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# Earplugs

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## Earplugs

I pulled the blanket around my head. The blue fleece covered my ears. It was warm outside but I insisted that he bring it anyway. I was wearing short pants with red and white stripes. I thought they looked funny but mom said they were for the holiday. Each time a firework exploded I pulled it tighter and leaned into my father. He was a big man. Not big in the way all dads look to their daughter, but big in a hulking massive way. I once heard him tell someone he weighed three hundred pounds.

His hair was short and oily. When I touched his cheeks I could feel the short hairs scratching out of his face. He told me that the invisible farmers who harvested his beard could not find him as easily ever since he left home. He always made up silly excuses for everything. I heard mom say the same thing about him to her friend, except she used different words.

“Do you want one of them?” he asked. He was pointing at a man with a white beret wearing about a hundred glow-in-the-dark necklaces. He had on funny pants too except his were yellow with splatters of red paint.

“No. Mom says they run out after one night.”

He looked down at me. His chin got really big. “Did your mother tell you you can put them in the freezer and they’ll last longer?” he asked. He put his hand over my ear right before when two loud blasts came.

“Well did she?”

“No,” I said.

He picked me up in the blanket and walked over to the man in the beret. I looked at the man’s face. It was covered in pock marks. He must have picked his entire face the

way I did the one on my leg when I had chicken pox. He looked terrible. I turned my face into my dad. It was dark and he smelled like pine. It was like being in the forest at night.

“You know,” said my dad when we sat back down, “when you wear that necklace it will protect you from the fireworks.”

I knew he made that up too but I unwrapped myself from the blanket anyway. My dad took it and folded it twice into a square and let me sit up on it. I had gotten sweaty and whenever I touched my arm to the metal of the grandstand it would stick to my arm. The fireworks started to go off so often that I no longer worried about being surprised.

“This is the grand finale,” he said. All of the other people were holding hands and staring up at the fireworks. I pulled my necklace into my mouth and rolled my tongue against it.

“Wow,” my father said. The fireworks looked like flowers only faster. The seed went into the air where it bloomed and, within a second, disappeared.

Getting out of the parking lot was difficult. A car had parked next to us and we had to wait for it to move before we could leave. We sat there for a minute in silence before he said, “So do you have school tomorrow?”

“Daddy it’s summer.”

He smiled, “Oh yeah, that’s right. Do you have camp then?”

“No Daddy, I only do that for a week.”

The people finally came and moved their car. When we started moving he lowered the windows and put on the radio. It was the oldies station that mom listens to. I knew all of the songs but did not sing along like I usually do.

It was clear out and I could see all the stars. "Daddy don't they look almost like the fireworks before they 'splode?"

"Yes," he said, "but I hope none of those explode."

"They don't do that daddy," I said but decided to keep my eyes on them just to make sure. One of the stars started to move. I shook but then realized it had just been a plane.

"Do you know what you need kiddo? You need some ice cream," he said.

The car had a clock so I knew it was past my bed time. I wanted ice cream so I did not remind him. I put my hand in my pocket and felt two coins. Mom had given me fifty cents if I needed to call her. I did not understand why since dad had a cell phone.

We did not go to our usual store; instead he told me we were going somewhere new. "It's by where I live now," he said. This place didn't have a big inflatable ice cream cone attached to the roof, but when I walked inside and saw they had chocolate I knew it would be okay.

I ordered chocolate ice cream with chocolate sprinkles. I always had the same thing, except this time daddy told me to get it in a waffle bowl for specials. He didn't get anything. Usually he ordered a banana split with an extra scoop. He told me before I was born someone had dared him to eat three of them. He said he did it and could have even eaten a fourth. I didn't believe him at first but mom told me she was there and it was true.

The table we sat at was already sticky, but neither of us cared. “So are you excited about school coming up?” he asked.

“Daddy, school is forever away.”

“Well, I mean, do you like school. I mean the school you go to?” he asked.

“I get to take dance instead of gym there and I get to see Emily so I like it.”

I took a big scoop of chocolate ice cream and opened my mouth, but instead it fell on the red and white stripes of my new shorts mom bought for me today. I just stared down where they fell. “She told me to be careful,” I said.

“Well nobody can be perfect right?” he said.

He touched my chin.

“Right?” he said again.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Listen, I’ll go get some paper towels from the bathroom.”

I thought about walking over to the phone to call mommy and tell her what happened but daddy came back too quickly with a handful of wet towels.

He daubed and I daubed and it wasn’t going to come out.

“Don’t worry about it, your mom will just wash it out,” he said.

“But she’ll be so upset. She told me to be careful.”

He told me he knew the store where she bought them from and if we left right away we could get there before it closed.

On the drive there I did not look up at the stars. They could have turned into fireworks, or flowers, or airplanes and I could have cared less. I just kept looking at my dad.

He parked right in front of the store without using a parking space. I got on his shoulders and we walked inside.

“We’re about to close sir,” said a man in a blue shirt.

“I don’t care,” said my dad, “do you see these pants that she’s wearing? We need to find them right now and we are not leaving until we do.”

The man in the blue shirt stepped back and pointed at an aisle. I knew my dad frightened him. At first we did not see my size, but he saw a different pair sticking out from underneath a pair of jeans. They were the right ones. I walked to the changing room and switched them.

The man at the register told us that they were closed and we could not buy them any longer. My dad set the stained shorts on the counter and put three five dollar bills on top of them and we walked out of the store.

My father was not afraid of anyone and knew how to fix everything. Back in the car he put on the radio and this time we both sang along. I was surprised that he knew the words too.

We started to drive back to my mom’s house. We drove over the bridge to get there. Mom never went this way. She said the back way was quicker, but I could see the face she made anytime she had to drive over any bridge. Dad just made sure he hit all of the notes and didn’t even notice the fact we were over the bay.

When we came a block away from where I lived he stopped the car and turned to look at me.

“Daddy this isn’t where I live. Have you already forgotten?”

“No kiddo, I haven’t forgotten. I just wanted to talk to you about something before you went home.”

I thought he was going to tell me that he was sick and going to die. I started to cry.

“Hey,” he said, “it’s okay. It’s okay. It’s nothing bad.” He put his arm on my shoulder and pulled me closer to him, but the seatbelt caught me before I had my head on his belly. “I was just wondering how you might feel about living with me for awhile.”

“I live with mommy though,” I said.

“Well, I thought you might want to try this out for awhile.”

I put my hand into my pocket and flicked the coins against one another.

“I didn’t want to tell you like this,” he paused and looked at me, “actually I wish I didn’t have to tell you this at all, but I am moving.”

He added “not too far, not too far,” but my face had already begun to crinkle on itself again. This time he reached over and unclasped my belt. I started to blubber into his chest.

“It’s just a few hours away,” he said, “and that’s why I wanted to know if you’d come with me.”

“But this is where all my friends live and mommy, mommy lives here.”

He sighed. “Oh, I guess I forgot.” I looked up at him and I could see his second chin. He was pushing it down to look back at me.

“You should look at the stars daddy,” I said, “it makes your face prettier.”

“Promise you’ll let me visit.”

“Yes.”

“One more thing, I want to be the one that mentions this to mommy. I just wanted you to know first, so for right now can this be our secret?”

“Like the pants?” I said.

“Like the pants.”

He drove the rest of the block to my house and Mommy was standing outside. She had on the same shorts that I had on. She walked up to the car to get me out.

“How were the fireworks?” she said.

“They were so cool mommy. Daddy got scared but I protected him.”

“Jane,” said daddy, “can you go inside for a moment so I can talk to your mother?”

“Okay.” I walked inside and up to my room.

I looked out my window and could see some people shooting off fireworks from their driveway. Inside the house they were not quite so loud or scary.