want you to take a paternity test."

I was surprised.

She continued: "How would we explain Alex to the boys?"

"We can worry about that later."

Jamie sat down. "I still find it hard to believe you screwed Marsha!"

"Well, I did. And I sobered up totally when she told me she thought she was pregnant."

"You knew?"

"Not really. She disappeared right after telling me."

"But you knew it was a possibility."

"That's the week I started to stuff protection in my wallet."

"Why do you think you're Alex's father?"

"I recognized him. He's my high school twin."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jamie's phone rang. It was CPS. They wanted to know why Jamie was concerned about Alex. She answered she was in the middle of something and could they please call back.

She turned to me. "I can't believe you've put me in this position!"

"What position is that exactly?" I asked.

"Upending our lives."

"You were cool for it yesterday."

"Yesterday it wasn't personal."



I pulled out a chair and sat at the table. "I'm sorry."

She sat opposite to me. "It's so sordid!"

"It happened. I don't want to run away from it any longer. I want to be tested."

"You're so selfish. What about the boys? Suddenly they have a brother..." Marsha pushed back her chair. "I want you to move out for a few days. Go to a hotel or something."

"You're not serious."

"I want some space to deal with this mess you've got us messed up in. I want two days alone with the boys."

I wasn't about to argue. Jamie was right, the situation was a mess. I checked into a small hotel near my office.

The next morning I called CPS and asked to speak to the case coordinator for Alex. I was transferred to Naomi. I explained I had had an affair with Marsha about the time she got pregnant with Alex. I was concerned because I suspected I was Alex's father.

"But Alex's father is Henry. He was in court the other day."

"Henry helped Marsha raise Alex. I just want to make sure I'm not the father. If I am, I'll want custody of Alex."

"Even if you are the father, Henry was there for him from the day he was born."

"Only because I was excluded from Alex's life."

"This is nonsense. If you want a paternity test, go to court. On the off chance they will humor your request. I'm not about to."

I decided to call Henry and explain what I am thinking. We agreed to meet in the hotel bar the next night for a beer.

When I got off the elevator, I spotted Henry across the lobby waiting for me. At the court hearing he had worn a suit, but tonight he was in jeans and a teeshirt. The bar was a simple modern room with low lighting reflecting off a polished wood floor.

We ordered a couple of beers and carried them to a booth.

"So ... what's this about?" He said, right off the bat. "It's been years."

"I married Jamie after you and Marsha disappeared long ago."

"We heard about that. You eloped the next year."

"She wanted to start a family while we were young."

"She didn't know you'd already started one?"

"Whoa," I said. "I didn't know, either. Not for sure, anyway. Marsha had dropped off the map."

"Well, Marsha knew, but didn't want to get 'stuck' with you, as she put it."

"I was pretty immature those days."

"To the point, then: although I raised Alex with Marsha, I am not the father."

"Then I'm going to insist on a paternity test."

"What would that prove?"

"That I am Alex's father."

"You missed your chance there." He stood up. "We know you're the father. This conversation isn't going anywhere."

"I was hoping I could meet with Alex and apologize for my desertion. I want a relationship with him if possible."

"I'll check with Alex and get back to you," Henry said. "I'm not sure he'd want a relationship with you." He turned around and left. I went home.

I was deflated. I'd overlooked our relationship was a two way street. Why would Alex want a relationship with me after all these years regardless of how I was feeling?

Jamie gave me a hug when I drove home. She explained: "I needed some time alone to process what was going on. I'm sorry."

I told her about my meeting with Henry.

"So, you've settled on paternity?"

I explained that I had recognized Alex at the hospital. "And I want him in our life if possible. You'll handle it better than me, if you will."

"We'll handle it together," she said.

Henry called me the next afternoon. "It's on," he said. "My place, tonight. Bring your wife."

I agreed, Henry gave me his address and at six sharp I rang his doorbell. Henry answered. "Come on in. We'll meet in the living room."

The house was smallish but comfortable. Alex was waiting for us in one of four chairs spaced in a square.

Henry introduced us. "Alex, this is your biological father and his wife."

"We met at the hospital the other night. I remember."

Alex's arm was still in a cast and lay resting on the arm of his chair.

"He's here with an apology for you."

"For what?"

"I should have been there for you while you were growing up," I jumped in.

"Henry was the best dad I could have asked for," Alex said. "Why did I need you?"

"I could have added support for your mom and Henry."

"My grandparents took care of that. They were always there for me."

"You have two stepbrothers who will idolize you."

"I'm not sure why you're really apologizing."

"Because I screwed up. I'd like to be a part of your life."

"Sounds like a hassle. I already have a bunch of that." Alex turned to Henry. "What do you think?"

"It's up to you, Alex. Your Mom will be buried tomorrow. Maybe you need some time to take all this in?"

"Look," I said, "I don't want to take from you anything you have ... I just want you to have me in your life. I made a piss poor decision when you were conceived. I could have at least stood by your mom and helped Henry and her raise you."

"So, you feel guilty?" Alex asked.

"Yes and no ... more a sense of loss. I think I would have enjoyed watching you grow up. If I can, I'd like to watch your growth from this point forward."

"What about you?" He looked at Jamie. "Are you on board with this?"

"I'm the one that screwed up..." I said.

Jamie interrupted. "Very much. I'm looking forward to it."

"I'll tell you what," Alex said. "If you come to the funeral tomorrow, I'll let you know then. Do you have a dog? I always did want a dog."

I shook my head no. "But it's a bargaining chip."

"I'll see you out," Henry said and stood up. I followed him to the door.

The next morning my whole family dressed up for the funeral. We borrowed the neighbor's Siberian Husky, we climbed into the car and were on our way.

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