

Just Wendell

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My new best friend is Dawn. She lives down the street. She wants to be my best friend as soon as she finds out about the amusement park in my backyard. She has red hair and freckles. Kids with red hair and freckles aren't as good as regular kids. Black kids are even less than that. That's what my mother says but when I ask, "Why?" she doesn't have an answer. She tells me that Dawn's jealous because I have ponies at my house and she doesn't. "Aren't you lucky?" She says. Dawn tells me I'm lucky too. People I don't even know tell me I'm lucky.

Since Dawn is older than me by a couple of years, she knows a lot of stuff. She makes fun of the kids in our neighborhood who pick their noses and eat their boogers. I don't tell her that I do that too, but I think she knows. She asks me all the time, "Char, do you want a booger sandwich?" And I say, "No, Yuk!"

We are sitting on my front porch waiting for my new daddy to get home so we can ride the ponies. Dawn puts an apple in her mouth, but doesn't bite down all the way. Then she puts the apple in my face to show me the teeth marks.

"So?" I say.

"See how perfect it is?"

"Mine is too," I say. I take the apple from her and make my own teeth marks right next to hers.

"See?" I say, putting it in her face like she did me.

"Yours are all crooked," she says. "You're gonna need braces."

Dawn tells me about braces. I don't want to have braces in my mouth, but she says I'm doomed.

"Next time you go to the dentist they'll probably put them on," she tells me.

I don't really know what the dentist is, but I don't tell her because I'm pretty sure it's something I should know. I can't stand not knowing stuff and I don't like the feeling I get when people laugh at me. When I ask my mother about stuff, she usually says, "You'll learn that in school." I think she doesn't tell me because she doesn't know either. I can't wait to start kindergarten so I know more things than she does. I wish I already knew everything right now.

Dawn says, "I know how your mommy got you."

"I do too," I tell her.

"How?"

"From the stork."

"There's no such thing as a stork."

"How then?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you."

"Why?"

"It's a secret."

"Tell me."

Dawn says it's taking too long for my new daddy to get home so why don't we just go ride the ponies without him?

"Tell me."

She won't look me in eyes and I want to know even more because of it. She says she's going home now, so I follow her.

"Tell me! Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!" I say running alongside her until she does.

"Your mom went to the hospital and they cut you out of her belly." She says this as she's looking down at the sidewalk, like it's telling her what to say.

"Her belly?"

“Yes.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Yes, huh. And he’s not your daddy either.” Now she looks me in the eyes.

“I already know that. My real daddy died. He’s my new daddy.”

“He’s not your new daddy.”

“What is he then?”

“I don’t know. He’s just some guy named Wendell that lives with your mommy.”

“Why isn’t he my daddy?”

“Because he’s not married to your mommy.”

“Yes he is.”

“No he’s not,” she says. “They’re not married. Go ask.”

I hear her yell, “Booger Eater!” As I turn around to run home.

I’m out of breath when I reach my mother who is sitting on the sofa in the dark. I tell her that Dawn said I was cut out of her belly and that she’s not married to Wendell and is that true? I know that saying this is going to upset her. I want her to be upset.

“Why would she tell you those things?” She puts her head in her hands. “Oh, God. What else did she tell you?”

I want her to get up and open the drapes.

Just then my new daddy, or maybe not, walks in the front door.

“Oh Wendell, Dawn has been filling Char’s head with lies,” she says from her spot on the sofa, barely turning her head toward him. It’s like she’s in slow motion. “Char, tell him what Dawn said. Tell him what you told me.” She leans forward and grabs my shoulders. “What else did she say to you?”

Wendell reaches over us and throws open the drapes behind her. “It’s like a goddamned cave in here! What the hell’s the matter with you people? Are you vampires or something?”

The light shines over my mother's head, making her a shadow in front of me. She's not wearing her wig and her real hair is sticking up all over, forming a greasy halo around her head.

I pull away from her and follow him into the kitchen. "Dawn said that I was in mommy's belly and she had to go to the hospital to get me cut out of her."

"That sounds about right," he says.

"She's a liar!" I hear my mother yell from behind me. "Everything she says is a lie!"

He grabs a beer out of the fridge, pulls off the tab and takes a long guzzle.

I lean my shoulder on the fridge. "She says that you're not my daddy, because you aren't married to my mommy."

"I'm not?" He says playfully, like he's surprised to find that out just now.

"Are you?"

"Well, let's see." He scratches his head. "I don't remember going to a wedding. Do you?"

I shake my head.

"I guess that means we're not married."

This is what finally gets my mother off the sofa. "Wendell!" She screams. "She doesn't need to know about that stuff!" I hear her headed toward the kitchen.

"We're just livin' in sin!" He shouts as he takes her hand and pulls her into the kitchen. He puts his arm around her waist and does a little dance with his hips, holding his beer up in the air.

"Wendell, stop that," she says as she pulls away from him. "What else did she tell you? I knew that girl couldn't be trusted. She's nothing but a dirty liar."

I cross my arms in front of me and stare at her.

"She was bound to find out sooner or later," he says.

"What's living in sin?" I ask.

She turns to me and kneels down, putting her hands on my shoulders again. "What else did she tell you?"

"She said that I had to be cut out of your belly."

"What else?" She says louder, shaking my shoulders.

"She said that I'm a booger eater." I wasn't going to tell her that, but she made me.

She looks behind her at Wendell, who has leaned his butt against the kitchen counter, then back at me. "Is that all she told you?"

"What's living in sin mean?" I ask again.

My mother looks down and lets out her breath, like she's been holding it for a long time. "That's just what they say when people live together before they're married. We're not married yet, but it doesn't really matter."

"Why don't you get married then?" I ask.

"Because your mother wants to keep getting checks in the mail," he says.

"We'll get married some day, just not yet." Her breath smells like onions and port wine and it makes me turn my head away. This is not good, I think. Who would want to marry her? She's still wearing her nightgown and it's four o'clock in the afternoon. It scares me that he could leave and then what would happen to the amusement park?

"He's still your new daddy," she says.

"No he's not. He's just Wendell."

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