

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

John Scott Dewey

Teaching Your Son How to Cry

His son, William, fell from his bicycle onto a patch of grass in the front yard, and Marko allowed the four-year-old a moment to cry, because not even a helmet can protect a boy's pride from thudding against the earth. But that moment passed, it was over now, and still the boy wept, clutching his knee that looked fine from where Marko sat on his porch. "You're fine," he said. "Get up. Walk it off." Grandpa Yuri would be over soon for dinner; he was an immigrant, a farmer from old Ukraine who wouldn't hear of boys crying. If he saw William like this, he would say, *I cried once when I was a boy. When my Papa said I was man enough to slaughter pig. Great tradition in our family. He give me a butcher knife and a trough to catch the blood. Oh boy, did your Grandpa Yuri cry for that little piggy! Papa never forgive me for crying so much. Said I spoiled his pork chops...*

Worried, Marko walked across the lawn now and knelt beside his son. He wanted a closer look at the knee.

"It's bleeding real bad," whimpered William.

"Let me see it. Move your hand."

"If I move my hand, all the blood will come out, and when all the blood comes out..."

The boy mewled on. His little lips wet with tears.

"Get up," growled Marko. "You won't bleed to death. Don't be silly." His wife, Tish, would pull up in the driveway soon, any minute now, with Grandpa Yuri in tow. Weeks ago, she had warned Marko not to be so tough on William, to let the boy cry once in a while: *He carries too much grief, Marko. You tell him he's silly for crying, so he sucks it up. He sucks it up and is miserable for it...* Which was surprising to hear from Tish. Over at the high school, she coached the girls' basketball team with a chip on her shoulder, playing to win, refusing to lose, and forbidding her girls to cry when they made a mistake, lost a game, or got injured. "My girls do not cry more readily than boys," she affirmed. And they believed her. Coach Tish certainly never cried... *That's because a four-year-old doesn't have words to express himself. He can't write a poem. He can't write a song. You might as well sign him up for football...* Even when her Lady Leopards lost the championship game last season, she did not cry, upset as she was. The way she explained it, her girls surrendered in the waning minutes; a few points down, they just gave up, slouched their shoulders, ran half-assed after the ball... *All William does is slouch, pout and whine. 'Cause he's too tough to cry. Like that proud Papa of his...* It was a depressing sight to behold, and after the game, in the locker room, she told her players how disappointed in them she was, why quitters don't belong on her team, why she was sorry to have believed in a team of quitters to begin with. And to Tish's strange relief, her players, every one of them, buried their heads in their hands and cried.

Marko moved William's hand away and saw scrapes from the bike pedal. "We'll put a bandage on it," Marko told him. "Like Gretl. Remember Gretl?"

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Little Gretl, from the *Sound of Music*. They had watched it a week ago, together—all of them together except Grandpa Yuri, who, at the doctor's urging, had moved to the nursing home across town, a pretty place with modest accommodations. A window. A bed. A television with a clicker. It was Tish's turn to pick the movie, and since the old man was no longer there to object, she picked a musical. Marko hadn't seen any musicals growing up in Yuri's house, so each scene of *The Sound of Music* came as a surprise to him. The mountains, castles, a cute blond with a boy's haircut singing and dancing with children... Marko was surprised when Captain von Trapp, a mean father, resolved to fire Fraulein Maria for taking the children out in their play clothes. Marko was especially surprised, though, by the way Fraulein's sad eyes put a little lump in his throat. He had to swallow. There'd be no crying over a musical, he thought. But then a song beckoned the Captain to his house, a song of angels. And when he followed the song, he saw them, all his children, still damp in their play clothes... Leisl, strumming the guitar... Kurt, Brigitta, their perfect little lips in sync, in harmonious expression, crooning the way the governess taught them... And the Captain, he was singing too, his voice as giving as the sun... And as the children's hearts melted, Marko's eyes turned to little salty puddles. He was crying. He was crying into Tish's favorite couch pillow... She patted his back. William, burrowed between them, patted his back too, saying, "Daddy's sad. I don't like *The Sound of Music*."

Tish's car was whining up the street, what sounded like a half a block from the front yard. Marko picked up his still-weeping son and carried him to the porch. There, William settled into quiet hiccups and together they watched the car pull up the driveway. "I'm OK now, Papa," William said. "I'm sorry." Tish got out and hustled to the passenger side to open Yuri's door. His cane popped out first, then his loafers. He grunted his way out of the seat. "Don't be sorry, William. Don't ever apologize for crying." Marko lowered William onto the porch, stood him on his little legs. The boy's cheeks were still wet and pink. "Go give Grandpa Yuri a hug. He misses you."