

4000 Words

I LOVE YOU DADDY

“Class, this is Jesse Bellway. Say hello everyone,” said Ms. Cavender.

The fifth grade class answered back, “Hi, Jesse,” with one boy adding loudly, “I thought Jesse was a boy’s name.” Most of the other kids laughed.

Jesse stood shyly, looking at the floor.

“That’s enough. Go ahead and take a seat in that empty desk, Jesse. Derek, you know we don’t tease in this class. Five points from your section,” which was followed by a groan. Jesse carefully navigating between the tight rows of desks. She gave a weak smile to the kids around her new home, then mostly stared at her new desk.

Warning bells were sounding and Ms. Cavender immediately suspected abuse. Jesse seemed to flinch whenever another student spoke. Her light blue dress was pretty, but old fashioned. She wondered if the long length was hiding bruises. She observed Jesse all that week. She looked for the classic signs of abuse: insecurity, being withdrawn, avoiding eye contact. Of course, those are also signs of a new student. But, something wasn’t right. On Thursday, Jesse seemed a bit more relaxed when it was time for art. Jesse seemed to be enjoying herself when Ms. Cavender came up to look at her drawing.

“Are those your sisters and brothers?” asked Ms. Cavender.

Jesse replied, “I don’t have no sisters or brothers,” and continued drawing.

“We say I don’t have ‘any’ sisters or brothers. So, who are the other kids?”

The drawing was a bunch of children on the lower part of a hill. A man was standing on the top of the hill. Everyone seemed happy except for the man, a yellow crayon sun was shining above.

“They’re my friends from before. My dad and me... we move around a lot.”

“Oh, what does your father do?”

Jesse was visibly puzzled. “I don’t really know. I never think about that. He works under cars sometimes.”

“Oh, a mechanic. How about your mom?”

“I don’t really want to talk about that,” replied Jesse.

Ms. Cavender was afraid to go too deep with a new student, “Okay, maybe later. You’re very talented, Jesse. Can I hang that drawing on the wall of honor?”

Jesse burst into a bright smile, “Oh, oh sure! Thanks Ms. Cavender.”

Ms. Cavender’s constant yellow alert turned bright red when she saw Jesse’s father that Friday, while directing the parents that were picking up students. He was driving an old grey primer pickup truck. Her attention was caught because he seemed to be staring right at her. As he crept up through the orderly line of cars, Mr. Cavender was sure of it. She prided herself on not judging anyone, to look past appearances, but something about this man was wrong.

He didn’t try to hide his staring, the gaze broken only by Jesse, “Over here, dad!” Jesse said brightly, waving her arm.

She had come up behind Ms. Cavender, but she tried to hide the fact that Jesse had startled her, “Oh, I didn’t notice you there. You going to show your dad your award for art?”

Jesse nodded happily. Jesse was talented, and Ms. Cavender thought it was important for Jesse’s self-confidence. The other kids had all shunned her. Jesse got into the truck and slammed the door with a rusty groan, “Daddy! I got a prize for my art, look!”

As the truck rolled by, Ms. Cavender clearly heard a gruff dismissal, “Uh-huh,” was all he said, and stared back at Ms. Cavender. She decided to find out about this Mr. Bellway. She went

straight to Mrs. Miller in attendance. There had been new privacy rules put in place recently, so there was only so much she could find out. But Mrs. Miller was her best bet, “Hey Barb, I need to look up some info on a new student. Can you help me?”

Barbara Miller had been in the school district for thirty three years and knew how to swim through the complex bureaucracy, “Well, you know about the new rules, right? Well, they just added another layer of new-new rules. But I think I can help you out. Pull up a chair.”

Ms. Cavender watched as Mrs. Miller deftly got her the information, “It’s printing now. Not much, really. Past schools and a few past addresses.”

That’s exactly what it was, but Ms. Cavender thought it was enough to start. She went home feeling uneasy for a reason she couldn’t quite define. What was she so worried about? She went over it in her head and possible abuse added up: The clothes that always covered her so well, the over-excitement to see her dad. Those were both classic signs of abuse, but they were also sign of a regular parent that didn’t know how to dress his little girl. She didn’t have proof that anything was wrong. Just a feeling... and that creepy stare.

She got home and set to work. She didn’t know what she was looking for exactly. The records only went back a few years to when Jesse must have been around seven, and in third grade. They had lived in the greater Los Angeles area, and before that they had moved from Susan Valley, California. *Where is that?* Thought Ms. Cavender, It sounds vaguely familiar.

She opened her laptop and notices the stack of papers she had put beside her. *They are not going to grade themselves*, she chided herself. It was Friday, though. They could wait until tomorrow. *Isn’t that what your students say to you?* She mentally argued with herself for a few more minutes, but decided her new obsession was more important. If that poor little girl really was being hurt, she had to know and report it.

She search the internet for his name first, Timothy Bellway. A few names came up. He wasn’t on any social media. She scrolled through pages and pages of internet Bellways until the

search yielded stranger and stranger things, “I will never get how these search engines work,” she commented to herself as the searches started offered up totally unrelated things, like liver foundations and PDF files on how to make furniture, “totally random,” she said out loud.

She next searched for Susan Valley, still not remembering what made it sound familiar. Then it struck with a cold chill that went all the way to her little toes: The little boy in the wall. In Susan Valley, not two years before, the body of a little boy had been found among rubble between two brick walls. The boy was found eight days after he’d gone missing. He’d been strangled, but his body also had puncture wounds.

Ms. Cavender absently put her hand over her mouth as she made herself finish the online article. She had enough, she thought, and closed her laptop, “My God,” she said aloud.

Then her mind refused to make any connection. *Oh, come on, he’s not a serial killer, for god’s sake. That just doesn’t happen in real life.* But she knew it did. She had been a teacher in California schools for more than eight years and knew what evil could lurk around ordinary corners. She’d only taught at two different schools, mentally thanking God she had not witnessed any school shootings.

She had seen abuse though. Unfortunately, she had three students as young as five who were being abused. In two cases, the kids were taken away. One family fled with the little boy to another state before charges were brought. She quickly opened her laptop. She knew she was just being paranoid, but she checked the date of the murder and the dates that the Bellways had lived there. Another chill rushed through her when the dates matched up.

Ms. Cavender tried to distract herself with mindless television, but her mind kept focusing on Timothy Bellway and the boy in the wall. Then she got the call around 10 pm Saturday night.

She was engrossed with her favorite hospital drama, so she was mildly annoyed when she saw her mother was calling. She paused the TV, and snatched up her phone when she realized what time it was, “Mom? Are you alright?”

“Oh my God, are you? Are you home, are you safe?”

“I’m watching my DVR. Mom, I’m fine. What’s happened?”

“My God, just turn on the news. I can’t believe this could happen...”

Her mother trailed off, but she was still on the phone when Ms. Cavender saw the body bag on channel four. Then another being taken out, then another.

“M... Mom, what happened...?”

But before her mother could answer, the TV answered for her, “...Reports are still coming in. The police are busy questioning witnesses. From what our sources tell us, the theater was fairly empty tonight, with only five people attending movie theater number three. The police will not confirm how many have died, but from what we’ve seen here tonight, we don’t expect any survivors.”

“Oh my god, mom. Someone killed people in a movie theater? Did they get the guy? Did he shoot himself?”

Her mom was still emotional, “I don’t know dear. Channel 11 is saying that all five are dead. He cut their... I can’t dear. I’m sorry. He used a knife. They haven’t caught him.”

“It’s okay mom. I just can’t believe it. That theater is only ten minutes away. I go there all the time. Do they have his description?”

“No, I don’t think so. I haven’t seen a sketch, or security camera video or anything. Hundreds of people are in and out of those theaters. This one has, what, twelve or sixteen different theaters?” asked her mom, clearly bewildered by the events.

“Yeah...” added Ms. Cavender, “...and each theater must have four exits each. This is horrible. Is dad okay?”

“Oh, yes. He just keeps shaking his head and saying the world’s going to hell...”

“Well, it is,” she heard her dad say in the background.

“Tell dad I think you are safe up there in Washington. I have to go, mom. I’ll call you tomorrow. I’m... I’m a little shaken up.”

“Ok dear, make sure your doors and windows are locked. Do you want to come up here for a while? You have vacation time...”

“Sorry mom, I will stay safe, but I think my students will need me on Monday. If they don’t cancel classes, that is. Love you mom, give Dad a hug for me.”

Her mother reluctantly let her go, making sure to mention her old bedroom was always ready for her. She smiled. She loved her parents, but she had her own life now. She always kept the doors and window locked in her apartment, but she checked them anyway.

Ms. Cavender was surprised she could sleep that night, but she finally did. She didn’t watch any more news. They would just be repeating the same facts. The 24 news cycle can only get new facts so fast. She had uneasy dreams she could not remember, and was anxious all of Sunday.

The news was not good. Four people had died, and only one was expected to live. There were few witnesses to anything: it was fall, and the theaters were mostly empty. The fall Oscar-worthy films never drew the same numbers as the family-friendly summer action flicks.

The victims all had their throats slit. The killer had apparently started from the back and made his way to the front of the theater, quietly killing victim by victim. It was a man in the first row that had survived. The cleanup crew had assumed the others were sitting there, waiting through the credits. The poor teenage worker saw the man at the front of the seats, clutching his throat. They say he was the only one that fought the attacker. Now he was in a coma and only time would tell if he lived.

Was it Timothy Bellway? She picked up her phone frequently that Sunday. Mostly to check for text messages about what the school district would do about classes. But a few times she considered calling the police. *And tell them what?* She asked herself. That a creepy dad who moved

into town recently might be... wait. Jesse had just started school, but it said that she and her dad lived in Susan Valley about a year ago. Where had they been in between?

Ms. Cavender tried to check out each city between Susanville and her part of California, but by ten o'clock that night she was too tired. She had forgotten how big California was; so many towns. She remembered driving from her parent's house in Washington state all the way down to Mexico her last summer in college. The top of California to the bottom was an eighteen hour drive straight through. Wherever Jesse and her father had been, it would remain their secret.

She had already gotten a text and an e-mail from the school; there would be half days all week in respect for the horror show. Special councilors would be available to any student that needed them. Before Ms. Cavender went to bed, she thought, *what about the adults?*

The next day was the strangest of her teaching career. She realized that this must be what it's like after a school shooting; everyone was numb. There were a special few that seemed undisturbed by anything life threw at them. A few others caught themselves laughing, and realized they shouldn't. Only boy was absent, apparently related to one of the victims at the theater. The person that seemed most affected was Jesse. It may have been that Ms. Cavender kept too close an eye on her, but something was definitely wrong. Jesse was wearing long sleeves. It was fall, but in her part of California, fall was just an extension of summer and too warm for long sleeves.

When it was time for art, she casually came to Jesse. She seemed to using only dark colors and nothing in her picture was recognizable. It was just dark swirls, "Feeling sad today, Jesse?" she sat beside her, "we have counselors you could talk to."

Jesse kept looking at her paper, still swirling, "That's okay. Thank you Ms. Cavender."

Ms. Cavender didn't want to do more harm than good, so she left it at that. But she asked Jesse to stay just after the bell rang.

Jesse looked confused, looking around at the other kids, who barely glanced at her anymore.

When the class was empty, Jesse said, "I gotta go. Daddy will be mad."

Ms. Cavender stopped her with her voice, “That’s what I want to talk to you about. Jesse, does your daddy hurt you?”

Jesse stopped dead, clutching her backpack in her arms, “No...! I mean, no... my daddy loves me...” she said, but made no effort to move.

“I’m sure he does love you, but some parents don’t know how to show love. Does he hurt you?”

“Daddy loves me. He says I’m bad, but...”

“Jesse, may I see your arms?”

The girl seemed afraid, “What? No... sorry, I have to go...”

“Jesse, please roll up your sleeves right now,” Ms. Cavender said, standing in front of the door.

Jesse looked at the floor, tears suddenly bursting out, and she wept as she put her backpack on the ground in front of her. She slid up her long sleeves. Black and blue marks appeared, and the sobbing got worse. Ms. Cavender tried to stay strong for Jesse, while inside she was sobbing along with the girl.

“He just grabbed me hard... how... how did you know...?” Jesse managed through sobs.

Ms. Cavender came to Jesse and hugged her. She knew what the school board might think of that, but right now she had to hold this girl. She whispered, “Because, my daddy used to hurt me too, Jesse.”

Her eyes looked pained and confused, “But, you don’t understand...he...” was all she could say through the sobs.

She let Jesse cry for a few minutes, holding her. When she thought the time was right, she asked quietly, “Does he hurt you in other ways?”

Jesse hesitated for what seemed like a long time, “He punishes me. Sometimes he makes me... he makes me clean up.”

“You mean clean the house? Or clean your room?”

Jesse barely managed, “He makes me clean up the blood... sometimes.”

Ms. Cavender froze, still holding Jesse. Instead of panic, the horrible implications beginning to unfurl. She knew what she had to do, “Jesse, we’re leaving now. Get your backpack. I am taking you to a friend who will help.”

“But daddy...”

“Come on, right now Jesse.”

They left the classroom, and the next little while was a blur as she drove Jesse to get help. Ms. Cavender realized as soon as she got in the car that she had left her cell phone in her desk. Her friend was a librarian at a small building that housed a research library. Only a few research students ever went there. It was quiet, and she would call the police from there.

Jesse was quiet on the drive over. As Ms. Cavender hoped, there were only a few cars in the parking lot. She took Jesse in the back door that led from a hallway into a series of small offices. Jesse silently obeyed the gentle directions to sit in the office and wait. She clutched her backpack, but Ms. Cavender noticed she was looking around the office. At least she was focusing on something real, something beyond the horrors she must have seen.

Her kind friend was there, almost waiting as though they were expected. In the next office Ms. Cavender explained what Jesse had told her. The librarian shook her head quietly, empathizing with the nightmares this little girl must have been through.

“Hi honey, I’m the librarian here. Ms. Cavender has a phone call to make. And I think there is a section of our library you’d like to see. Would you like to see some big books about art? They have beautiful pictures.” Jesse didn’t say anything, but her face seemed to light up. She nodded cautiously, as though their kindness might be a trick.

“Go with the librarian, Jesse,” Ms. Cavender said as they all walked into the hallway that led from the offices into to the main part of the library, “I need to make a call to get you some help, okay.”

Again, Jesse nodded silently as the librarian led her through the door, “You will have to be quiet, though, we have a few college students that are studying,” and they disappeared through the door.

Immediately, the door to the outside flew open. She froze as Jesse’s father stood there.

“Where is my daughter?” he said calmly, moving toward her.

She instinctively backed up toward the other side of the hallway, barely breathing, putting herself between the man and the door that led to Jesse, “I’ve already called the police. You need to leave now.”

“You have no right. Where is she? This is not your business.”

She marshalled all of her strength, “I will not let you hurt her...” her back to the door now.

He didn’t advance, but looked worried. She expected an angry rush to the door, but instead he ran his hands through his hair, “Hurt her? She has to know when she...she... I know it’s not her fault. It’s just, only I can...”

“No, it’s not her fault! How dare you! She’s just a little girl, she’s not responsible for what you’ve done” She felt her heartbeat in her ears as she pressed harder against the door, wanting to launch at him, imagining he was the father she never forgave.

He looked confused and angry at the same time. He took a few steps toward her, “I knew she shouldn’t go to school. It was too soon...” and his anger seemed to just drain away. He appeared almost to deflate like a balloon, as he sat down in the middle of the hallway, “I thought I could protect her, I thought as long as we were together it couldn’t happen again. She likes you, you know. You’re the first teacher that even noticed her. I had to keep her out of school so much, but thank god I make her carry that cell phone...” he trailed off.

Cold sweat beaded down Ms. Cavender's back, "That's how you found us?" she said, trying to stall for time.

He stood up suddenly, "Wait. Wait, where is she right now?"

"I won't tell you..."

He looked in her eyes with a mixture of darkness and heartache, "She was doing better..."

"She'll be a lot better when she's far away from you," Ms. Cavender's anger flared, memories of her father flooding back.

The man burst into tears, looking around, "But she will be safe, right, away from other people?" He looked up, his eyes almost pleading, "Is... is anyone else here?"

Ms. Cavender was confused, "She will finally be with other children her own age, hopefully placed with a good family."

The man suddenly stood up, "No, no they can't. She has to stay alone, or watched. I... I was only in the bathroom for a few minutes. She said she'd be good, I thought she was watching the movie. But she can't be alone with other people..."

Ms. Cavender didn't know what to say, but knew she had to get away from this man. She turned the knob to the main library, hoping she could find a phone in there.

The man looked confused, "No, wait, don't. She needs me. We should wait for the police..."

Ms. Cavender rushed through the door, closing it behind her. Luckily it locked from her side. The man banged on the door, shouting, "Wait for the police. Please!"

Ms. Cavender needed to find a phone. He was still banging on the door when she spotted the phone on the desk only a few feet away. She glanced around and only saw one student at a nearby table. She went to the phone. The banging continued, even louder. She began to dial and realized the student didn't seem alarmed by the commotion.

She put down the phone.

The thoughts clicked into place, her mind fighting the truth. She approached the student in the chair, sitting at a strange angle. She didn't need to get too close, she saw the bloody footprints leading away. The throbbing continued in her ears, the rushing blood pounding. She followed the tapering red trail and noticed a college aged girl face down on another table. She told herself that the girl might have been taking a nap.

Ms. Cavender couldn't run. Her mind wouldn't face the reality any faster than a walk. She barely registered that Jesse's father had broken the door in, and was coming her direction. She noticed that Jesse's backpack was open. But all she could focus on was how calm Jesse was, flipping through the book, red fingers marking each page. The knife set neatly next to the book. The librarian was laid out on the floor at her feet, also not taking a nap.

"Oh Jesse," her father said as he came to her.

Her face brightened, "Hi daddy! Oh, sorry," she lowered her voice, almost giggling, "we have to be quiet here..."

The man went on one knee, quietly sobbing, "Jesse, you've been bad again."

Jesse looked up, then looked as though she'd just noticed, "Oh no, daddy, I'm... I'm sorry. Do I have to clean it up again? I'm sorry. I love you daddy."

END