



When Your Father Gets Home

It begins with a child running as fast as he can on a spring afternoon just before suppertime. I had done something wrong—who knows what it was? I was always doing something wrong, like not eating my food, not cleaning my room, not coming when I was called, and even forgetting to turn off the car radio and killing the battery. Of course, I was too small to understand such things as car batteries when my friend Bergy and I played in my father's car in the garage, pretending we were grown-up men, turning the big wheel and listening to bouncy music on the radio. In that old black Ford you didn't need to turn on the ignition to listen to the radio, but we didn't understand about ignitions either.

It begins with me running and a man running. If I had done something truly bad, I never would have run. Perhaps it was as simple as liver for supper, and I ran because there seemed nothing else to do, because I hated liver most of all the foods I hated, especially the smell, which made me gag, and I had long since used up all the tricks of not eating it, like hiding pieces in my napkin and asking to be excused from the table to go to the bathroom. Now they knew better, and I was not excused. I had to eat all my food because there were plenty of starving people in India and China, which I hated for

their starving, and because I should be thankful for what I got and I wasn't, even if it meant sitting alone at the kitchen table with a piece of cold liver long after everyone else had been excused, even if not eating it for supper meant I might get it again for breakfast, though I never did. No, it couldn't have been anything more serious than liver for supper or my mother would have said, "Just wait 'til your father gets home," and I would have waited in my room for the sound of his voice and footsteps moving down the hall in my direction. I would have waited to be taken to the basement, a condemned man in a cell. There my father would spank me with his belt, which only happened a couple times. The basement probably scared me more than the belt since I knew there were rats in the basement, which my mother had felt scurry across her feet when she went down there to wash clothes. We lived in an old apartment building, and no one ever visited the basement except to wash clothes or spank a boy who, as his father said, deserved whatever was coming to him. And long before I got to the basement stairs I cried about the rats and the drama of the belt slipping out of its loops—not the pain itself, which was never very much, and besides, when the pain came it meant that it was all over and I could stop crying. That was the way it worked.

It begins with me running from my father through the backyard of an old apartment building, running without thinking about where I'd go if I actually got away—like something I'd seen at the movies where someone chases someone else off the screen, like Tom and Jerry or Heckle and Jeckle at the Varsity Theater on Saturday afternoon. For there were as yet no TVs in the apartment house, only radios like the one in our kitchen, where I'd listen on Saturday mornings to *The Story Lady* or the Buster Brown Show, pretending I was a cowboy or a jungle boy or sometimes an orphan.

It begins with me running from a double-breasted brown suit and a boldly colored necktie, one of those ties I sometimes put on when we played car drivers in my bedroom. Bergy and I would be on kitchen chairs with pot lids from my mother's cupboard, which were the steering wheels we turned and turned and then made squealing noises, racing our chairs through the long afternoons. Our cars had running boards and special engines that would take us one hundred, two hundred, nine hundred miles an hour, in my father's ties, in my father's double-breasted suit coats that surrounded us like tents. Just about the only real driving was when my father took his upside-down-bathtub-shaped Ford out of the garage for a Sunday afternoon drive, or on

those hot summer nights to follow a searchlight to its source and stop on the way home at the little store that sold double-dip ice cream cones for a nickel.

It begins with me running past the giant box elder tree in the backyard of the apartment building, the tree that came crashing down the night of the hundred-mile-an-hour wind, and in whose branches Bergy and I played, until the men with saws came and cut it up and hauled it away, with me running past the sandbox where Christopher—the son of Mother’s friend, who’d come for a visit—and I packed sand into our ears because it looked so funny to do it, where my mother came out and said, “Just wait ’til your father gets home.” And then my father did get home and drove us to the doctor’s office where they squirted something into our ears and we cried, and the doctor said, “Boys will be boys,” and my father laughed with him and never did take me to the basement with his belt, though I waited the rest of the day for him to do it.

It begins with me running toward the cars parked along the curb, where once I hit Diane, the daughter of another of my mother’s friends, on the top of her head with a little stone, and Diane, who started bawling only when she reached the top of the back stairs, carried a chunk of tar as big as her hand to show her mother what I’d hit her with, and my mother said, “Just wait ’til your father gets home.”

It begins with me running from a man I can’t see or even hear behind me in a double-breasted brown suit with an orange-and-salmon-colored tie, who has just come home from work and who, just when I think I will run forever, catches me from behind, catches my Buster Brown oxford in his hand and trips me into a hard fall on the grass, where I sit amazed, looking up into his deep brown and blurry eyes, with grass stains on my knees, which my mother will soon be upset about, breathing in his dark tobacco smells as he asks me if I thought he couldn’t run fast anymore, and I nod and wait for a blow that never comes, then feel his strong arms pulling me to my feet, leading me toward the flight of wooden stairs that runs up to the second floor balcony and then through our back door and into the kitchen, where my mother is cooking liver—which later, much later, I’d find out even she doesn’t like—waiting and wondering where the two of us have run off to, and all the other things that she will never, ever know.