

Daddy

By Dessy Walls

It was Ma told me that Daddy had shot the dog. He took him out at dawn, as you would any traitorous cur, and put a bullet through his head.

OK, it wasn't at dawn; we would have heard the shot and been out of our beds to investigate. Daddy was smarter than that. He waited until we were all packed off to school. Then he enticed Skipper around the back of the house and bang; no more Skipper.

I don't know about my siblings, but I resolved never to forgive Daddy for that. He had murdered our dog; a mutt of mixed pedigree, mind you, but ours; no trial, just a summary execution. I demanded an appeal.

"How could he do that, Ma? That dog was the family pet." This was a slight exaggeration, as Skipper was an old stray who'd been with us no more than three months and generally minded his own business. However, as his only defense lawyer, while too late to save his neck, I was determined to redeem the dog's reputation.

Ma put a strong case for the prosecution. "We could not afford to have any more sheets ripped from the clothesline" she told me. She, herself, suggested the dog be locked up or chained in the garden but Daddy said no: an animal must be free. So he shot him; the penalty for ripping a few mangy sheets from the clothesline? Death ...!!!

"Why" I suggested "couldn't you raise the clothesline higher or give the dog away to a nice home where they have a tumble drier? Did Daddy shoot that dog when we were at school because he knew I would have stopped him had I been at home?" I flexed my muscles.

Ma put her hands on my shoulders and holding my eye argued gently “Daddy did it when he did to save you the pain of witnessing it. We could have lied and said that the dog ran away. He was a stray. But we wanted to let you understand that not all choices in life are pleasant. And, rather than debating something we had little choice about, Daddy thought it best to have it over with, and the dog buried, before you got home.”

With a plaintiff huff I left it at that. I didn’t even ask where they’d buried the dog. I hadn’t known Skipper that well. We might have passed each other a few times around the side of the house; I on my way to play football and he off to rip a few fine sheets; words were seldom exchanged. A quick rub from me and a tail wag from him sort of covered all we needed to say. That was the extent of my acquaintance with Skipper.

Daddy, I knew better. He was a complex man. First you had Daddy the dog slayer. Then there was Tomato Sluberums Daddy. Tomato Sluberums Daddy wouldn’t harm anyone. Unless you were a big juicy tomato: in which case he would put you in a huge pot with potatoes, onions and every vegetable he could find in the house and, having added some secret ingredients only he knew, he’d boil it all up and make the most delicious stew. It tasted all the better because of it’s name; Tomato Sluberums. When Daddy Chef would announce it no dish was ever more warmly welcomed. Who wants some Tomato Sluberums? We do! And there was always plenty for everyone; except Mammy and the baby, of course. They’d be in the maternity hospital. Ma for the umpteenth time and the baby for the first; cause that was when Daddy would be chef; when Ma was having another baby; so; very often, really. Egg boats were another specialty of his, but Sluberums was his trademark.

Another Daddy I knew well was “never let slack grammar or mispronunciations pass by” Daddy. Windows has its auto-corrector; we had Daddy.

“Daddy, can me and Clare go to the fillum with you?”

“Filmmm!”

“Ok; can me and Clare go to the filmmm with you?”

“Can Clare and I go to the film with you?”

“Can Clare and I go to the fillum with you?”

“Filmmm, filmmm”

“Well, can we?”

“Hurry up, get your coats.”

And on the way home from the film there was always a great discussion about the funny bits and the scary bits. The kissy kissy bits were never mentioned.

Then there was the chocolate finger biscuits Daddy. There was always a crowd to welcome that Daddy home from work. We said it was because we were happy to see him. He claimed it was because of the biscuits. He would bring us chocolate finger biscuits from the canteen at work. They were wrapped in fine blue silver paper.

At the oil refinery where he worked, there was a manager’s canteen and a workers canteen. Daddy hated that distinction and would go and sit in the workers canteen. First, however he would snatch all the packets of finger biscuits from the manager’s area. It wasn’t stealing. His fellow executives were fat enough. He didn’t eat the finger biscuits, or at least not all of them, he would bring them home to us. Kids would come running from every corner of the garden and house when we heard his car; an eager crowd gathering around the driver’s door. He would lower the window. “What are all these expectant faces I see?” he would smile mischievously.

The younger ones would jump up and down singing “you know, you know”!

“Perhaps,” he’d say “you mean these” and from inside his warm overcoat he would produce a few packets of chocolate finger biscuits. The biscuits didn’t last long or taste great but the moment was delicious.

Ruthlessly efficient Daddy was another; cold and deadly. He wasn't a soldier. He hated soldiering. But, if he had been, I would have wanted him on my side.

One day, while Daddy was chatting and laughing with a gaggle of us around the dining room table, six year old Paddy came running into the house shouting "Tony Hayes has been knocked down by the bread van".

Even as Paddy screamed "he's still stuck under it" Daddy was already moving and issuing orders; Kevin, get the Dunlop pillow from upstairs; Peter, get the big car jack from the shed, it's next to the boat; Patricia, call David from next door; Dessy, get Mr. Higgins from down the lane; Brid, get a blanket; Clare, call an ambulance; Mammy, give the bread man a cup of tea. The rest of you come with me.

The army was mobilized; within five minutes the powerful Mr. Higgins, Daddy and David and a few small helpers had lifted the bread van, I had placed the jack under the rim and Daddy had slipped Tony Hayes out. It all had to be done with extreme delicacy as Tony's body was twisted like a Swiss roll, his head forced between his legs and jammed against the steel undercarriage; the centre of his scalp torn off. Yet there he was, in six minutes flat, lying on the Dunlop pillow with a blanket over him awaiting the ambulance; safe as houses.

After the ambulance had taken Tony away to hospital in Cork, I found Daddy in the dining room questioning six year old Paddy, my kid brother and sole witness to the event. I, being almost eighteen and knowing everything, interrupted saying why waste your time; a minor's evidence is impermissible in court. Daddy bluntly told me to stay out of it. This was not a court of law. It was his family.

I was hurt because I'd really just wanted to talk to my hero and ask him would he have been as cool and efficient if it was one of us under that bread van ... or would he have frozen in fear. I knew

the answer, but I'd wanted to ask. After his harsh rebuke, I didn't ask; I walked out and back to my own life.

I was older now. I had a life outside of Daddy. Ten years earlier anything that didn't include him wasn't rated as living at all. Everything that did include him was magic.

In fifty six, he took me fishing in Glen Flesk, Co. Kerry. We stayed with the Lucey family in an old farmhouse with a huge open fireplace. Each day we would set out on a different fishing adventure. This particular day it was Currigaveha lakes, up a mountain behind Fitzgerald's farmhouse. I was so excited. Along the road from Lucey's to Fitzgerald's Daddy rode the Lambretta Scooter and I was the pillion passenger, protected from the wind by his back; protected from all harm by his invincibility. I was so excited I could hardly contain myself. I was so excited I kept singing through the wind though nobody could hear me. I was so excited I completely forgot to bring the small fishing bag.

It was all he'd asked me to do. "Stand here with the rest of the gear" he said "I'll go back for it". He wasn't cross with me, just irritated about the lost time, he told me later. But at the time I thought it was all my fault and he would be killed on the road or lost coming back and I'd never see my Daddy again and I couldn't imagine then or now a bigger loss and it would have served me right for forgetting the small fishing bag. I screamed for the whole twenty minutes he was away. I thought it was years.

When he came back he held me while I sobbed. He was so sorry for leaving me but I was such a big boy he had thought I could manage without him for a while. I said I am big but I'll never be that big.

I always won the game of drop the hanky. Daddy would stand in front of all of us and he would hold his handkerchief up high. Then he would drop it. The rules were you must laugh real loud as the hanky fell; then when it hit the floor you must be suddenly and totally silent.

Daddy's job was to get us laughing again and he was good at that. Holding up his index finger was enough for most but I refused to laugh. He could stand on his head and wiggle his toes, I wouldn't laugh. Normally I would laugh at him all day long but, when the game was to not laugh, I could touch something sad inside myself and become invulnerable.

I also tried holding back a smile when I was cross with him but that didn't always work.

Chocolate finger Daddy drove through the gate. The usual mob surrounded the car. I was near the back as I was tallest. And I was keeping my distance as it was not long after Skipper's execution. I had only forgiven the dog slayer about forty nine per cent.

“What are all these expectant faces I see?” he smiled mischievously.

That led to more jumping up and down singing “you know, you know”...

Normally he would have said “Perhaps, you mean these” and from inside his warm overcoat produced the chocolate finger biscuits. This time he looked over the heads of the others and straight into my eyes. I hadn't spoken to him about Skipper but Ma may have passed on my message. He smiled as his hand went inside his warm overcoat ... Look at all those expectant faces ... and what he pulled out was not finger biscuits, but the most beautiful fluffy puppy dog you have ever seen. The dog had pissed on his shirt but my “ear to ear” grinning Daddy didn't care. I gave in. I grinned too.