

THE CHILD VERSUS

The child sees daddy and runs to hug. His head is full of something joyfully thick. He hasn't seen daddy in so long. And here he is in the grass on that blanket, the one with lines and stripes and colors from light to dark. The child's head is hot and excited. He's never had so much energy and mommy is yelling at him to stop. He is not going to stop, not even when he hears her voice get shrill like she really means it.

And then she says it, "I really mean it this time! Louis Allen Kinquier!"

He will be in trouble. But maybe not when she sees it's daddy. Then maybe she will be excited too.

There was a time when the child saw daddy every night. When daddy came home from work the child would dump whatever he was working on and run to hug and kiss and be picked up. Daddy and him had a good time together and he knew his daddy missed him. Who wouldn't miss such great evenings spent playing and eating, relaxing until bedtime? Sometimes he could talk daddy into a game while mommy watched some "mushy" show. He and daddy would groan and gag when someone would kiss or say something mushy. It was hilarious. No one could argue they didn't have a great time together, daddy and the child.

These days daddy went on business trips or was at his new apartment or at work. It wasn't fair. It was bullshit. Mommy said life wasn't fair, but still. She said life was bullshit. Didn't daddy love him? Wasn't he a good boy, like, all of the time twenty-four seven? Basically, he was.

He thought every night as he fell asleep about living at daddy's apartment and waking up early and going to work with him. They would do a bunch of work and laugh the whole time. Their boss would tell he and daddy to do things and they would do them faster than anyone else. "Build a computer!" the boss would shout and Louis and daddy would be all like, "Easy," and build a computer in five minutes.

When they were done working the boss would give them each a stack of money and they'd get pizza on the way home. They'd play the pinball machines until they were out of money. Maybe there'd be a game to watch or a game to play when they got home. It was a great life he pictured before falling asleep every night.

When he told kids at school about his plan to live and work with his daddy they giggled and said "no way" to the whole scenario. "You can't work with your dad," they'd say. But he could, he knew, because this was America and anyone can do whatever they want in America. "Not if it's weird," one kid said.

"You can do whatever you want in America except be weird?"

"My moms always tells me to stop being weird."

"Not my mom and guess what?" and after asking this, the child fell onto his back and began convulsing and then he stood and convulsed and stuck his tongue out and let spit fly everywhere as he spun. The other kid grimaced and yelled for him to stop and when he did he said, "Being weird in America. Because I can."

The child didn't know why kids' parents were telling them not to be weird and other dumb things. One kid wasn't even allowed to say the pledge of allegiance or celebrate her own birthday. This was America and his daddy told him he was free and could do what he wanted in America. He didn't understand why other kids' parents were so dumb about it.

That morning mommy took him out of school. She came into his classroom pushing the stroller with the baby in it. Mommy is always trying to get him to look at the baby and play with her but it's like, why? The baby is dumb and boring. He didn't understand why his mommy was bringing the baby into his class but she did and she told Mrs. Heron, "Louis is coming with me." Mrs. Heron was all like, "You're more than welcome to take him but we do have a procedure to take your child home early. You may want to stop by the office and..." blah, blah, blah. Mommy rolled her eyes like she did when the child asked if she could see if daddy wanted to come over to play. They left the classroom except the child forgot his dinosaur and his car. Mommy wouldn't go back for them. He pitched a little fit as they walked out of the

school, a fit he thought was reasonable. The car and dinosaur were right back in there and they were important. It would take only one second. But mommy was in one of her rushing around moods and she walked stone-faced, clutching the child like a caveman drags a club.

Mommy stopped to use a bathroom and she told him to watch the baby. They were at a park. The child watched the baby, who stared at him and tossed her arms and legs around. "Where ya wanna go?" he asked her. "What da ya wanna do?" She just looked at him and threw her limbs around like she didn't know what she was doing. "What the fuck are you doing?" he asked her in a whisper. She smiled at him and he began laughing hysterically. She liked that word just like her big bro.

As he laughed he thought about being weird and began to convulse for his baby sister. He shook and spit. She laughed which made him laugh and he began to realize she liked him which made him like her. He kissed her and she got serious. He spit in her face and she looked serious and then squealed and laugh He laughed too and began to spin in circles to show her what her big brother could do when he saw the blanket.

The blanket was an Indian blanket. His dad had bought it when they went to Mexico and the child had used it as a blanket that same night. They were renting a house on the beach and sleeping outside. The colors of the blanket were so sharp, from white to black and a lot of bold colors in between. He counted and named the colors as he fell asleep that night. His daddy was snoring next to him. They were on cots. It was his happiest memory. He always talked about it with kids at school.

After he saw the blanket the child saw the bald spot on the top of his dad's head and began to run. That's when his mommy began yelling at him and he knew she was really mad. She'd been more and more mad since daddy left. She was always in bathrooms while he watched the baby and then she was always rushing around and yelling about people they saw and knew. He just thought his mommy hated everyone. It was okay, this was America, but still.

“Daddy!” he screams and topples onto his daddy. His daddy cries out and grabs him too hard and it hurts. He looks at his daddy’s gray whiskers and his daddy looks at the child.

“Louis! Jesus, kid, you scared the crud outta me. What are you doing out here?”

His daddy puts the child on his back on the blanket and tickles him.

“No. no-no-no, daddy, no!” he squeals and tries to get away. He does and runs into the grass before spinning around and waiting for daddy to come and grab him.

He sees his daddy laughing and there is another kid on the blanket and some lady. He didn’t see them before. The child smiles and waits for his daddy but his daddy just sits there grinning at him. “Come on, daddy, come on!”

The other kid begins to cry and the child’s daddy looks at the kid instead of him. “What’s wrong, Thomas?”

“I don’t like him,” the kid squeals, pointing at the child.

The child walks onto the blanket and presses his hand into the kid’s face until the kid cries out and falls over. He pushes over, drags the kid off of the blanket and into the grass. The lady grabs the child’s arm and he bites her. She screams and the child’s daddy grabs him and yells at him like he’s never been yelled at before. His mommy is there yelling something as well, pushing the stroller over. All of the grown-ups are yelling and he doesn’t know what any of them are saying, blah, blah, blah.

“What are you doing here, Diane?”

“Oh, please Donald, it’s a free country. I didn’t know, okay? I didn’t know. How would I know you’d be here? What’s the big deal.”

“Because I told you. Yesterday. Remember? I said we’d be here having a picnic if you wanted to come by with the baby and you told me to go fuck myself. Remember that? Why isn’t Louis in school?”

The baby begins to cry. The child is holding his daddy and staring angrily at the other kid as he listens to the grown ups yell too much.

“He was sick. I had to go pick him up.”

“And then you just had to come here, to the park I told you I was coming to?”

“It’s on the way home!”

“Not really.”

“Kinda! And you invited me, so...Agh!”

“I didn’t want to spring this on Louis like this. He’s confused, he’s lashing out now. I told you, you are so selfish, Diane.”

“I’m selfish. Why are you keeping your new little secret family from him? Waiting for the right time my ass. This isn’t my fault, Donald.”

“It never is, is it?”

“Agh!”

“What’s wrong with you, Diane? Stop screaming. Please. You look insane, you know that? Your eyes are all bloodshot?”

“Yeah? So?”

“Are you okay? A little hungover, perhaps?”

“I’m fine, you fucking prick. Louis, let’s go. Come on.”

“No! I’m not leaving. I want to see daddy.” The child nestles into his daddy’s arms.

“Louis, this is daddy’s family now! Get your ass up, we’re leaving.”

“Diane!”

The child’s mommy is trembling. She is sweating profusely and speaking through clenched teeth, “Fuck you both. Fuck you all!”

She walks over and picks the child up and the child cries and kicks in frustration, kicks his daddy on accident.

“Ow. Louis!”

His daddy lets go of him and his mommy struggles to hold his writhing body. The child’s shirt is scrunched up to his neck and he has his tongue out spitting.”

"I hate you, mommy, I hate you!" he cries.

His daddy stands up. "Put him down, Diane! I'll call the police if I have to. You're a mess."

"Put me down! Put me down!" the child screams. He kicks his mommy and she drops him, which is startling but doesn't hurt. He scrambles up and runs to the blanket, embracing his daddy's waist. He sobs into his daddy's shirt, doesn't want to see his mommy right now.

"Diane. I'll watch him. Why don't you go get some rest. Please. I don't want this to get any worse."

He peeks a look at his mommy when she doesn't respond. The child's heart breaks. His mommy is lying in the grass vibrating. She is crying and shaking and the child feels terrible but is angry at his mommy and wants her to be sad.

"Go away, mommy," he says.

His mommy sits up and looks up at him. He's never seen her this sad before. He cries harder and buries his face in daddy's shirt. The lady on the blanket rubs his back. Maybe she is his new mommy.

"Diane."

"It's okay, baby. She'll be alright. I hope we can meet properly sometime, Diane."

"Diane, I'll bring him home later!"

"Baby. Stop yelling. We should keep Louis for a while until she can get some help."

His mommy stands up, shaking and hunched over. "Shutup, you old bag. You're gonna need help soon if you stay with his emotionally abusive asshole. Fuck you, Donald."

The child watches his mommy walk away sniffing with the stroller. He feels relief. He sits up and begins fiddling with frayed ends of the Indian blanket. His daddy strokes his head. The other kid is in his mommy's lap, sniffing.

"You alright, bud?"

"Yeah, daddy."

"Is your mommy being nice to you?"

"She's mad. I like Chloe now, dad."

"You do? She's very cute, isn't she?"

"Yea. And I made her laugh, so that's pretty cool."

"I believe it. You're a funny kid. You're a great big brother."

"Maybe I am now. But before I wanted her to die."

"Louis. That's terrible. You don't want your baby sister to die."

"Not anymore. Now, I kinda wish mommy would."

"No, honey. We don't want anyone to die."

The child did, though. He thought about people dying a lot. His daddy, some mean kids at school, mommy, everybody. He thought about himself dying too and wondered if his parents would care so much. They had other people to take care of, other people to love them. Maybe he was too weird for them. Even in America.

The child's daddy tells the child to get up so he does and his daddy goes to the cooler and takes a beer out and a ziploc bag full of sandwiches. The child looks at the lady who is smiling at him and stroking the kid's head. The kid is sucking his thumb and staring at him too.

"Don't look at me," he tells the kid.

"Hey!" his daddy yells, "You be nice to Steven."

"I don't even know Steven."

"You'll get to know him. And this is Leanne. You'll get to know her too."

"Why are they looking at me?"

"Because we like you, honey. We'd like to get to know you."

The child stands on the blanket and stick his hands in his pockets, sighs. He wishes it was just him and daddy here on the Indian blanket. They'd laugh and play and have such a good time. He pulls something out of his pocket, one of his mommy's white candies he stole. He like to steal her candies sometimes. They're gross but mommy eats them all the time so he steals them sometime to see if they're

good but they never are. He puts the candy in his mouth and chews and it's bitter and gross. He looks at the people smiling at him, scrunching his face. Slowly but surely he starts to turn his body in circles.