

The New Daddy

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Days later my mother takes me by the hand and pulls me through the leftover ashes and the broken pieces of tea set and we climb into a white truck with rounded corners and a big camper shell on top of it. We drive from Simi Valley to Tarzana, where he lives in a house the size of the room my father built just for me, only it's in the middle of nowhere, behind some trees. The wall between his living room and his bedroom comes to my shoulders, their waists. I sleep on a slippery vinyl couch facing their bed.

His father was a dog and pony man. That means he trained dogs and ponies to do tricks, jump through hoops and stuff. They grew up in Missouri, which he pronounces, "Mizora," and they were very poor. He tells me that his little sister used to sit on her mother's lap in a rocking chair in front of their farm house, while their mule, Jake, would push the back of the chair to rock them. Before the dog and pony act, his father ran a pig farm and worked at a saw mill. I imagine all of his relatives with dirt on their faces. After his mother died from cancer, his father joined the circus and he joined the Air Force, leaving his little sister to be tended to by neighbors and schoolteachers. He didn't go to war, though. He stayed in the states building cabinets for the soldiers to store their guns.

I get the feeling that he doesn't really want us here, but my mother keeps bringing our stuff over. He clenches his jaw so that the little muscle on his cheek pulsates back and forth every time she walks through the door with something else in her hands. She pretends she

doesn't notice the look on his face. She's put drapes over the windows and she brought over a lamp and a bed spread that used to belong to her and my real daddy. Now, my mother and my new daddy spend all night kissing underneath it. I can hear them from my place on the sofa, even though my mother turns up the TV really loud. I miss having my own room to sleep in, but my mother takes me back to the old house during the day so I can play with Diane. She's my best friend, but since she's six years older than me, she is also my babysitter.

He acts nice to me. He holds my hand and talks to me in a special, high-pitched voice, but I still haven't decided whether to like him or not. Today my mother went somewhere without me and it's just me and him. He's wearing an oven mitt as he unfolds the TV tray in front of me, then plops down my dinner saying, "There you go," all sweet, like he's talking to a baby. I kick out my leg and the TV tray turns over sideways. My dinner lands face down on the shag carpet, foil side up so I can make out the little compartments where the mixed veggies and cherry pie sit. For a second, my new daddy and me look at it on the floor. Then I look at him and start laughing because my dinner just fell flat on its face. I expect him to laugh with me, but he doesn't think it's funny. All the veins pop out in his neck and his arms go all stiff.

"You're a God damned spoiled brat, that's what you are!"

I've seen my mother scream and act crazy. Even though I know it's sometimes because of me that she acts that way, it's more like she's mad at the sky, that's where she usually looks. Not him, though. He's looking right at me. Then he starts pacing in front of me, back and forth, back and forth, staring, with his arms all stiff out to the sides and his hands balled up into fists like they're meant for me. It's not the first time I've been called spoiled. I heard the lady down the street at our old house tell my mom that I need some discipline. Maybe she's right.

Then he stops and points his finger at the TV dinner on the floor. “Look at that! You ruined my God damned carpet!”

“No I didn’t,” is the only thing I can think of to say, even though I know it’s a lie. More veins pop out in his arms and on his forehead. He thinks I did it on purpose because I laughed and then I lied about it. He points at me and says, “You’re a God damned bitch liar!” He yells that since I don’t care about his carpet that I can just go to bed without any supper at all then. I close my eyes when he comes toward me, but I can feel him grab my arm hard and pull me off the sofa onto the floor. He drags me into the bathroom mumbling under his breath. I think that maybe he’s going to wash my mouth out with soap because I’ve heard of other parents doing that, along with sending them to bed without their supper, but that’s not what he does.

It’s like my body has a short in it. I can even hear the sound of it in my ears. Zap. Zap. Zap. The whole world starts flickering on and off like I’m losing my connection with the thing that’s keeping me alive. Then there’s static, like a TV when it’s not on a channel. My body starts shaking as everything around me turns gray. I can feel myself float up until I’m nose to nose with the ceiling. I shrink into a tiny point of light, then disappear.

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