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WHEN THE WOLF COMES HOME

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NAT CASSIDY

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NIGHTFIRE

TOR PUBLISHING GROUP
NEW YORK

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For Barry

CONTENT WARNING

I'll never understand why some people get so upset about content warnings. If you're a sicko like me, all these do is give you a little preview of what flavors of nasty fun you're in for; and if you're a reader who prefers to avoid certain subjects or prefers to go in with some bolstering, well, forewarned is forearmed, right?

This is specifically a story about the slippery nature of fear and how important it is to find healthy ways to live with it, so I'm more than happy to provide a heads-up: this book contains graphic depictions and/or discussions of murder, gore, dismemberment, needle trauma, blood-borne diseases, spiders, insects, suicidal ideations, abuse, grief, alcoholism, parent death, child death, child trauma, child endangerment, and a whole lot more. It borrows a few tropes from fairy tales; happy endings isn't one of them.

And, hey, if you *are* the sort of person who's offended by the existence of content warnings, I'm truly sorry. Maybe next time, I'll give you a little heads-up that they're coming, so you'll be able to prepare yourself.



PART ONE

ALL
DADS
ARE
MOTHERFUCKERS

I am afraid, oh I am so afraid!
The cold black fear is clutching me to-night
As long ago when they would take the light
And leave the little child who would have prayed,
Frozen and sleepless at the thought of death.

—Sara Teasdale

I must not fear.

—Frank Herbert



1

Daddy is roaring.

Howling.

Destroying everything in the house—furniture, pictures on the wall, all of it—while he searches for the boy.

The boy is crouched inside the pantry. Hidden. For now.

Hardnoise, he thinks in his terror, flinching at the sounds of destruction. He's seen Daddy angry plenty of times before ... but not like this. This is so much worse than all the other times.

"How?!" Daddy demands in a deep, raspy voice. "Where?!" It sounds as if the words rip out of him, pulling bits of throat along the way. "*Where ... ind ... I-i-t?*"

The boy—who is only five years old and small for his age—shrinks farther inside the pantry. He thinks about disappearing completely, but knows he can't. The thing he's clutching to his chest keeps him moored to the world. The thing Daddy is raging about.

The book.

Lately, the boy had been sneaking out a window while Daddy took his afternoon naps. He knew it wasn't allowed, that it's Bad and Dangerous, but he hadn't been able to stop himself. The call of the outside world was too great, and for all his rules and precautions, Daddy hadn't yet realized the boy figured out how to open that window.

Daddy's naps are always the same time and the same length every day, so the boy never went far on these walks. Usually, he just stood and looked around for a bit before scrabbling back inside. He looked at the other houses. At the cars driving by. The little rocks with bits of sparkle in them. The trees. A lizard. A stray cat. Things he'd seen or heard from the other side of the window, usually accompanied by Daddy's dry, detailed explanations of what they were looking at. "So you never have to wonder," Daddy always said.

But it was so much nicer to *experience* them. So much more exciting to wonder.

A few days ago, the boy let himself walk down the block a little, and that's when he'd discovered the tiny house. It was in a neighbor's front yard: a tiny house on a short pole. The tiny house had a little glass door, and inside ... was all books. If the boy could read, he still might not have known what the phrase *Little Library* meant, but he thought the teal calligraphic squiggles were pretty.

The boy didn't own any books, but he'd seen plenty. Daddy liked to read. Except, his books were all dull, uninteresting things. Flat colors, no pictures, blocks of tiny words inside. The boy had never seen books like *these*.

Some were soft and floppy, with glossy pictures on their covers. Some were sturdier, and their covers even slipped off, revealing the blank, hard covers the boy was more familiar with.

One book in particular stole his attention.

Old. Worn. Hardbound, but its peach-colored cover wasn't blank; it had shiny gold lettering and pictures stamped into it. This book had been *loved*, the boy knew somehow.

The inside was also full of pictures. Beautiful, full-color, richly detailed *pictures*, some taking up one or even two whole pages. A boy and a girl finding a house made out of candy. A girl asleep in a bed full of flowers. Another girl with fish fins instead of legs. The boy didn't understand any of these images—he'd never heard a fairy tale, had never seen a picture book—but he was captivated.

He didn't know a book could ever be like *this*.

He'd been out too late—had sensed the time slipping away like a physical thing—so he hurried home with the book in tow, making it back into his room just in time before Daddy woke up. He hid the book, *his* book, under his mattress, peeking at it very rarely and very briefly, whenever he was certain Daddy wouldn't catch him. He only looked at one picture at a time. Savoring it. Cherishing it. Trying to imagine the words that might go with such fantastical pictures. He didn't even feel the need to sneak out the window anymore. The book was his window now.

Until one day he flipped to the wrong picture. A large, hulking wolf stalking through an endless forest. The wolf had oily dark fur, a long, pointy snout, pulling back to reveal rotting gums and massive teeth dripping with foamy drool. Its claws were massive, perfectly sharp and curly, and made for tearing into soft, little-boy flesh.

The picture scared the boy. Scared him in a way he'd never been scared before. He couldn't shake it. He had to keep looking at it. It seemed to give a shape, a face, to every fear he'd ever had, as if this wolf had been waiting for him all along in the shadows.

Every time he looked at his book, he went straight to that picture. Compelled. Hypnotized. Like prey.

He was staring at it this morning, when Daddy caught him.

Daddy got so angry, seeing what the boy was doing. He began to yell and stomp and demand answers. He threw the book. He shook the boy. Which only scared the boy further.

And now ...

Another howl tears through the silence.

“WHERE—?! *STOP THIS!*”

The boy hears heavy footsteps stomp farther into the house, searching for him.

Go now, he thinks. Run.

Don't, he also thinks. Stay hidden.

But Daddy will check the kitchen eventually. And when he does ...

Remember the other boy!

That gets him moving. The other boy. His only friend.

The boy has to leave. At least for a little while. So Daddy can calm down.

He carefully opens the pantry door. Daddy is gone, destroying other rooms in his search for the boy, but the devastation in his wake ... The kitchen table, smashed into bits. The walls, ravaged and slashed. Holes punched in the plaster. Shreds of fabric everywhere.

For a moment, the boy is frozen, taking it all in.

The air is hot. Heavy. Smelling like food left burning on the stovetop. Like that time Daddy ruined dinner and got *so* mad and the boy got scared and—

More hardnoise from the other room—*Smash! Crash! Howl!* No time.

Still clutching his book, the boy tiptoes his way to the front door. Too many things on the floor to trip over and make noise. It takes all his balance and concentration to not—

Snap!

The boy inhales with a hiss. A framed picture. Daddy and Mommy smiling. The boy has stepped on the thin wood of the frame and cracked it.

The hardnoise in the other room stops.

Daddy. Listening.

The front door is suddenly yards away. Miles. Impossible to reach from here. Too late. The boy ducks behind the overturned coffee table. Makes himself small, as small as he can, and squeezes his eyes shut. Maybe if he can't see Daddy, Daddy can't see—

A hand closes over his ankle.

“FOUND YOU.”

The boy is pulled out and up. As if he's insubstantial as air.

He opens his eyes to find himself dangling upside down, staring at eyes burning with senseless anger. Lips pulled back in a sneer. Breath as hot as an oven's. Frothy drool seething between clenched teeth.

He barely recognizes the face.

No, no, no!

The boy squeezes his eyes shut again. He remembers another picture in his book. A hero, brandishing something long and sharp in the face of some fire-breathing, scaly thing. In that desperate instant, the boy imagines he holds a similar weapon and brings his book down, hard as he can, onto the hairy arm holding him. He feels the solid resistance of bone.

Daddy yelps.

The boy hits the carpet in a tooth-rattling thud. He wastes no time, scrambles toward the front door, not caring how much noise he makes now.

He doesn't let himself worry that the door might be locked, or the knob too high, or his palms too slippery. Still holding the book under one arm, he wrenches the door open and sprints into the night. His bare feet slap against pavement and asphalt.

From inside the house, Daddy's cries change from pain to anger again.

"GET BACK HERE!"

The boy ignores his father's commands. He runs and runs. Daddy will be behind him any second, so he heads for back ways, through bushes and culverts, ignoring sharp gravel, hoping his small size helps him disappear.

"GET BACK HERE!"

Daddy's voice, fainter now. The huge world, swallowing up sound the farther the boy runs.

But the memories of hardnoise still crash in his ears.

And the taste of fear never leaves his mouth.



2

“Oh my god, Jess, what are you so afraid of?”

Jess cocks a hip, makes a show of considering the question.

“Hmm. Chlamydia? Gonorrhea? Weeping pustules? The kind that smell like cheese from a few feet away?”

Margie grimaces. “Okay—”

“Hepatitis A? Hepatitis B? Hepatitis *C and D*?! And AIDS is still a thing, right? Can’t forget AIDS—”

“Shut *up*!” Margie smacks her with a menu. “Good *lord*.”

It’s a quarter past 1:00 a.m. Jess doesn’t bother keeping her voice down—the only people eating at Poppy’s Diner right now are past caring about the animated conversation of the establishment’s two-person waitstaff. Even if that conversation invokes cheese-smelling crotch rot.

From where they’re leaning against the main counter, Jess and Margie can see every one of Poppy’s nine tables and fifteen booths, save for a couple of booths at the extreme ends. It’s the usual sparse, graveyard crowd as ever this time of night. Whether or not a single customer has *actually* set foot in Poppy’s before, it’s the same cast of characters. Itinerants. A truck driver or two. Goth kids. People using the \$3.50 bottomless cup of coffee (“North Hollywood’s Finest!”) as their evening’s rent.

It’s not as if Los Angeles is exactly drowning in options as far as twenty-four-hour eateries are concerned, so Jess often thinks it says a lot that Poppy’s still doesn’t pull in huge numbers during the graveyard shift. Location might have something to do with it. Poppy’s is tucked away under the 107 like some vestigial organ the body forgot to reabsorb. That and a pretty decent Denny’s opened up just a couple of miles away.

Margie straightens the pile of menus and blows a curly strand of hair out of her eyes. “He *is* cute.”

They give one more appraising look at the photo Jess conjured forth from social media of the boy she's crushing on.

"Yeah," Jess grumbles. Then she kills the display and puts her phone back under the counter, where it continues to charge. "Too bad he does improv."

"*You* do improv."

"Girls that do improv are cool. Guys that do improv are ... the opposite of that."

"Okay." Margie sighs and gives the menus a firm tap, then pours herself a white ceramic mug of Poppy's not-actually-all-that-fine coffee.

"No, seriously," Jess continues. "Wanna know why?"

"I bet you're going to tell me."

"Because everyone in the comedy scene has daddy issues. It might as well be a rule. And girls with daddy issues know how to party. But guys with daddy issues? They're just mean." She gives a disappointed shake of her head. "Fuckin' dads, Margie. They ruin everything..."

In fact, Jess's first UCB team after she moved to LA was even *named* Daddy Shoes (short for Daddy Is Shoes, which was a compromise from the originally proposed All Dads Are Motherfuckers), because it was the one thing every member agreed they had in common. Before she can share that detail, though, one of the goth kids over at Booth 8 periscopes over the vinyl seat back and looks around for assistance. Jess hurries to attend to them. More coffee, shocker. As black as the kid's cargo pants and, presumably, soul.

When Jess comes back, Margie is wiping down the counter with a rag. At one point in its history, Poppy's could've been considered a '50s-style diner, all spaceship sparkle. Its chrome will never shine that way again, but Margie always wipes it down as if it will.

"Anyways," Margie picks up their conversation without missing a beat. "Just ask the guy out. You don't have to—ugh—exchange fluids with him. Not yet, at least."

"I dunno, man." Jess's turn to pour herself a cup. "It's been so long I might not actually have a choice. It might just *happen*."

"*So* long," Margie scoffs. "You're young. Long for you is, what, a month?"

Jess quickly does the math. "Three and three-quarters."

"Hmph. Come crying to me when it's been six years."

"Six y—?! Margie!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"We've gotta get you some action, like, *tonight*." Jess begins looking around for an eligible candidate.

"The only action I want is for someone to pick up my bills for the month. I'm a fifty-eight-year-old single mother, sweetie. You wanna talk VDs? Having a kid is the

only VD you're expected to send to college."

"Hey, I sent my HPV to college. Well, I guess technically, it came *with* me, but still..."

Margie smacks her with a menu again, and Jess grins. Jess likes getting a rise out of her. In fact, she likes everything about Margie. Of all the staff at Poppy's, Margie's the only one ever willing to riff with Jess. Sometimes Jess even entertains the idea of showing up at Margie's house with some wine and/or weed so they can hang out, gasp, *outside of work*. She knows where Margie lives—a few weeks ago, Margie's car had been in the shop, and Jess had driven her home a couple of nights in a row. Jess has never followed through on these plans, though. Something she can say about a lot of things in life.

Still. Margie's good people.

More than that, this conversation is doing Jess a world of good. This companionship. This distraction. It's allowing her to forget about the static that's been buzzing inside her skull for the past several days.

Margie wouldn't know this, but there's a reason Jess has dads on the brain right now. Hers was just found dead a little over a week ago, and she still has no goddamn idea how to feel about it.

Fuckin' dads ruin everything.

★ ★ ★

She doesn't have all the details—which is fine by her—but it appears to have been a fittingly pathetic end to a pathetic existence.

He'd been dead for a few days before someone found him, out in Pennsylvania where he'd been living his spartan, isolated excuse for a life. No foul play; his body had simply given out after years of alcohol and neglect. He died alone, which was all he deserved.

There'd been a records check, a contacting of the next of kin, which had led to Jess and her mom being notified. Neither had any interest in claiming the body, so they left him in the custody of the Commonwealth. By now, he's probably the finely packed contents of an urn in some potter's field somewhere.

Simple. Fitting. No muss, no fuss. Adieu and good riddance, Tommy Bailey; we hardly knew ye (which was *your* fucking choice).

And yet, since hearing the news, something fundamental has changed for Jess. It's like she's been split into two separate entities.

There's Outer Jess, living her life, cracking her jokes, unaffected by the death of the man who, for all intents and purposes after she reached the age of six, might as well have been an anonymous sperm donor.

And there's Inner Jess, who's busy seeing him *everywhere*. Who's working overtime to force everything into the context of *him*.

I wonder if Dad liked this kind of cereal, too.

What kind of music was he listening to lately?

Did he put his socks on before or after his pants?

Did he ever think about me?

Inner Jess is fucking obsessed.

Every now and then, there's an additional presence, too. Not quite a voice; it never speaks. A *feeling*. A bone-deep agony Jess remembers from when she was first told Dad was leaving. From those few, brief slurring phone calls he'd made before eventually giving up. She thinks of this presence as Little Jess. And Little Jess just *hurts*.

It's all so infuriating. Honestly, after two and a half decades of absence, how dare he become so present in her life now? It's gotten so bad she hasn't even wanted to talk to her mother lately, something she's done almost every day for as long as she can remember. She and her mom used to have no problem *not* talking about Tommy—not even thinking about him. Now Jess feels like he'd be there on the call with them.

She just wants things to feel normal again. To go back to having a dad who was a concept, a few tainted memories, something she could safely joke about. Not this nagging puzzle. Not this thing caught between her teeth.

Someone's got her Daddy Shoes laced a little too tight, Inner Jess observes.

Outer Jess hides her grimace inside a cup of North Hollywood's finest coffee and scans the diner for some new distraction.

Moments later, she finds it.

★ ★ ★

"Ooh, hello," Jess nudges Margie. "I think I found someone who can end your dry streak. Maynard over there—he your type?"

They both crane over the bar to get a better look at the ragged beanpole who's just sat back down in Booth 15. No, *sat* is the wrong word. He's come back from the bathroom, coughing, sweating, and has *crumbled* into his seat.

Jess has no idea if Maynard is the guy's actual name. Speaking of Poppy's regular cast of characters, every patron who looks one day shy of living the bindle life is named Maynard by the staff. "That's just how it's always been," Margie explained back when Jess first started working here. They get a lot of Maynards on the midnight shift.

This particular Maynard looks terrible. He could be anywhere between thirty-five and ninety years old, draped in ill-fitting clothes the ashy color of neglect and hard luck. He's shivering and damp, scratching at dark spots creeping up his neck. His skin is somehow both red and green: a Christmas ornament of nausea. A faint line of drying crud rings his lips.

The unasked question hovers over them: Drugs ... or disease?

Jess drops her voice. "What do you think he just did to our bathroom?"

"Nothing good," Margie mutters back. "Guess someone should check and see?"

Jess makes a whining noise. "Or—what if we don't and this can be a Rhonda-and-Freddy problem?"

But no. Margie doesn't even need to say that if Maynard left the bathroom a mess, they need to know ASAP. The next shift doesn't start for well over an hour. Plus, Rhonda would never miss an opportunity to tell their boss that Jess and Margie failed to maintain even Poppy's loose standards of hygiene and presentability. Fucking Rhonda.

"Tell you what," Margie says. "*I* can clean up the bathroom—"

"Bless you—"

"—if *you* ask Maynard to leave."

A steely glare. "Margie, you know I hate doing stuff like that."

"Take your pick." Margie shrugs. "How about this? If *you* take care of the bathroom, *I'll* help Maynard leave, *and* I'll cover the rest of the shift so you can go home early."

"Seriously?"

Margie nods. "It's totally dead tonight. And my back and knees would appreciate not having to clean a toilet right now."

Jess considers. She *does* have an audition later this afternoon. A commercial she desperately needs to book if she wants to live her fantasies of qualifying for health insurance and paying rent. Getting even thirty minutes more of sleep would be a blessing.

Plus, wasn't she just looking for a distraction? If she stays here much longer, listening to the steady backbeat of *dad, dad, dad* in her head, she might get bored enough to tell Margie what's going on. That might lead to her receiving sympathy for her loss—and *that* might make her actually snap.

"Ugh. You asshole. It's a deal."