

Why I'm Bad
Thief

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Wendell gets mad at me because I'm always asking for stuff. He says, "Well you just want the world, don't you - handed to you on a silver platter?" I don't want the world on a platter. It's just that when I see something I want, I say, "Oh, I want that," without even thinking. All he has to do is say no. He doesn't have to get all mad about it. Sometimes when he gives me stuff he says, "Well, then, what do I get in return? Tit for tat." That means I have to give him something back so it'll be fair.

I wish I knew how to not ask for candy and books and toys. I also wish I could eat an ice cream cone without getting it all over my face, but even when I try my hardest to be careful, it ends up melting so fast I can't keep up. He gets mad about that too. I worry that when I'm an adult I'm not going to be able to eat ice cream in front of other people since I'm so bad at it.

When we go grocery shopping, I always head straight for the toy aisle as soon as we get inside the store. Today I find a slinky and take it out of its box so I can play with it on the floor. I saw on T.V. that you can make slinkys go down stairs and I want to try that on our front porch. I wish we had a two story house with lots of stairs, like the Brady Bunch.

I find a book about Cinderella. The pages are made of plastic and really thick. When I run my fingertip over each page, I can feel a million little ripples, like the fiberglass over the picnic benches, only teeny tiny. When I hold the book to the light and move it back and forth, I see two completely different pictures on the same page. One is a picture of Cinderella in her rag clothes and the other is a picture of Cinderella in her gown. It's the neatest thing I've ever seen.

When Wendell and my mother tell me it's time to go, I am still looking at that book. I put the slinky back in its box and run to catch up to them. I tell them all about the book and how the slinky can go down stairs. My mother says, "Oh, isn't that nice," and she pats me on the back with a stiff hand. She looks around as she's doing it, to see if anyone is watching. If they are, she laughs and shakes her head at them, or smiles and reaches out to hold my hand. If they aren't, she just walks ahead of me. My mother cares a lot about what other people think.

When we get to the check stand I get stuck looking at the woman who is typing all the prices into the cash register. Her fingers move really fast and I wonder how she can remember how much everything costs. Some stuff has a price on it, but not all the stuff. I think she would be really good at "memory." It's a game my friend Diane taught me how to play with cards. I'm really good at it - better than Diane even. Maybe I'll be a cashier when I grow up.

After the woman is done ringing up all the groceries, she looks at me and smiles. I smile back, but I keep my lips closed. That's how I smile now, so that nobody will see my crooked teeth. Then she turns to Wendell and asks him if he wants to buy the slinky I am holding in my hand. His arms go stiff and he balls up his fists when she says that. I tell him I can put it back, but he whips his head around before I can finish saying it and looks at me with his mouth turned down. I can see the little muscle pulsating by his ear so I shut up. When he turns back to the clerk he smiles and starts talking in his sing-songy voice.

"Well," he says, "Sure then."

My mother smiles at the woman in line behind us and shakes her head. Then she says something to her and shrugs her shoulders. She chuckles like the woman behind us is chuckling with her, but she's not.

Wendell turns to me and says, "Well look at that. You got yourself a brand new toy," and everyone thinks he is the nicest person in the world. He pats me on the back too, but his hand isn't stiff and he squeezes my shoulder then keeps it there.

When we get to the parking lot, I think he's reaching out to hold my hand so I lift mine up, but he grabs my waist instead and he pinches it, hard, twisting up my skin. He's staring straight ahead, pushing the cart with one hand and pinching me with the other. I have to keep up with him or it'll hurt worse, so I hold onto his wrist with both hands and pull myself toward it. I scream because that's the only thing I can think of to do, but he just keeps walking faster and faster.

My mother says, "Char, be quiet, someone's gonna hear that and think you're being abused."

I'm quieter when I beg him to let go. He stops pinching my waist, grabs both my wrists and looks at me again. "Shut up," he says through his clenched teeth. At the same time, he jerks me a bit to make it set in. When he straightens back up to push the cart, he uses his other hand to twist my wrist this time. I have to turn sideways and run to catch up with it. He holds it that way all the way to the car.

On the way home, my mother spins around to look at me in the back seat and says, "I can't believe you tried to steal that slinky. What are you? A thief?" She tries to make her forehead creased like Wendell's has been since we got in the car, but it looks fake.

Then I hear Wendell say, "That's what she is. She's nothing but a little thief." Then he holds up one hand and says, "She just wants, wants, wants all the time, like we're made of money."

He's so mad at me after saying this that he grabs onto the steering wheel and starts rocking back and forth in his seat as he's driving. He leans forward as far as he can go then jerks himself back. He hits the seatback so hard it makes my mother bounce up on her side. Steering wheel, seat. Steering wheel, seat. Boom. Boom. Boom.

"I didn't raise you like that," she says. Her voice is jerky from Wendell's rocking. It makes her sound scared. She puts her nose in the air and turns around so that I can only see the back of her head.

Her wig is all frizzy back there, like something exploded in it, but it's combed nice and smooth on the sides and in the front. If she really cares so much about what people think, why doesn't she care about how she looks from the back? It's like, if she can't see it, it's not even there.

"You're lucky your father never spansks you," she says as I watch her head go up and down, up and down, from Wendell's rocking. "Other kids would get a spanking for this."

The next time we are at the grocery store, I am still holding a grey plastic airplane when we get to the check stand and it scares me because I realize I did it again. It's small, so I stick it in my pocket really fast before anyone sees.

The next time, when I stuff the Cinderella book down my pants, it makes a big stiff square over my belly. My face is hot as we go through the checkout. I'm sure someone is going to catch me this time, but they all act like I'm not even there. Sometimes it's better that way.

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