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Whiskey-Soaked Sugar

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WHISKEY-SOAKED SUGAR

Any second now, Daddy's going to come in here and take his belt off to me. He's going to say, "I just can't understand why you have to have a whipping before you can get out of bed in the morning, Georgianna!" Well which would you rather? Get a whipping, or be crushed between your closet and the headboard of your bed?

My teacher thought I needed glasses and that's why I was having headaches every day in school. If I just had some glasses, I wouldn't be seeing all these awful things. My sliding closet doors, for instance. They're fine as long as I keep my eyes closed. But when I open my eyes, they start coming toward me. And a couple of weeks ago there was a creature that ran back and forth across the backyard making horrible noises. When I told Mother about it, she said she'd heard that the Gaddis's goat got loose. Well tell me this: does a goat have claws? I can't even watch TV anymore, not after the way the people on "Password" talked to me.

Nothing bothers my cousin Lacy. Except the fact that she's not rich. She even told Cissie Smallwood that we have a bowling alley in our basement when all we have is a basketball and some empty Clorox bottles. I don't want to be rich. You know what I want more than anything else in the whole world? I just want to be like everybody else. I wish my cousin Lacy didn't live with us. I wish she'd quit saying that my daddy is her daddy when everybody knows her daddy ran off and left Aunt Rose before she was born.

It's a good thing nobody ever believes Lacy. She told the whole school about how Daddy busted Mother's head. It's been a couple of months since it happened. One night Daddy came

home and wanted to know why there was nothing but bologna sandwiches and Campbell's tomato soup for supper. Mother told him that she had been sewing all day so Lacy would have a new dress to wear to the PTA meeting that night. She was going to play "Les adieux" in the piano recital. She wanted to play "Old Black Joe" but Miss Tannenbaum told her it was prejudiced.

"Nobody's eating any sorry-ass sandwiches for supper and nobody's going to be brown-nosing with a bunch of goddamn communists!" Daddy said. The next thing I knew, the pan of tomato soup was on Mother's head and I couldn't tell which was soup and which was blood running down her face. I just grabbed Missy out of her highchair and took her to my room. I sat cross-legged in the corner and rocked her back and forth in my lap, singing "Silent Night" over and over until Daddy got finished fussing and stomped out the door.

Mother put a plate of sandwiches and a pitcher of Kool-aid in my closet and told us to hide in there and eat while she got ready. She still had it in her mind to take Lacy to the PTA meeting. Like I said, nothing ever bothers Lacy. She had put on her new dress—a white sailor suit, trimmed in navy blue braid with a red tie around the collar, and Mother had put her thick, brown hair up in a French twist. "This is just like a picnic," she said. But I was too scared to eat.

"Georgianna, you stay here and take care of Missy," Mother said. She had washed her face and her hair and put a bandage above her left eye. "Don't worry, Lacy. I'll stay in the car." Not that it would have bothered Lacy one bit for everyone to see Mother with her head all bandaged up.

I would have stayed in that closet all night if Mother hadn't come back after about ten minutes. "The car won't start," she said. Every time Daddy thinks Mother's going to leave him, he takes a part out of her car so she can't get away.

“Don’t look until I tell you, Georgianna!” I jump. It’s Daddy. But instead of whipping me for not getting up, he covers my eyes with one hand and slips the other one underneath my back. “You’re not peeking are you?” he asks, helping me out of bed and pushing me gently from behind.

“No sir,” I tell him. I don’t know why he’s talking so nice to me.

“Now!” he says, taking his hand off.

I look out my picture window. Everything is covered with snow: the rusty old heater where there’s a robin’s nest every spring; the gully where we throw our trash; the cow patties in front of the barn. Even the pig pen looks pretty. And the sun is so bright that the cows’ ears look like the pink cellophane on an Easter basket.

I look at Daddy and he smiles and squeezes my shoulder.

“Did I miss the bus?”

“The school bus ain’t running today, Georgianna. The mailman ain’t even coming. Today’s a snow day.”

I look out at the cows and they stare back at me.

“We need to put some hay out for them,” Daddy says.

I go to the side of my closet, slide open the door, reach in, and grab a dress.

“Don’t take your pajamas off. Put your dress right over them—you don’t want your legs to get cold. And put your sweater and your shoes on—and two pairs of socks. I’m going to go and get you some galoshes,” Daddy says, smiling at me.

I hurry to get my socks and shoes on before he comes back. For some reason, I start thinking about a mangy old dog that kept hanging around our chicken houses. Daddy would throw rocks at him and chase him away, but he’d show up again the next day. So one morning Daddy came out of the house with some leftover fried chicken livers. “Here boy,” he called, just as sweet as can be. He let the dog smell the chicken livers and then he put them in his coat pocket. The dog

followed him way into the woods. Then Daddy put the chicken livers down on the ground. But that old dog didn't get to eat the first one—Daddy shot him in the head.

He comes back with two plastic loaf bread sacks. He pulls them over my Buster Browns and puts rubber bands at the top to hold them up. Then he gets my red wool coat out of the closet. "Hold your sleeves down." He pulls my coat on and buttons me up. "You know what we forgot?" he asks.

"No sir," I answer.

He goes through my sock drawer, pulls out a pair of bobby socks, and holds them up. "Mittens," he says. He puts the socks on my hands and ties one of Missy's diapers on my head. I start toward the kitchen, but Daddy taps me on the shoulder and points toward the living room.

Mother catches sight of us as we try to sneak past the door of the den where she's nursing Missy. "Lonnie! Surely you're not going to let her wear her good coat to the barn!"

"If we mess it up, I'll buy her a brand new one, right Georgianna?" He gives me a wink.

"Yes sir," I answer.

I climb the ladder to the loft and Daddy climbs up behind me. He takes out his pocket knife and cuts the twine on a bale of hay. I break the bale apart and throw armfuls of the stuff down to the cows that have gathered at the front of the barn. The hay is warm and sweet-smelling.

"All right, you finished your work," Daddy says. "Now it's time to play."

He starts pumping up an inner tube. "What's that for?" I ask him.

"This is your sled," he says.

"Do you have one for me?" I frown. It's Lacy. She's a grade below me and I can't do anything without her tagging along.

"No, that's the only one. But you can both fit on this one and you'll go even faster with the two of you on there," he says. He's even being nice to Lacy.

Lacy and I sit facing each other with our legs straddling. We go sledding right down the middle of the road! And the most fun thing of all, Mother brings us out some hot chocolate and tenderloin biscuits and lets us eat in the swing on the carport. After we finish eating we make snow people and snow angels until the sun disappears behind Pine Mountain.

When we go inside, my fingers and toes start to burn. I take the diaper off my head and blow my nose in it. My nose is red and raw, like my throat. Lacy says her fingers and toes don't burn a bit.

While we were out playing in the snow, Mother made chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, cream gravy, and buttermilk biscuits. This has been the best day of my whole life. But I don't say it out loud. "Quiet little Georgianna." That's what everybody calls me.

"Hey," Daddy says all of a sudden, "Let's make us some fudge!" He gets out a big iron skillet and a thick aluminum tablespoon. Mother hands him some sugar and he just pours it in, right out of the sack. "Aren't you going to measure it, Lonnie?" Mother asks.

"Don't need to," he tells her. He taps on the can of cocoa and shakes big clouds of the stuff onto the sugar. Then he mixes the two together and pours in the sweet milk. He stirs and stirs until it boils. When it looks right, he takes the skillet off the burner and we take turns beating until the spoon makes a thud against the bottom and you can hardly get it through the muddy mixture. Mother hands him a cake of her butter and Daddy rubs it all over the platter. He swirls the rest into the fudge until it's all melted. Then he pours the thick mixture onto the platter and takes it outside to cool. While it cools, Daddy scoops up some snow and mixes it with sugar and vanilla and cream. Mother puts Missy in her crib and comes outside and all four of us sit together in the swing, with a wool blanket over us. The fudge is still warm. Mother leans her head against Daddy's shoulder and we swing and eat fudge and stare at the stars.

My throat has jagged rocks in it. I try to call to Mother, to warn her, but nothing can get past the rocks, not even air. She looks like “Pink Girl,” standing on the porch, smiling, with a delicate white hand shading her eyes from the sun. I try to warn her about the bull. Why can’t she hear the thud of his hoofs? Finally she sees him and tries to open the door, but it keeps slamming shut. I try to run to her, but my legs are so heavy I can’t move. “Daddy!” I scream. The bull stops and looks at me. It has Daddy’s eyes.

I feel the cool, curved tip of a spoon against my lips. It is the thick aluminum tablespoon that we beat the fudge with. I know, because with my tongue I can feel the tip that has curled over from so much beating. The spoon is full of something wet and sugary. It burns my throat and makes it stop hurting. I open my eyes. It’s Daddy. He’s kneeling beside my bed and my head is cradled in his hand.

I burst into tears. I can hear Daddy’s voice far away, saying he’s going to whip me if I don’t stop bawling. Still, I can’t stop. Finally I manage to choke out, “Daddy please don’t hurt Mother anymore.”

“I won’t,” he whispers.

The next morning, when I wake up, the snow is gone and so is Daddy. It is ten o’clock. Lacy is watching Saturday morning cartoons like nothing happened. Mother is sitting at the breakfast table with her housecoat on, the egg yolk crusting up on the dishes. I sit down in front of my cold sunny-side-up egg and look at Mother. She takes a tissue out of her pocket and dabs her nose.

“He said ‘Lily, if you really want a divorce, I won’t stand in your way.’ I packed his suitcase while he put the part back in my car. Then he left. I don’t know what made him do it,” says Mother, looking out the picture window toward the barn. *Probably some floozy*, I think. I sit down beside Lacy and watch “Mighty Mouse.”