

'I'm Not the Baby Daddy'

by David Lapp | @AmberDavidLapp | June 20, 2016 8:00 am

"I want out today," Travis, 25, announced to the doctor. A week earlier, he had collapsed onto a grocery store floor, his fiancé shrieking as she clung to their 9-month-old daughter. He had no pulse, but doctors revived him at the hospital, where he was told he had sepsis, a potentially life-threatening complication of an infection in his leg. After warning him that they might need to amputate his leg, the doctors stripped out the infection.

A week later, it was Thanksgiving Day, and Travis, with his leg intact but still pinned together, wanted nothing more than to go home and enjoy his daughter's first Thanksgiving.

"There's no way. You're sick," the doctor said.

"Well, I have the right to check myself out, right?" Travis shot back.

He called his fiancé, whom he would marry in less than two weeks, and told her the good news.

"I'm coming home," he said.

He heard a pause on the other end, and then, words that cut a new wound.

"Well," his fiancé began, "I think you should know something: we're done; I've been cheating on you." Then, she told him everything—how for the past year, while he had been working 12 to 16 hour shifts as a sales representative at a logistics company, she had been sleeping with another man. And how, despite the fact that they had relatives and friends traveling from as far as South Korea and Ohio to their wedding in Colorado in less than two weeks, she was done.

Shocked, Travis searched his contacts list to find anyone who might be able to pick him up from the hospital. He finally reached a friend who lived an hour away who agreed to take him home. Travis promised to pay him cash for the gas.

But as he went to the ATM to withdraw money, he discovered that there was no money in his account. *That's weird*, he thought. He had about \$8,000 in there. When he called his bank to find out what had happened, he learned that it had all been withdrawn. His fiancé had taken everything.

Finally reaching home, he discovered another stunner: the house that he had bought and shared with his fiancé had been purged of all furniture and personal belongings—pictures, TV's, their daughter's belongings, game systems, cable boxes—everything except a lone couch in the living room.

"What the f***!" was all that Travis could say, walking around his empty house. He couldn't even give his friend the cash he had promised for driving him.

He immediately called the cops, but all they did was advise him to take it to civil court. That wasn't an option for Travis. "That's the mother of my child," he explained. "I'm not going to do that." He couldn't believe

what she had done to him, but he didn't want to retaliate.

She had keyed one of their 2015 Chevy Malibus, so he took the other car and pointed it toward the Colorado Rockies. He just needed some alone time in the mountains.

But about five minutes into his journey, the final insult: the *puh-puh, puh-puh, puh-puh* of his car blurring, and then stalling. A mechanic said that somebody had poured water in the gas tank, frying the engine.

When I spoke to Travis over Memorial Day weekend on a front porch in small-town Ohio, where he was visiting from Colorado, it had been six months since his ex-fiancé had fled with their daughter. I was interviewing working-class young adults for another research project when I stumbled into Travis, who had politely accepted my invitation to sit down and ask him a few questions about relationships and marriage. ("He's got a crazy story," Travis's friend had warned me.)

"Why did she do this?" I asked him.

"I'm still confused to this day," he responded. "I don't know. I didn't see it coming." He did notice that she "changed" after the birth of their daughter. He suspected that she had post-partum depression, and had encouraged her to see a doctor. She never did.

"And there was never any clue [about the cheating]?" I asked.

"It was hard because I left at 5:30 in the morning [for work], and I came home at 6:00 or 7:00 at night," he explained. "I took a shower, I played with my daughter, and I went to bed. No, I had no idea. We just had such a trust level. She was my best friend. She had guy friends, and I trusted her."

He also noted that she was constantly saying that she wanted to work part-time, rather than be a full-time stay-at-home mom. But he would point out that he could make a lot more working overtime than she could working part-time at a low-wage job. Her wages would probably just cover their daughter's childcare expenses. And with all the overtime he worked, he made about \$70,000 a year. So, to him, it seemed financially smarter for him to work and her to stay home.

Besides, the way he saw it, he was sacrificing for his family and letting his fiancé "bond" with their daughter at home. But as he said, "She took it as she's stuck, stranded."

Whatever the case, Travis felt completely abandoned. He wanted nothing more than to see his daughter again, but he couldn't reach his ex by phone or social media, and he couldn't reach her family members. He hadn't seen his daughter since. He had no idea where they were.

In the months after their break up, Travis lived as a hermit. "I literally spent every day going to work and coming home and contemplating suicide every day," he said.

He also quit his job at the logistics company, and obtained a license to grow marijuana and sell it to marijuana dispensaries in Colorado. He was making even more money than he ever made at his previous job, he said. But he had lost the social currency that really matters: trust.

"Do you trust women now?" I asked. "Do you trust people?"

He shook his head. "No," he said, "because I learned. She was my best friend and she turned her back on

me.... I've lost trust with a lot of people.”

On his Facebook wall, he shared a meme with a photo of *Mad Men* character Don Draper in the background: “People run in packs because they don’t feel alone. I run alone because I don’t feel safe in a f***** pack.”

Now, Travis said, it was time to “work on me.”

When we met, he was visiting his hometown in Ohio to attend the funeral of his best friend from high school, who had committed suicide. At the funeral, he met an old-high school crush. They clicked, and she was the first woman he slept with since the breakup. But a couple days before I interviewed Travis, he went to bed with his new girl by his side and awoke alone to find his wallet and watch gone. He discovered she was a heroin addict; their relationship ended as quickly as it began.

In less than an hour, on a front porch in a Midwestern small town, Travis had told me a story that distilled so much of what afflicts working-class America: loneliness, infidelity, a lack of trust, premature death[1], heroin, and trauma.

His story tempted disbelief. But the day after meeting Travis, I heard a similar story about a Marine serving his country in Afghanistan for nine months, while his wife was back home with their son. When he returned, he discovered that she had fled with their son and her new boyfriend—and about \$50,000 in their bank account—to another state. She had also sold most of their belongings. And before she high-tailed it out of state, she slit the tires in her husband’s vehicle.

That same day, I met another young father, age 20, who was trying to win full custody of his son, a toddler who wouldn’t let his dad out of his sight, but clung to him like a koala, his arms and legs wound tightly around him. The dad had been awarded emergency custody after the child’s mother’s had fled to another state with their child.

These are the kind of fathers who are so easy to forget. We lament deadbeat dads, and we celebrate the good dads on Father’s Day. But what about the dad who wants to be there, but cannot? What about the dad who feels abandoned? What about the dad who checked himself out of the hospital so that he could celebrate his daughter’s first Thanksgiving, but now doesn’t know where she is?

‘I’m not the baby daddy. Baby Daddy is someone who does nothing for their kids. I’m the child’s father. I’ve been here, and I’ll always be.’

A meme that Travis shared on his Facebook wall says, “There are men who want to be a good father and there are women who won’t let them.”

Travis lamented the vocabulary of “baby daddy, baby momma.”

“To me, that’s so disrespectful,” he told me. “I’m the child’s father. I’m not the baby daddy. Baby Daddy is someone who does nothing for their kids. I’m the child’s *father*. I’ve been here, and I’ll always be.”

He knows there are “a lot of bad men out there doing bad things,” but when the woman leaves, “it’s the man who takes the blunt of it.”

“And in the courts,” he said, “it’s the mother’s laws. We don’t have father’s laws.... When a woman leaves a man, he better have a really good attorney to get every other weekend and a day throughout the week. It should be 50/50.”

“We’ve lost track of equality,” he lamented.

But we shouldn’t even have to be talking about all this divorce and court fights in the first place, Travis added. He looks at his grandparents, married for over 50 years, and admires their “pure love story.” *That’s the way it’s supposed to be*, he thinks.

Then he looks at his parents’ divorce, and he looks at the divorce rate today, and he concludes that marriage today “means nothing. It’s a piece of paper.” What marriage is supposed to be—“a beautiful thing meant to be shared between two people ... meant to be forever”—has been “lost.”

People today, he said, are too quick to give up. “What happens when it pours?” Travis asked. “You run. You wanna get out of it. You used to stand and dance in the rain and make the best of it. And you don’t now. Whenever it gets hard ... the easiest thing to do is to turn your back and run and not deal with it.

He still wants to believe in love, he said, but right now he feels too “mentally drained.” He needs time to heal.

Travis is not a deadbeat dad. And his ex? If we were to hear her side, our story might be more nuanced. As Travis suggested, she probably felt trapped trying to cope with her own struggles. She probably felt that she had “nowhere to go,” as Travis told me.

It would be extremely simplistic to make this a story about “loyal men vs. unfaithful women.” We know that life is more complex than that. Right there on that front porch, where I interviewed Travis, another woman paced and swore about her boyfriend, whom she suspected was cheating on her. During our conversation, she stormed off in her car to confront him.

In bed that night, after my conversation with Travis, I remarked to my wife that for the first time in my life I felt in my bones what men mean when they say that “you can’t trust women.” I didn’t actually believe it—I know far too many women full of kindness and goodness to say that—but I did want to let myself, if even for a moment, feel just a piece of that despair and weight of betrayal. Travis’s experience is real. And if there is to be any authentic reconciliation to the gender wars, we will have to walk through the suffering, not ignore it. The road to healing is a road best traveled with attentive, compassionate companions who stand with, not above.

“Look into my daughter’s eyes and then I get the water eyes,” wrote Travis on his Facebook wall, quoting rapper Dizzy Wright. “If I die, I pray to God she knows her father tried.”

Endnotes:

1. premature death: <http://family-studies.org/the-family-implications-of-premature-death-in-rural-america/>

Source URL: <http://family-studies.org/im-not-the-baby-daddy/>

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