

The Luckiest Boy in the World

Now that I've been living with Nan and Papa for quite a while (almost three years, Nan tells me), there are times at the cabin and here in Fresno when I really do feel loved. Sunday mornings, for example, like this one, a few weeks before my eighth birthday. Nan and I have come home after early Mass, and now she's fixing breakfast with slow, easy movements, tossing eggshells into the bin under the sink while four eggs sizzle on the stove, sunny-side-up, two for her, two for Papa.

Humming, she takes bacon from the fridge, loosens long strips from the cold, greasy package, carefully lays each piece alongside the eggs. Biscuits are warming in the oven, the kind made from a cylinder she twists and it pops open. When the eggs and bacon are done, the fresh smell of dough wafting from the oven, she slides them onto a platter, then pours frozen hash browns into the iron skillet.

Softly she calls to me, sitting in the hutch, my elbows resting on the red-checked tablecloth, watching the morning sunlight stretch across one corner of the sill, "You can set the table, if you want."

So I go to the counter, step up onto my stool, open a creaky cupboard door and take out the usual plates and a big cereal bowl, step down and gather what I need from the silverware drawer, then bring them all to the table. Go back and get Papa's big coffee mug, Nan's small porcelain cup and my plastic cowboy-boot drinking cup. Last, I take the butter, milk and a pitcher of mixed Bosco from the fridge and set them out as well.

Breakfast ready, the percolator tossing bursts of black liquid up into the clear plastic knob at the top (I like to think it's a geyser, like the ones at Yellowstone I see

on TV), the smell of coffee blending with the aroma of fried bacon and biscuits, we wait for Papa, Nan sitting across from me in the bright yellow hutch, light now spreading across edge of the wall and wooden bench on my side.

While we wait, I read the back of my Cheerios box to see what I can order from Battle Creek, Michigan, eager to finish them off so I can cut out the coupon, send it right away for a free decoder ring or spyglass or super-powerful magnifying glass.

Nan calls out, two or three times in a row, "Come on now, Honey, the food's getting cold."

The more we wait, the less we look at each other, the more I watch the morning light spreading toward me.

"Go ahead and eat now," she says to me, "Pour your cereal, you don't have to wait."

I know better. Papa hates it if he sits down at the table and I'm already chewing something. Instead of eating, I finger my red cowboy cup, running my thumb across the plastic stitching on the upper part of the sole, the edge of the tablecloth pressing down on my pantleg as I fidget more and more. At the same time, Nan covers the basket of biscuits with a towel, then gets up and goes to the stove to put a lid over the platter with the eggs and bacon, and another one over the hash browns, still in the skillet, then comes back and sits down.

No longer humming, she starts mumbling to herself, saying words she doesn't want me to hear, but I know what she's muttering: "Why does he do this? What's taking that man so long? We can't wait all morning."

Looking at her from across the table, I see the curve of her neck tensing up, her furled brow, how sad and angry her dark eyes are. And again she says, "Go ahead and eat, no sense in waiting."

Eventually we hear Papa shuffle from the bedroom to the bathroom, then the steady hiss of running water, which means he's shaving. Her patience gone, Nan gets up, and I start eating dry Cheerios right from the box, feeling my whole body tighten as she marches through the dining room and into the hall. I can't see the bathroom, but I can hear their voices. Some mornings it's laughter I hear, and Nan comes back into the kitchen a few minutes later with a big smile on her face, her curly hair more ruffled than when she left, a slight blush in her cheeks. She'll look at me, almost shyly.

"He's coming," she'll say, and I know I can relax.

Those are the good mornings.

On bad mornings, there's shouting, a loud thump that I tell myself is just the medicine cabinet slamming closed, then a louder bang that I know is the bathroom door as Nan storms out and back into the kitchen, throws herself onto the bench across from me, body trembling, face flushed. When I see her like that, I want to dart up to my room, crawl out onto the roof and close the window tight behind me so she won't look for me there. But I don't. I know better. I know, no matter how angry Papa might be when he comes to sit at the kitchen hutch, he'll be even more furious if I'm not there and it's him who has to come find me. So here I sit, squeezing my cowboy cup so tight I can feel it almost crack.

Nan won't say a word, even if a welt starts to rise on her cheek, her olive skin darkening. Only tears come. And still she says nothing, nor does she look at me.

She just hunches her stooped shoulders even more and glares at the table, fingering her fork, waiting for what's to come.

On the mornings Papa's in a good mood, he crosses the dining room at a quick pace, pulls out his chair at the head of the table and sits at an angle, facing me or Nan, his thick, hairy legs stretched out, tattered robe half-open, rumpled slippers half off.

"Eat! Eat!" he commands, as if us waiting for him is the craziest thing in the world.

As Nan pours his coffee and serves the food, he reaches over and strokes my hair or gives me a gentle shove on the shoulder.

"What's up, little guy? Wanna help me in the garage today?"

The more he eats, the louder his voice gets as he hoists big bites of hash browns dipped in yolk up to his wide open mouth, or eats a whole piece of bacon in one bite, stopping now and then to compliment Nan:

"Damn good breakfast, damn good. Pass the biscuits!"

The rest of breakfast is spent with small talk between them, Nan saying what groceries they need, bits of gossip about the neighbors, when we might go to the cabin next. Papa talks about his latest paint or roofing job, how good (or not) his helpers are, how the old Cadillac is holding up. Their banter is light, their laughter easy.

But when he comes to breakfast hung over and angry at the world, he shuffles in, slippers dragging, bloodshot eyes glaring at both of us. He yanks his chair from under the table, lets it drop with a bang, then lowers his heavy body into it. Doesn't say a word. Nan sits erect, moving like a robot as she pours his coffee, slides eggs, bacon and hash browns onto his plate, butters a biscuit and sets it in front of him. I

stare hard at my Cheerios, quickly pouring milk and slicing a banana on top, wishing I could make a mound so huge I could hide behind it.

Not a word from any of us. Our silence stiff, complete.

Then the complaints start: “Did you clean your room?” he asks, scowling at me. “Dump the garbage? You think you can play all day and do nothing to help? We love you, but you gotta pull your weight! Your father never pays what he owes us anyway. What do we do about that?”

Other times he flings questions at Nan: “Why didn’t you call the plumber? Why do you let your damn brothers manipulate you all the time?”

But those morning aren’t the worst. The worst is when she goes to get him and he won’t let her into the bathroom. Like now.

She comes back to the kitchen pale, frightened. We sit in the hutch like two statues waiting for the sound of his slippers sliding, heavy, unsteady, across the dining room carpet. We know what to expect. The first time I saw it, a year or so ago, I thought he was playing, trying to be a clown of sorts for me, so started giggling. He slammed his fist on the table and stared at me menacingly. I never laughed again on such mornings.

Now I know that when he comes into the kitchen, a towel over his shoulder, tiny wads of toilet paper stuck to his cheeks, chin and neck, blood showing through, he’s cut himself several times while shaving. That’s not what the towel is for though. Not to dab at the blood if a balled-up bit of toilet paper falls from his nicked skin. He’d tear off the edge of a napkin for that, sticking it onto the spot where blood is still seeping.

The towel has another purpose. As Nan pours him coffee, he slides the towel around the back of his neck, hands shaking almost uncontrollably as he clenches

each end tightly. Then he lowers the shaking fingers of his right hand down to his coffee mug, grips the handle and pulls the towel with his left hand as if working a pulley, slowly raising the cup to his mouth, coffee spilling in spite of the excruciating care he's taking. Bending his head way down, he sips from the mug ever so carefully, and then, raising his left arm, lowers the cup back down to the table.

The same with his fork, each bite tortuously managed as one quivering hand lowers the other, fork clicking against the plate's hard surface as he separates a piece of egg or clump of hash browns. Then he slides the fork under and hoists a small bite, whatever he can manage, up and into his mouth. As often as not, most of the food spills before he gets it into his mouth.

Struggling like this, he doesn't like me watching, so I pretend I'm staring at my cereal or chocolate drink, stealing glances whenever I can. Nan isn't watching either, but she can tell what he's doing. She's gone through this so many times, she knows exactly how much he's eaten and when he'll finish.

Done with his food, he slowly sits up straight, tosses the towel, now stained with coffee and egg yolk, butter and grease, to the bench beside me, leans his upper body hard against the hutch table and pushes himself upright, then shuffles out of the kitchen, back to the bedroom. Nan waits a couple minutes, then follows to make sure he makes it to the bed, comes back to get aspirin and a glass of water, then goes to tuck him in.

While she's tending to Papa, I sit here alone, looking out the hutch window, my back warm against the wall's wooden slats, not from sunlight, but from my own body's churned up heat. I see, in the yard, the branches of our tall weeping-shrub leaning out toward the alley, where, this morning, a garbage truck is making its rounds, rumbling and stopping, rumbling and stopping, going from one garage door

or backyard gate to the next, workers emptying garbage cans into the truck's wide churning mouth, the whole backend trembling worse than Papa as it passes.

Back in the kitchen, still upset, Nan coaxes me from the window. Then we both clear the table. With her at the sink and me standing on my stool beside her, we slowly wash and dry the dishes. Hands deep in hot, sudsy water, no longer moving like a robot, she starts talking in a low, soft tone:

“Do you know, you're the best little boy in the world?”

And as I dry the last dish, she adds, “Do you know how much your Nan loves you, and your Papa?”

Looking over at the yellow hutch, half in sunlight, half in shadow, I say, “Yeah. I know. I'm the luckiest boy in the world.”