

WHAT DID YOU DO TO STOP IT?

Well? What *did* you do to stop it?

Of course. You did nothing. You, the only one who had the power to do anything, did nothing.

Swishing slaps and clouts rain around my head; my helpless wails and cries could wake the dead. But not you, though you live still. My pathetic whimpers and my pain—visible, audible, palpable—pain could not stir you to action, could not persuade you to make a simple, reasonable request: "Stop."

You didn't even dry my tears.

My head and body are small and delicate, cute, some would say—and many do. My ways are childish, for, of course, I am a child, your child, your only daughter. Remember? Children make mistakes; I am, therefore, typical, normal, so pitifully normal. I am fragile of mind and physique. I stutter and fidget. I break easily; I crack easily, even now. The scars heal slowly, if they heal at all. The welts on my soul, I know, are permanent; those wounds will never close, for no ointment strong enough exists; there is no salve for the scarred spirit, and no salvation.

Were you more afraid than I? Were you too as terrified of her as I was? *Are* you still terrified, though she is no longer among us, no longer between us? Were you fearful, awed by her aura into taciturn lethargy, from the beginning, whenever that was?

I know only that it didn't stop, and that you didn't stop it. I may ask when it started, for I do not know. Though, to be truly honest, I am not interested in your answers, your explanations. Your excuses are doomed to be flimsy, as unconvincing as your faked love, your counterfeit care. I would not listen, even if you were to try to speak. I seldom believe anything anyone tells me; I learned my lesson well.

Childhood is sweet and simple, straightforward. At least it should be, and *is*, for most. The sweet moments of early life are vital, like warmth, food, and air to breathe; they are the system of emotion that pushes us forward in later life, that,

in short, make life worth living and give it order. Do you know this? Did nobody ever tell you that your childhood never *never* leaves you?

Well, now you know. Because you did nothing to stop her, my life is barely worth living. My memory is a torture chamber, my soul a bruised and lacerated lump of carrion thrown to the big black birds.

You stood by, though I'm sure you didn't watch. I suffered; you, who should at least have suffered with me, did not. You felt nothing, and probably still feel nothing. It is likely that you have never even asked yourself why she hated me so. You saw no need to plague your own blunted soul with gloomy questions. So you busied yourself, dumbly—off down to the cellar to play with wood and metal, paste and glue, to construct something, something tangible, something to take your mind away from the reality of that terrible abstract: the consequences. And here I am, alive—barely, I often feel. I do not laugh, and I have never sung. I know no pleasures; I enjoy practically nothing. I trust no one, no man, no woman, not even animals. And you are to blame. Yes, you are to blame. You are to blame.

I remember I spoke during the main course one evening, and the ladle from the casserole thwacked across my crown.

I think I had said, "This is jolly good," though, of course, I should have known better.

I remember I cut my finger on a piece of broken tile in the front yard, and was slapped severely and repeatedly on both cheeks for my carelessness.

After bathing it in secret tears, I wrapped my injured finger in a filthy swathe of sacking, knowing this would make it worse.

I remember one stiflingly hot summer's day, running quite happily across the gorgeous open fields; I sweated under my thick linen dress, so much so that stains appeared at my tiny armpits. I got no dinner, only a thick leather belt across my bared arse, and was sent to suffocating bed with the bedroom door and windows locked.

I never ran again; I miss the fields; my lungs miss the air.

Now, I feel comfortable nowhere, neither outdoors nor in. I feel safe with nothing; life is fear: I am omniphobic.

Later in life, I heard strange words in everyday use, words like *justice*, *forgiveness*, and *tolerance*. I cannot believe in those words and their pompous

impersonation any more than I can believe in good fairies, hobgoblins, or gods. You—and your thoroughly evil wife—gave me nothing on which I could found the tiniest monument to faith in good, much less God.

Father, I believe only in evil, for I have seen little else.

There's not much in this joyless world that doesn't remind me of the searing physical and emotional pain I suffered at the hands of your woman. I'm often afraid to speak, though many tell me my voice is sweet and gentle, and that my comments—when I release them—are tactful and impeccably polite.

(And how else could they be?)

I sit and freeze at the few formal dinners I now attend, terrified of potential faux pas, though I know, or should know, that my hosts or fellow guests are unlikely to rap my knuckles with a heavy wooden spoon or box my ears. Pop music and TV give me the shivers, too; I fear most forms of entertainment; even light opera—so frivolous, so trivial—makes my hands sweat. Anything sugary, apart from official pudding, makes me tremble: I look around to see where the clout might come from.

Can you imagine what it is like to be terrified of ice-cream? To go into a cold sweat when you walk past a McDonald's or a Burger King? (She once found a cheeseburger wrapper in my schoolbag; I feel the sting of the leather belt and taste the salt solution in my mouth even as I write these words.)

And did you try to tell her that confectionery and fast food and TV and pop music and coffee and a million other things—consumed in moderation—are not particularly harmful? I mean, did you ever, just once, question the wisdom and justice of these proscriptions? Well, of course not.

She was a powerful woman; you were, and are, a coward—the type of coward who unquestioningly opens fire on unarmed civilians on the whim of some demented officer. The courage required to make even the most tentative, the most oblique of suggestions failed you. Completely.

I am a child; I am no longer a child.

But you were a real man. A real *manly* man, weren't you? A worker. Salt of the earth with craggy face and rippling muscles. A breadwinner, proud and potent. You fathered me, anyway. But was that your last act of will as far as I was concerned? I suspect it was. Or did she even force you into that?

"Give me a child! You're too big and strong for me to hit. I need an outlet for my hate. Give me a child!"

Maybe not. Maybe that's not how it was. I suppose I'll have to give you the benefit of the doubt, though that's something I was never given. Never. There was doubt—I got hit. Simple, for her at least. And very easy for you too, huh? You got—apart from the occasional howl or muffled whimper filtering through the floorboards—your peace and quiet.

She deceived you. Often. Though really she could have dispensed with the deception: you weren't going to do anything to stop it anyway.

She hid money, said I'd stolen it, and beat me.

She threw out food, said I'd eaten it, and beat me.

She tore my clothes, said I'd torn them, and beat me.

She hid my schoolbooks, said I'd lost them, and beat me.

She messed up rooms, said I'd done it, and ...

Maybe, just maybe, she *did* think that you might one day try to stop her if it ever occurred to you that the punishment was unwarranted, but I'm fairly sure she needn't have bothered with the forgeries. Am I right? Is it possible that you would have let her beat me black and blue—and a million other colours—even if it was plain that I was guilty of absolutely nothing?

Was she threatening you? Blackmailing you? Sort of, let-me-destroy-our-daughter-or-else-no-nookie? Is that the way it was? Or did it improve your—and her—sex life? Was she warm and cuddly, with all her bile and hate vented for the day, when she climbed into bed with you? Or did it even turn her on, the very act, or thought, of inflicting pain on her own flesh and blood? Things like this are not unknown and, as far as I'm concerned, your sadist-loony wife was capable of deviations even more monstrous than this.

I have often wondered if beating me could somehow have been a source of sexual pleasure for her. For me, of course, it was not. On the other hand, I would not know what sexual pleasure was if it walked up and bit me on the arse. I have never known, and probably never will. How can I trust a man, or a woman for that matter? How can I even trust the sun to rise in the east, or the moon not to fall on my head?

I tell people about you and my "mother", and they don't believe me. They think I dramatise and exaggerate; they don't trust me; they treat me differently the next time they see me; they think this is a story.

This is not a story. I refuse to let anyone believe that this is a story, a finespun fiction. You know I'm not making this up. If anyone knows that, it's you, father. But who will ever believe the truth? Human beings are not monsters, no one is such a monster, they will think to themselves—and they do. And should I chance to mention *your* role, their eyes narrow and accuse. They cannot believe that you did nothing, you, the manly, conscientious family head. It is beyond them to conceive of two monsters in one household, even if they manage to conceive of the first.

I cannot hate. I am no more capable of hate than I am of love. My feelings for you and your departed wife go beyond those paltry labels. My feelings about *anything* in this miserable world are either so strong or so weak that they are imperceptible. Most of the time, I feel absolutely nothing, not even bitterness. I have planned revenge, brooded for years over a suitable punishment. I have wished for time machines and other magic, so that I could spirit you back and force you to feel the agony, or even put you through the agony. I have thought of ruining your quiet retirement by going to the press, hoping that the good citizens, your neighbours, would then hound you out of town.

But the press wouldn't believe me, and the neighbours wouldn't believe what they read even if the story got into print. Human beings are not monsters, not in this part of the world.

And there is no magic. Time machines are science fiction and witches would probably take her side anyway, and refuse to help me. So, rest easy, father, there will be no revenge; I could not threaten you even if I wanted to.

Nonetheless, it could be that my existence is your punishment. The fact that I have survived your woman's torture, have lived to tell the tale, point the finger and damn your eyes, shall be your punishment. I will survive you. I live on only to put on my most colourful outfit and dance on your grave.

When you die, I will know there is a god.

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