

DUM DADDY DUM DUM

By Richard Elman

When she was very little, she agreed with her father that she and he were being very badly treated as children. “I’ll stick up for you,” she said, “if you stick up for me.” The deal was made between the five year old girl and her forty year old father. They were in on something together now and everybody else in the household were interlopers, intruders, bullies. It was wonderful how nice her father could be to her when she was protecting him.

“Don’t tell mommy anything about this,” he said.

“O she knows alright,” the little girl said. “And she doesn’t like it.”

“She’s jealous,” the father said, “and that’s...

“It’s dumb is what it is,” the little girl said.

“I’m glad you have a mind of your own, just like me” the father said.

He was said to be a man of great integrity. For example, he couldn’t work for other people, and he had a lot of important things on his mind other people never understood. The little girl knew her father was somehow special and when the bills piled up unpaid and her mother was always complaining at the dinner table, she told her mom, “If you don’t like it why don’t you do something about it?”

“That’s not a nice way to talk to your mother,” her father said.

“O dad,” she replied.

“Mind your father,” said her mother.

“Shut up,” she said. “Shut up.”

She was asked to leave the table and go to her room. Her father joined her there later.

“She’s not really angry,” he said. “Don’t worry...”

“I was sticking up for you,” she said.

“I can handle your mother most of the time,” he said.

She asked, “Why is she so angry?”

“People like your mother are that way,” he said. He rubbed her beautiful dark hair with the flat of his palm, and wondered if he could borrow back a dollar of her spending money to buy himself a cigar. “I’ve been so busy all week I couldn’t even get to the bank,” he said. She gave him the dollar. She knew he was broke and her mother wouldn’t give him any money.

She was a very prudent little girl: “Do you want some more?”

“A dollar per dad is more than enough,” he said, with a sad little smile. “I’ll pay you back with interest.”

When she came home from school the next afternoon, her father gave her back her dollar along with a very expensive porcelain doll in a green silk dress with silky red hair.

“It’s so beautiful” she said.

“It must have cost a fortune,” her mother said. She wanted her husband to go to the supermarket and do the shopping, as she was very tired from work. He said, “Sure.” All he needed was some cash as he was kinda low after the doll.

“Honestly,” the woman sighed. But she reached for her purse.

“Don’t rub it in,” he told her.

“Yea mommy don’t pick on daddy...”

So it went. He was a handsome portly man with a florid face and soft hands. His wife was leaner, somehow more gaunt. She had deep hazel eyes and couldn't sleep nights. Everybody said the little girl favored her mother because she was so slim, but her father said, "She looks a lot like my Aunt Sophy the dance hall hostess."

The little girl whose name was Beth thought that was a very nice thing to be, she supposed.

The mother said, "Sophy was a hooker."

"Not so you would notice," the father winked at his daughter.

"Yeah mom," she said. "Horray for Aunt Sophy."

How far back their quarrel extended was lost to memory. The little girl was certain she'd awoken in life to loud voices, to anger, and long faces. Her father was always there, protecting her. His pet name for her was "Poppy," and when people asked why he said, "It's short for something or other. Would you like to hear the story?"

Nobody ever did.

As things were always getting worse for the Gotleib family they rarely even appeared to be getting better. Her father was out of work a lot now and took up cooking and house cleaning to help out, but he was always being called away to an important meeting or an interview just as he was about to plug in the vacuum cleaner. So the house got dirtier and meals were not cooked until her mother came home from work.

"This is awful," her mom would scream.

"Kiddo," he winked at Beth: "Hey kiddo..."

“Don’t yell so much mommy,” she said. “It hurts my ears.”

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One day her father brought home a monkey.

“The smell,” her mother said.

“If I can stand it,” he repeated an old gag, “so can he.”

“Yea,” Beth said.

“That isn’t funny,” the mother said. “It isn’t even nice...”

“I love him,” Beth said. “Because he’s cute. I’ll keep him in my room.”

“Thata girl, poppy,” said her father.

Her mother said, “If he stays longer than overnight, I’m planning to cook him, joke or no...”

“O momma...” The girl burst into tears.

“Now do you see what you’ve done,” Mr. Gotleib told his wife.

She stared at him a long time: “You should have brought home a scapegoat to replace me...”

“Always feeling sorry for herself,” the father said. “Such an unhappy woman.”

He went into his den to smoke and Beth went upstairs to play with her caged monkey.

“Don’t take him out,” her mother said.

“Wouldn’t you just like that,” Beth replied.

Her father had a new program to improve people’s spirits. He would only say nice things about his wife. He expected Beth to join in.

“So what should we say first?” she asked.

“A lady likes to be flattered about the way she looks,” he said. “Let’s lift her spirits with some compliments...”

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“I don’t think mom’s very pretty,” Beth said.

“I heard that,” her mother said, from the kitchen.

“Now Emma,” her father said. “The child didn’t mean anything.”

“I did too,” Beth said.

“You see, she did too...” Her mother broke down and cried.

Her father grabbed her, held her.

“You teach her these things,” her mother said.

“Emma she has eyes...”

“You shoulda been a politician,” her mother said.

Beth liked that, she thought it was funny, but her father was insulted.

“If I can’t please you,” he said.

“You never could...”

“You’re just not satisfied,” he said.

“O Ben,” she said. “O Ben please not in front of the child...”

“She’s a member of this family, too,” he pointed out.

“Yeah,” said Beth. “I am too.”

“Ben,” her mother said, shaking her head sadly.

Beth didn’t like that look on her mother’s face. She ran to her father.

When the doctor said mom would have to take it a lot easier Beth and Ben claimed they were very worried. “Why don’t you go away and rest someplace?” he said. “I’ll look after Poppy...”

“With what?” She looked very gaunt, and dark.

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A few weeks later she was taken to the hospital, and then she died. A heart attack.

Beth didn’t believe it would ever be like this. She was alone with her father. There wasn’t much money but that crazy intrusive lady wasn’t bothering her. The hurt she felt was for herself and past hurts, as much as for her mother.

After a while she went back to school and her father found a job. It wasn’t as she’d imagined, a dull grimy life with her mother gone, and nobody to pick on. She began to find her father a little boring.

One evening he came home from work and said they were going out to dinner with a friend. Beth should dress up.

“What sort of friend?” she asked.

“A friend,” her father said.

“You’ll like her. She’s a lady.”

“You have no right,” Beth said. She was very sore and angry.

She started to cry as if her mother was now inside her, making her say these awful things to poor daddy.

Her father looked at her in astonishment. He had not expected such an outburst. A little pearl of spittle dangled from his upper lip. He said, “I’ve been so lonely Beth I need friends.”

“I’ve been lonely too,” she said, “but I don’t do like you...”

“You’re little,” he said, “it’s different...”

“You sound just like mommy,” she said. “I hate you...”

“Beth...”

“You killed mommy so you could be with your lady...”

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“Stop it.” He grabbed her and shook her, but her eyes remained closed. She didn’t really hate her daddy, but she didn’t like him anymore.

When her father remarried to Lillian, who was a very pretty lady and wore fancy silk dresses, Beth was maid of honor. She stood beneath the arbor to one side of her father, and afterwards went into her bathroom and dropped her floral bouquet into the toilet.

She got down on her hands and knees as though to pray and she said, as she’d heard in synagogue, “The departed who all revere still lives among us in our memories vyimru aumein...”

She flushed the toilet and sat down in front of her TV, and while the others drank and ate in the room next door, she sat very still with her hands folded on her lap on the bed and watched the news.