

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

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THE BOSS OF MY BODY

WHO CAUSED THE WAR

Joey will think it was his fault. He always does. Even when it has nothing to do with him. When his mom stubs her toe and cries out, he rushes over to her and says, "I'm sorry, Mama. Was it my fault?" He's only five.

He's still trying to figure out how to make it up to his uncle Ray. Ray falls asleep on the sofa when he visits. Wakes up screaming and sweating. Joey's mom told him it's because he can't forget what happened in the desert last year.

"What happened?" Joey said.

"People were fighting and hurting each other," his mom said.

"Like we do at school?"

"But they were killing each other," she said.

Joey puts Pooh Bear beside his sleeping uncle, hoping it will help.

Joey's mom and dad used to fight. He never thought they might kill each other. Now he's glad he made them stop.

During one of their screaming fights he stood between them and yelled, "Stop!"

Joey's friend across the street doesn't have a father any more. He moved away and never came back.

"Mama, why did Georgie's daddy leave?"

"Because his mommy and daddy didn't agree."

"But why did he leave?"

"Because they didn't agree and they couldn't stay together."

"Was it Georgie's fault?"

THE STREET

"This is the worst thing ever. It's worse than being afraid Mommy's going to die."

I probably shouldn't cry with him, but it's hard not to when he says that.

"Please let me go out and play with Georgie."

"Sweetie, you didn't listen to Mommy about not playing in the street."

"What does that mean? Does that mean no?"

"Yes, that means no."

"I hate Mommy." Joey sticks his tongue out and furrows his brows to confirm.

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This is the first time he's ever said these words. When I get my breath back, I say, "I understand how you feel."

"I'm mad at you."

"It's okay to be mad."

"I hate you."

"I understand, but you still have to listen to Mommy about the street."

"I'm mad and sad and glad."

"A lot of feelings can come at the same time, can't they?" I reach over and rub his leg like I do when he scrapes his knee.

"Hmmp," he says, arms folded, furrow so deep it's hard to see his eyes.

"Do you want me to give you some time alone with Daddy so you can eat?"

"No, I want to be with Mommy." His reply is immediate, knee-jerk even.

I melt.

We eat, and his dad starts making jokes to get him to laugh. Soon he's laughing and eating, smiling with his whole face lit up. He looks at me.

"I don't hate you anymore, Mommy. I love you."

He throws his arms around my neck. His hands are in my hair and they're full of sausage grease. I have this thing about grease, but I'm so happy to feel his arms around me.

BEGINNINGS

There are reasons I didn't have a child until forty-two. I won't go into them. I was seduced by my husband of twelve years into thinking I could have a child and it would all be okay.

What a shock to find I loved the roundness, the swish-swish of amniotic fluid when I walked, the little galloping heartbeat on the monitor, the way delivery cut through all the crap to the core, where I was.

This morning Joey is in a good mood. He tells me, "I had a great dream. I dreamed I was in a small airplane that only has two seats. You were there with me."

Eating his cinnamon toast loaded with sugar, he gets an inner rush and flings his hands out and shouts, "Happy. Join us."

"You mean joyous, Sweetie?"

"No. Join us."

My husband is irritated by my frantic rushing around—I'm late and unprepared. At times like these, he sings at the top of his lungs to drown out any sensory stimulation from me. He sings songs whose lyrics imply the criticisms he would like to throw my way.

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Joey waves goodbye as I leave him at day care. He comes running to me for one last kiss. He hugs my neck, then pulls back a little and says, "I'm still super duper duper duper duper mad at you."

"Oh really? Okay."

His face is so sweet I want to scoop him up. I want to wrap myself around him and protect him, but I know that would ruin it. He reaches up and hugs and kisses me again.

"That means I love you," he says.

The first day I took my son to preschool, he came home and started smashing his trains into each other, shouting, "Bad boy." It went on and on.

"Where did you hear that, Sweetie?"

"At school after a boy bit one of the kids."

DANCING

I like my mom and dad. They give me hugs and kisses and take me places. Mama put the art I did in school on my wall. She got me a treasure box and let me put my stuff in how I like it. Later she made me take the books and CDs out and put them back on the bookshelves. She said you have to be able to see the titles.

She went to a class last week and came back talking about bodies. She taught me the names for things, like anus and vagina. I already knew penis and testicles. She asked me who's the boss of my body, and I said, "You are, Mama."

She said, "No, you are, Sweetie."

This morning I asked her why she hated me yesterday. She said, "I didn't hate you, Sweetie. You hated me."

"Oh yeah." I usually don't remember things very long. But now that she reminded me, I do remember. Her making me go inside when my friends were out was the worst thing ever. I hated her. I told her I did. And she didn't get mad. She kept acting like I was saying I love you.

My dad is a salesman. My mom is a dancer. We used to all dance together in the living room. We danced wild. Then my mom got something wrong with her body and she stopped dancing.

I like to dance with The Talking Heads playing loud. She watches me and I can sometimes make her laugh. She was happier when she danced. She says her body hurts.

THE WAR GOES ON

My uncle Ray was in a war. He talks about it a little, but he won't answer my questions. I ask him if he shot anybody. I ask him why he would shoot somebody. He says our country is not helping guys like him. He says they should lock guys like him away when they come back.

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Uncle Ray takes me to the park when he's here. He sits on the bench and tries to stay awake. He's tired all the time because he can't sleep at night. I asked him why not and he said his body is not his own anymore.

The other day at the park I met a boy. He was older than me. I wanted to play with him. We played chase. He kept calling me person, even though I told him my name three times. I didn't like that. It felt bad when he called me person.

I told Uncle Ray about it when we were walking home. He said, "At least he didn't call you private."