

Failure To Thrive

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Sunday morning and I jumped on the bed chanting, “Fatty, fatty. Two by four. Can’t get through the bathroom door.” Daddy laughed, sloshed coffee on the bed sheets and smashed his cigarette into the full ashtray on his bedside table. I could always make Daddy laugh. Mama’s face crumpled and she pressed her lips together until they turned white. One month later, Mama gave birth to a blotchy, red-faced, squirming mass that she and Daddy called Ann.

Ann was never well. Mama dragged us to the doctor’s office every week. I sat on a hard wooden chair behind the doctor and listened to Mama complain. Ann wouldn’t eat. She wasn’t growing. She cried all the time. The doctor poked Ann with shiny metal instruments and placed her on a scale. He told Mama to stop nursing and to feed Ann store-bought formula. He told Mama to feed Ann every three hours. Mama bought the expensive formula and stayed awake around the clock, but Ann refused to eat or she threw up anything she managed to swallow.

At night, I listened to Ann scream while my parents fought. I crawled under my bed and clamped my hands down hard over my ears.

“You have to shut her up,” Daddy yelled. “I have to work tomorrow.”

Mama’s voice was softer. “I know. I’m trying. I’m doing the best I can.”

“It isn’t good enough,” Daddy told her.

He left. The front door slammed shut and I held my breath, waiting for it to open, to hear my Daddy’s voice again. All I heard were Ann’s gasping cries and my mother’s weeping. I steeled myself against the two of them. I believed he would come back for me. He would remember how cheerful I was, how I knew so many jokes and songs. I clenched my jaw and didn’t allow one tear to fall from my eyes. If I became one of them, one of the weepers, he’d never come back.

I tap danced through the house. I sang. At night, when Ann’s cries kept me awake, I practiced bits in my head. I knew all the words to the Sesame Street theme by heart. I memorized sketches from Saturday Night Live. I yelled, “Jane, you ignorant slut!” at our next door neighbor, until Mama heard me and slapped me hard across the face. I watched television all day

and all night. I could do anything as long as I stayed out of the way. Mama never looked at me except to roll her eyes. I didn't care what she thought. I only cared what Daddy would think when he came home.

Ann stopped crying.

I woke up and the house was silent and I knew that something had changed. Sun streamed through my window and threw prisms of light across the pink and green quilt that draped my bed. I tiptoed across the hall to Ann's room. Mama slumped on the floor, cradling Ann in one arm. She jumped up when she saw me and placed Ann into her crib. Ann didn't move or cry.

"You're up," Mama said. "We should get some breakfast, don't you think?" I followed her to the kitchen, hearing the slap, slap of her slippers for the first time in a long time. Mama poured flour and milk into a mixing bowl and stirred, splattering batter across the counter. She babbled. "How about some pancakes? Would you like that? Wouldn't pancakes be good?" She stirred and poured batter onto a hot skillet, watching for bubbles to rise and then pop before flipping the fragrant rounds over to cook through. She piled the golden disks onto a plate and added several pats of butter, which melted into yellow squares of salty liquid. She poured half a bottle of syrup over it all, pulled two forks from the silverware drawer and set the plate between us. "Dig in." Her cheeks bulged as she chewed.

I ate so much that my stomach ached. I put my fork down and sat back with my hands across my belly. Mama pushed the food into her mouth until the plate was clean. Syrup dribbled down her chin onto her nightgown. She tucked the last bite between her glistening lips and sat back in her chair. She closed her eyes. I thought she might fall asleep, but her eyelids flew open and her face turned hard as if she'd slipped on a mask.

I looked away.

By the time the ambulance arrived, Mama had shoved her syrup-stained nightgown into the laundry hamper. She'd pulled one of my father's left-behind sweatshirts on over a pair of jeans that she usually wore only while cleaning. The men in the ambulance took Ann away, but did not turn the lights and sirens on as they drove off. As most of the neighbors had come onto their front porches to peer at us, I was disappointed at the lack of fanfare. Mama picked me up and carried me into the house. I settled into the unfamiliar warmth of her arms and buried my face against her chest.

Mama said Ann was in heaven and that sometimes God took babies who weren't happy here on earth. She said Ann wouldn't cry anymore now that she was with Jesus. She said Ann would be happy. I didn't think that was fair; I wasn't happy.

"Daddy can come home now," I said.

Mama put me down on the floor and walked away. I hoped that Ann would not be happy. I hoped she'd be in a bad place instead of with Jesus.

Days passed. Daddy did not come home.

I stood in the middle of the living room and sang every song I could remember from Sunday School while Mama devoured the cakes and pies and pastries that neighbors brought to our house. I belted out “Father Abraham,” “Zaccheus Was a Wee Little Man,” “The Wise Man Built His House Upon a Rock,” “Deep and Wide” and “Jesus Loves Me” until my throat was sore and my voice took on a raspy, breathy quality that made me sound older. When I ran out of church songs, I switched to show tunes and music I’d heard on the radio. I was partial to Captain and Tennille or Elton John’s more upbeat songs. “Love, love will keep us together,” I assured my mother. “Don’t go breaking my heart,” I sang. “I won’t go breaking your heart.”

Finally, school started. I was in second grade. Every morning, Mama dropped me off at the small, blond-bricked schoolhouse and every morning I said, “Don’t forget to pick me up later.” Mama needed reminding.

If I did not remind Mama to do the laundry, I would not have clean clothes to wear. She never cooked, but did bring home grocery sacks full of sweet pastries. I begged her to buy other things – milk and peanut butter and bread – but she forgot. I carefully copied the words off food labels, so I could leave a list for Mama before she took me to school each day. Teacher said I was the best writer in the class.

I imagined that Daddy was watching me every day when Mama dropped me off and picked me up, her baby blue Volkswagen creeping forward in the circular drive. I believed that someday he would rush forward and save me, take me somewhere beautiful and cool. When he didn’t appear, I decided he must be very far away. I imagined that he was working somewhere exotic where phones and post offices and transportation were rare and inaccessible.

Mama had eaten so many pastries that she resembled a mound of greasy dough. Her breasts and stomach swelled against the dingy gray housedress she wore every day. Her bosom was forever dusted with the fine white sugar that coats powdered donuts.

A boy whose nose ran so much that the teacher forced him to carry around a roll of toilet paper greeted me each day with the same question. “Are you gonna be a fat pig like your mother? Oink, Oink!”

He laughed and slapped his thigh and snorted. Every day I answered him. “No,” I said. “I’m not.” Even though he knew the answer, he kept asking the question.

On Valentine’s Day, we were supposed to put on a show for our parents and teachers. Every year, the show was the same. Every year, someone was chosen to sing “Won’t You Be My Valentine?” and someone else was chosen to sing “I’m a Little Valentine,” which was really just “I’m a Little Teapot,” but with different words. Even though I already knew all the words to all the songs, I wasn’t chosen to sing anything. I was supposed to just stand

in the back and sing only when everyone else was singing.

We made paper hearts and folded them in half. We copied down information about the show in red crayon. We were supposed to give them to our parents as invitations. I tossed my heart into the round, wicker trash basket beside my bed. I didn't want Mama showing up in her gray housedress. I feared the flimsy folding chairs would buckle under her weight. I feared the boy with the toilet paper roll would point at her and laugh.

On the day of the show, I wore my pink church dress and allowed Miss Teasdale to pin a red paper heart on my chest. She poked me with the pin and a spot of blood seeped through the pink cotton fabric.

We performed in the lunchroom. The long tables that usually filled the space had been removed and metal chairs had been lined up in straight rows facing a small, makeshift stage. The room smelled of warm milk and tomato sauce from a can. Paige O'Connor stood at the front of the stage, chewing on a piece of her long blond hair. Paige had been chosen to sing the first song even though her voice cracked when the notes were too high. I took my place at the back of the stage with all the other kids who didn't have speaking parts or singing parts. The teacher called us the chorus, which was just a nice way of saying the losers.

Parents started arriving just before show time and I was glad that I had not invited my mother. The mothers who came were young and thin and pretty. They greeted each other with smiles and delicate waves of their hands. They wore nice dresses or slacks with colorful sweaters. A few fathers came, though not many. Fathers were too busy with work to come see second graders perform. Fathers were important.

Some of the mothers worked too. It was easy to spot the mothers with jobs. They wore blazers over their dresses and looked at their watches between smiles.

Paige's mother swept in just as Miss Teasdale cued the pianist. I knew it was Paige's mother because she had the same blonde hair and the same upturned nose and also because Paige spit her hair from her mouth and pasted on a big phony smile when the woman came in the room. Paige's mother sat in the back row and placed her purse on the seat next to her. Paige sang "Won't You Be My Valentine?" Her mother smiled, but kept looking over her shoulder at the doorway. Just as Paige finished, the door creaked open and a man walked in.

The man was my father, my Daddy. We were well into the chorus of "Big Red Heart Rock," which was just "Jingle Bell Rock" with different lyrics, and Daddy was here to rescue me. I sang louder. It was important that my voice be heard above all the others. I grinned and did my very best jazz hands. Daddy looked me in the eye. He smiled, but not a big smile. He was too excited to smile big, I thought. He was too happy to see me. Maybe he was nervous after

so long. I was nervous too. We would be nervous and happy together.

He whispered something to Paige's mother. I wanted to tell Daddy about Ann, tell him that the crying had stopped. I realized that I didn't want Daddy to take me away. Instead, I wanted Mama to be the person she was before she had Ann and I wanted Daddy to come home.

I sang and danced my way through the rest of the show. It was my best performance ever. I could almost hear Miss Teasdale thinking that she shouldn't have stuck me in the chorus. We all stood together on stage, held hands and bowed deeply. The parents stood and clapped for what seemed like a long time. I couldn't stand it anymore. I broke away and rushed off the stage straight to Daddy and threw my arms around his legs. He sat back in his folding chair and pushed me away.

"I was afraid of this," he said to Paige's mother.

"Daddy," I said. "You came."

"Look, honey," he said. He cupped my chin in one hand and looked down at me. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here."

"No, Daddy," I assured him. "I'm glad you're here."

"Really?"

"Really and truly," I said. I put my face in his lap and breathed in his familiar odor of stale cigarettes and Old Spice.

He pushed my head away and held me at arm's length. "Ann is gone," I told him. "There's no more crying. You can come home now." Paige's mother reached out and touched my hair. "Oh, honey," she said. Her hand was cool and dry as paper. I shoved her away and looked at Daddy. He looked at Paige's mother.

Paige came over and stood next to her mother. She raised her pale blonde eyebrows. "Why are you hugging my mother's boyfriend?"

A cold wave ran through my body. "He's not your mother's boyfriend," I said. "He's my Daddy." I leaned over and sank my teeth deep into the flesh of Paige's cheek. Daddy pulled me away. I stared at the round, red mark shining through the tears on Paige's face. Her mother bent down and swiped at the mark with a printed scarf from her purse.

"How dare you!" She glared at me and shook her head. "Honestly, Ted, I see what you mean."

I looked at Daddy. I waited for him to tell me that it wasn't true. I waited for him to defend me and to yell at Paige's mother.

"Look," he said. "I shouldn't have come here. I'm sorry." He held my shoulders and talked somewhere above my head. "Miss O'Connor is a friend," he said. "We're going to have lunch together and I came here to pick her up. I didn't know you were in this class."

That's when I knew. Daddy didn't leave because Mama was a weeper or because Ann was always crying, he left to get away from me. Why would he

want the girl in the chorus when he could have the girl out front with the solo? My breath came in ragged gasps and my nose ran. I stared at my father, who was looking at Paige's mother. I felt hot all over.

"It's not fair," I yelled and hit him with my fists as hard as I could. I kicked his legs and stomped on his polished shoes. I tried to bite his hand, but he pulled it away. I cried. I didn't care if my tears stained his shirt or if I wiped snot across his pants leg. I sobbed and flailed until Miss Teasdale came over and pulled me away.

"My goodness," Miss Teasdale said. "I don't think I've ever seen this child cry."

I kicked and punched the air with my fists, but Miss Teasdale held me anyway. She pulled me tight into her chest and wrapped her long arms around me, saying "shhh, shhh, shhh" in my ear until I stopped struggling and fell limp against her. She smelled of crayons and green grass. I pressed my head against her neck and closed my eyes so tight that rainbows danced.

"Your mother's here," Miss Teasdale said.

I shook my head. I thought she was asking a question. A pair of arms lifted me away and I smelled the familiar rank sweetness of my mother as she pulled me close. I opened my eyes and looked over Mama's shoulder. Daddy was gone and so was Paige's mother.

"How come you're here?" I asked Mama. She was crying too and the tears flowed down her bloated cheeks like a river. I reached up and felt the wetness against my hand. Mama held the crumpled heart from the trash basket in my bedroom and it floated to the floor as she pulled me in close and nestled me against her soft breasts. I sobbed, drenching her chest with my tears until I fell asleep on her lap.

When I woke up, we were home. We sat together on the couch watching soap operas and eating cookies from a cellophane wrapper. I didn't sing or dance or even talk. I was quiet and still and invisible, just like Ann. Just like Mama.