

## **Daddy's little girls**

The last miscarriage was like a vacuum pumping her stomach. In vitro sucked you dry. Arturo had made her promise it would be their last attempt. She knew he was right: he was an astronomer and he could see it written in the stars.

Sara pushed the car into gear, slipped out onto the road, popped a mint to cover her breath, clipped the radio in search of Dylan and dipped the accelerator a little closer to the floor than recommended on a narrow country road. She clutched at the curves determinedly.

She pulled into an empty driveway and stopped the car. She needed a minute before turning the corner and approaching the house.

The soggy morning wrung itself dry outside in silence. Rain spat on the windscreen but Sara wasn't really hearing it. A whiff of burning peat smoke slipped in the window but all she could smell was the mayonnaise smothering an egg and onion sandwich. They would be waiting for her, as inevitable as her mother's nervous greeting, all hugs and smiles and get it over with as soon as possible, retreat into the sitting room, the distant hustle of the kitchen as she boiled water and fumbled again with the sandwiches as if there was an absolutely correct way to present them on the plate.

The car was fogging up. Sarah opened the window slightly, sufficient for a light haze to sift in but not wide enough to allow it dampen her sleeve. Her mother would notice the scruffiness of her dress and start scrutinizing to make sure her daughter was taking proper care of herself. Her eyes never ceased. The mouth rolled pleasantries but Sara knew the stare was pitiless. There was always an unread sign, another indication that her mother had been right all along.

Sara breathed in the smoke to drown out the bitter taste of egg and onion. The windscreen blurred up but that was fine; she didn't need to see out. There must have been other things but all she could ever remember from her school days was the embarrassment of having to peel back the tinfoil and watch the other kids skive away holding noses as the embedded mix stung their senses,

offended their taste and reeled off streaks of laughter that still spun far too close to be forgotten. She'd never liked egg and onion sandwiches, that yellowy hue of mustard gone raw, a spring storm waiting to be released. She'd eat them when hungry enough and dump them, superstitiously, when she could survive without them, but her mother was not one to be easily deterred: she knew her daughter loved them. They were her favorites. Always had been. Her mother had taken the decision a long time ago. And there would be no changing that now.

"You're looking lovely dear."

"So are you mum."

"I hope that young man is taking care of you. What's he called again? Arthur was it?"

"Arturo Mum."

"That's what I thought."

Sara faked a smile in response, knowing that corrections would have little effect, the gaze behind the crinkling lips would be drawing its own conclusions. When she was younger she had just avoided her mother and run away; age and experience made that simple solution more convoluted. It was difficult to escape gravity, no matter how wide or elliptical you made your orbit.

"He's great."

"You'll have to bring him down again soon."

"Yes he'd love to. He just works so much."

"Well at least he has a job. Not everyone can say that nowadays."

She was looking older Sara noticed. Somewhat paler in her grimace, an extra line to her wince, the fake smile lagging just longer than it should. Her suit remained immaculate but the shirt beneath hinted at a tea stain. And the house

was beginning to smell in need of a good cleaning. She would have to convince her to get somebody in.

Yes Arturo was lucky with a job. They both were. Her mother was right of course. And she'd had the last word. The decisive conclusion. Sarra rattled her cup in annoyance. Her mother smiled and placed her own gently on the saucer.

Sara smiled, faintly, enough to comfort, to signal she was listening, maybe even in agreement or simply avoiding another opportunity to snipe and fence and scream and walk away as she had all those years ago when adolescence had grown into the confidence of a young woman as stubborn in her own right as her genetic precursor.

"The heathen," Arturo liked to call her, or a "white dwarf", too much density behind a faint exterior. All that religious fervor could only be hiding something evil about to implode into nothingness. What was she now, catholic again, a born again protestant? She wandered back and forth between congregations, ticking off boxes, criticisms, dialectical needs as an invisible sand glass drew her closer to a final decision. She prayed she'd get there in time.

Arturo would come. He wasn't mean. In fact he was a star, made a living out of them at least. One of those backgrounds you either went viral and became successful or you moved sideways and became a teacher like her dad. Dad had always wanted to be a professional athlete; but he had never quite made it and had to work out the frustration in sweaty school halls instead.

"Come in. So good to see you. It's been so long."

And it had been. Ages, not in terms of space but deep and vast enough to keep well out of the spell of his gravity field. He brushed her cheek with the whiff of a well kept beard, whitening but dignifying. His hand touched her shoulder to bring her closer. Aftershave. He'd changed brand. She held him away. He was still looking good, still in resonable shape, as benefits a PE teacher reaching

retirement. Pudgy around the edges but retaining a hint of reflex, coiled springs ready to pounce.

"Your looking well yourself."

He laughed that short tickling, enticing frog in the throat croak. It was so familiar. Still difficult to decipher.

"Am I now? I try. I try."

"And where are you working these days?" Sara asked.

She leaned forward and grazed his cheek. Her father needed to spruce up his shirt she noticed, The collar just wasn't right.

"Same place. Getting old. They keep me on out of habit. But no nuns anywhere close." His eyes sparkled. They had always been dangerously prone to twinkling at the wrong moment. Her friends used to say the same. It was her father's funny gaze. Does he always look at you too like that, they would ask and then giggle over a stolen fag, behind the slumping smelly shed that served as a changing room before volleyball.

"How's that man treating you?" he boomed, terminating in that croak of a half laugh that suddenly sounded so familiar in her ear, drawing tingles up her back as she fell into the hurricane of a past she couldn't completely remember living. He had always punctuated unsaid phrases with that rhetorical chortle.

Her mother kept changing religion, her father schools, but deep down they remained the same as if it really was all relative and like a universe constantly in motion our own concept of time never allowed us notice how things explode or implode: our perception of the world was a constant, a constant annoyance, a constant hope, a constant struggle between past and present as they spun

around in unregistered paths, touching occasionally, bouncing off each other in an never ending spiral that occasionally exploded into a lightening flash of venom.

"Will you have a drink?"

"I'm driving. Better not." For months on end she hadn't dared and now that she could, she had to refuse. It wasn't fair really.

"Well you won't be leaving immediately will you? Go on have a glass of wine at least."

She nodded. No harm in it.

She needed something to keep her mouth occupied as she whirled questions, doubts, thoughts she already knew she would not now let her lips frame into anything more concrete than a sip over the border of a wine glass, holding its stem firmly but trying not to clasp it directly and snap the brittle experience she was living. Everything she had come for was already missing, would never be touched upon. Their orbits were too settled. She hoped he wouldn't make the joke about prospective grandchildren.

He was looking her up and down, over his own glass. No matter how much you grow up you are never as old as your parent. Or maybe you are and that is the problem.

"What brings you down here after all this time? You lost your job or something?"

"That man not treating you well?"

He fished awkwardly, aware of the need, oblivious to the bait.

He would know about treating a woman well. She knew what her mother had said: she had proclaimed it loudly to the skies as she went in search of another god who would take vengeance and deliver pestilence. Yes indeed, fuck you: her religious mother had made it very clear and her father had whittled away in agreement.

"Arturo's fine. Working hard. I just wanted to see you. It's been a long time."

"It has indeed."

They both wondered what had brought her there. Miscarriage? That was their relationship, an aborted attempt at family life.

She was getting dangerously close to another glass. He had already filled his.

The armchairs were sinking in, with that resolved feeling of well-cushioned remorse. All that distance and still so little to be talked about or rather, so little that would let itself be expressed. They chitty chatted on about weather, sports and a film they had both managed to see and pretended to mutually like. She sat back and crossed her legs. He wheased out that laugh again, plump fingers gripping his own wine, mouth smiling, pert beard whistling, eyes squinting, from behind a shutter, a gauze protecting him from undesired targets, detecting threats, battling off competition. Legs wide open, her father filling out the armchair as he did with space in general. She'd checked the bathroom. No sign of another young lover. Clean, cold, like a man all alone. Perhaps he'd finally grown up.

He released another chortle to break the gaining silence. Sara had run out of responses. She fiddled with armchair lining, a little too soft and damp to be

completely clean: it oozed that stale sensation of having been through too much.

Would he have to offer her something to eat he wondered. Did she still like those awful egg and onion sandwiches? He couldn't remember what he had in the fridge. Pretty empty. But he wouldn't tell her he was moving school again. Or maybe retiring this time. Running out of options. His fingers curled on the glass nervously. He could feel psoriasis coming on. What else had he left her to inherit?

The frail thinning body of her mother hid around a steel interior of pent up desires that would never now be unleashed. She smiled, an echo of insincerity mirrored by her daughter from across the table, lips wrinkling around insecurities, amenities, tight falsehoods, the sour mix of egg bitten raw by onion, a vile void unfilled by lavish mayonnaise smashed between crust-less slices.

It seemed like centuries ago, but sitting here with her mother had brought it all back. It was still difficult to separate her parents, miles apart, years away, they insisted on coming together in her mind, a patchwork of frozen memories that never flowed into something new. She could remember the arguments, and was only now beginning to understand some of them. One day she might comprehend what they once had in common, but it might be just another vacuum, nothing more than a chance collision that briefly sparked off a distant universe leaving another white or red dwarf in its path. That would be her. Created out of an intense nuclear fusion that faded into nothingness.

"Is he all right?"

Her mother paused.

"Arthur I mean." She clarified.

She'd never managed to pronounce it right. Neither had her father come to think of it.

For a second the name was comforting. Sara's mind wondered and just for a split minute, a frazzled shred of time, she was going to tell her mother how her father was, how her ex-husband was, how he had been, how she herself was. Moments are fleeting however. Sara just nodded. They both did. Or appeared to. It was deep, dark and dangerous but she realized her mother didn't really want to know. Not her fault: they both had their defense systems and priorities and slowly you learned that you had your own life and your mother was just another person visiting you late at night with a kiss.

Going to the same school as your dad was always complicated but when they were young her friends loved him. He would pick them up and haul them around the gym, encouraging them to do all sorts of things their parents wouldn't let them do at home. And they had teams that won, athletes that gained medals and the school developed a certain reputation. He loved his volleyball team particularly. He'd straighten their backs, tug a leg into place, arch the neck, jump up beside them to show the correct angle, the speed of the twist, the pace of a hardening flick. Sara used to be envious. She had never been that good at sport and her father seemed happy to keep her at a distance.

As they matured things soured. The volleyball team began to avoid her completely. They started losing. Daddy had selected all the wrong girls she remembered thinking. Nevertheless, they attract all his attention and all I have are the fights over dinner at home. When you are thirteen the world is always out to get you. And sometimes it succeeds.

Does he do it to you too one of the team had asked her.

They were struggling home, rug sacks sagging, bending their clothes unfashionably out of line, clutching loose hairs that should look prim, exciting



and delightfully dyed but hung damp, rank, smelly beneath dark green hoods that kept the rain off. Spots bit their lips, hung to their noses like spores planning to defile them for life. Fugitively they wiped off a trace of eyeliner or a dribbling layer of lipstick before their mothers reacted and reduced them to the drabness of teenage habitats. Home, homework, houses that screamed out for release, bodies struggling to explode, minds slipping as they drove around corners without a brake.

"Does he do it to you too?"

Sara looked at her mother but avoided eye contact. Tea was drying up and they had both obviously decided not to breach the routine. Her mother sneezed and grasped around for a tissue, anything to keep herself distracted. There was always a cold coming on or off. Her eyes were damp. They struggled on in silence.

"They all say he does you know"

"That's what they all say."

Well they could say what they liked. They didn't talk to her anymore, anyway. Home seemed miles away. Her legs were tired, shoes tripping in the puddles, she wasn't sure if she wanted to make it.

Her father moved school, moved out and her mother had moved church. When he left it was a shock but then Sara realized she had never been all that observant. She could have seen it coming. Christ. They had all known what was going to happen. The Judas kiss. Turn the other cheek and avoid what was in front of you. Was who kissed first always the guilty one, the instigator of a larger crime? Maybe Judas had been goaded. Maybe he had just been a monster.

Catching her as the swing let her go. Running after her as the wind caught her skirt. Throwing her up and letting her fall back to the safety, the comfort zone her arms and breast provided. Letting her drink there. Simple little lips pouting around innate needs. Stroking her bald head until the hair grew and twisted

into tails and her little girl grew up bold and free, a tree in flight, wafting with a spring air, heir to a throne that was crumbling from beneath.

She'd get drunk later and arrive home in a fog. Meanwhile, time to finish off the sandwiches. Her mother had returned from the kitchen. Everything was in place as it should. The cosmos had it's shooting start but for all its revolt, gases and constant movements, it was out there every night as it always had been, moving, unmoving, sparkling, still as the night, evolving at its own snail pace which may be relative but also unconscious, dreamlike in its steadiness, insignificant in its vastness. Arturo would be waiting. Her astronomer would tell her stories that made her own world tiny, comfortingly unimportant on the grand scale of things. Her daddy would never again have a little girl to play with. Neither would his daughter. It didn't matter any more. That was something.

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