

Father's Day

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The sun streaked the room with strips of yellow light. It was eleven o'clock in the morning and our cramped apartment already felt overheated down to the checkerboard linoleum. I counted the tiles up to a hundred sixty-six before I smelled hair spray.

Two minutes later Mama appeared in her town clothes. "Look at the time. What you say we go and get us a bite?"

I peeled my sweaty arms off the vinyl surface so she could drag the brush through my hair. It had been two days since it had been tended to and was starting to mat up. Since we had left Tampa early that summer, it had grown well over my ears, longer than Mama had ever allowed.

"Straighten up and hold still." She jerked my head back to untangle my hair. My hair was something she kept charge of though I was nine years old. I figured it was her way of checking for head lice without being open about it.

"We ought to go get us something to eat," she said.

The pans and utensils that came with the apartment meant she wouldn't cook at home because she didn't know what unsanitary thing they'd been used for, so she insisted on going to restaurants though she could barely afford it.

I washed my hands like she told me. She was behaving more like a mannequin than a real person, thanks to Dr. Miles' Nervine Liquid, a lady's tonic that she drank day and night. At times I wondered if she was my real mother at all. Maybe she and Daddy had found me at the carnival, from one of those discarded-baby sideshows, and brought me home so Billy wouldn't turn into a spoiled rotten kid. If so, the plan hadn't worked.

He was as whiny and selfish as an “only” kid could dream of being. And of course this summer he'd kept his good-luck streak, going to camp for two weeks while Mama and I sweltered in our hotbox apartment. I studied my face in the mirror. My red hair and freckles looked like Daddy's and my eyes, yellow-green as Thompson's seedless grapes, were Mama's. I was theirs all right.

We made our way out to the car as Mama tucked a brown bottle into her handbag. “Pick up your feet. Stop acting dilatory,” she fussed

I shifted my thighs on the car upholstery and sat my back so the sores wouldn't rub against the seat. The radio crooned “Sweet Dreams” by Patsy Cline. “Things I know can't come true,” Mama sang along. The fire department whistle signaled noontime down Main Street. Saturday meant heavier traffic than usual. Farmers and factory workers were in town to do their trading. We passed the courthouse, then the Sears catalog store, the Sit 'n' Sip, the Rexall, lined up like books in the public library.

“Giving me the silent treatment, huh?” We looked at one another as she slowed for the stoplight. She saw me perk up when I saw the Cozy Café. “You can forget that, Sister. I'm not taking you in there acting like you are.”

I didn't like her calling me “sister.” She was my mother, not a kid like Billy. My stomach growled. For the first time that day I felt hungry. We passed the Dog 'n Suds, a dusty drive-in that specialized in hot dogs and root beer. A half block on down the street, she pulled over and handed me two fifty-cent pieces. “Here. Run back and get us something.”

“You want me to go?”

“I'm sure not talking to the radio. Now scoot.”

I stepped onto the pavement. She wasn't going to order herself, not after what had happened the week before with Daddy. Mama had spotted him there with his girlfriend. Mama had pitched a fit and Daddy moved out

She hung her head out the window. "Get the usual and tell them to put lids on the to-go cups. I don't want you spilling stuff. And don't forget the change."

It was some embarrassing walking up to the Dog 'n' Suds without a car, but I stood there in front of everybody waiting for the order, pretending like making a fool of myself was something I did every day.

When I returned to the car, she stuffed the warm sack on the seat between us and told me to hold the waxed cups steady. The Wakefield city park was the last place on earth I expected Mama to drive to, but when I spotted the duck lagoon and the empty playground, the afternoon started to look hopeful.

I steadied the drinks as she pulled into an empty lot under a large pin oak. I managed to slip out of the car without spilling anything. She examined several picnic tables before settling on one under some shade trees near the lagoon. The weather-beaten boards were as rough-ridged as corduroy, but free of bird droppings. Off to the side somebody had carved "turd face."

"Doesn't this beat sitting around that stuffy apartment?"

I shrugged. I wasn't going to appear to be glad about anything today. I'd rather count jail cell bars than be cooped up with Mama all summer. She could talk to herself for the rest of the century for all I cared.

She unwrapped her sandwich. "Billy won't be back for nine more days, but it's going to be a long siege if you keep clamming up on me. It's just you and me, sister."

I looked away. Wood ducks paddled across the lagoon, sending ripples to the banks. The last time we'd visited the park was right after we moved to this small town in Illinois, where our car broke down and Daddy took it as a sign that this is where we belonged. On Father's Day Mama had suggested a picnic which turned into a happy place when she unwrapped a store-bought chocolate cake with wavy icing. That day was our last happy time with Daddy. After lunch, Billy and I followed him to the water.

"Do ducks have a Father's Day?" I asked.

Billy laughed. "You come up with the dumbest things."

Daddy ignored him. "The ducks live here for the summer. When it gets cold, they fly south. These ducks here probably go to Florida for the winter."

"Wood ducks are migrants," Billy said. "That means they move around."

"Are we migrants?" I asked.

Daddy nodded. "Yes, but don't tell your mother."

Mama sipped her root beer as if she was recalling the very same day. She had a far-off look as if she was thinking about being anyplace but here with us. If Daddy hadn't run off like he had, Mama could afford to take me to the Rexall. We'd been there to pick up her tonic so I knew they had Barbie clothes—the pink satin evening gown or the frothy bride's dress. Mama should have had such a gown, but she and Daddy got married on the fly. Daddy was stationed near St. Louis. They'd found their justice of the peace at Creve Coeur, Missouri. Later, she found out that *creve coeur* was French for "broken heart." God had connected those dots for a reason. You couldn't get married in a place called Broken Heart and not expect things to turn sour.

“Aren't you going to eat?” she said, pointing to my half-eaten sandwich. “What a waste of good food.” She ate the rest of the meat, but saved the bun. “Here. Give this to the ducks.”

My flip flops snapped a rhythm against my heels as I walked over to the lagoon. I tossed a crumb into the water and the loud beggars paddled toward me—beggars like Mama and me would become when the money ran out. I slipped the last piece of dry bread into my mouth and doubled back to the car. Mama had started the motor and pulled out her brown bottle.

“Time to get a move on,” she called. And we sped off to see where the happy places had gone.

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