

The Landlord

It's taken six decades for me to figure out definitively, once for all, that my father was an asshole. I think my mother knew it in the 60's and 70's. Maybe she knew earlier.

There were a lot of telltale signs, but when you are eight, or ten, or twelve, how can you know? If you knew, would you care? Your father, after all, is your father.

When my father makes fun of my first-grade story because I misspell a word, I figure I'll never be a writer. When he takes credit for me being asked to read an original poem to the school assembly in fourth grade at the school where he works as assistant principal, I figure my writing has no value. When he derides the idea that writers do 'real' work, I get busy at anything else. I learn to paint rooms, pull wires, turn wrenches, hammer nails. Real work with visible results. Results that benefit my father, the landlord.

At age eight, I am locked in a dank basement apartment with overpowering smells of pine oil cleaner and fresh paint. I labor to push a roller on a stick up and down, the way my father showed me briefly, before admonishing me to 'work hard', 'pretend you are a man'. I work to apply a coat of Pittsburg Plate Glass's least expensive lead-based oil paint to discolored walls. I squint with eight-year-old, myopic eyes under the light of a single, forty-watt bulb that dangles in the middle of the room. A home fashioned work light stands to the right of the door. My father set it off limits. I am not allowed to use the two-hundred-watt floodlight. The roller makes a kiss, kiss, kiss, up the wall and back down. My voice repeats a rhythmic mantra in time with the hypnotic, wet-lipped slurp of the roller, "You missed a spot, stupid. Go back and do that again, idiot. You got it wrong."

I hurry with my work as best as untrained limbs can. Pushing, pulling, dipping the roller, carefully replenishing the roller pan with seafoam green paint from an open container in the corner of the room.

My father said he was going to the hardware store. He didn't say when to expect his key in the lock at the other end of the apartment, three steps below grade. So, I paint. I finish the wall he started 'to show you how'. When this is done, I begin the second wall, the third, the fourth. I feel pleased.

While I'm busy with the walls my father is busy in one of the other apartments a half mile away, collecting rent. It's an ad hoc, barter arrangement. The tenant doesn't turn tricks, but she does have a small, feral group of children. They are ages four to nine, three in total. The oldest child charged with the care of the youngest.

The children kick a half-deflated ball around a sand and gravel yard while their mother pays her portion of the rent with her back to sagging bedsprings. At forty-three, my father sweats and humps arrhythmically. The woman is twenty-four with breasts that have nursed four babies and assorted men, starting with the uncle that raped her when she was fourteen. Three of the four children she has birthed, live. My father doesn't know or care about her children.

The tenant is unimpressed with my father's labored grunting. She looks away when he grabs the ring at the base of his deflating penis. The flaccid organ threatens to leak when he slides off the lamb intestine prophylactic. My father is old school.

For her part, the woman gathers the sheet between her legs and wipes a smear of KY jelly from her thigh. She sits on the edge of the bed and adjusts a denim halter top. Ample breasts tension the knot behind her neck. Her skirt, knee length gingham, drops

into place as she stands. Her matted hair is a striking shade of reddish blond with auburn roots.

The woman's six-year-old daughter beats on the apartment door and yells. Her older half-brother keeps pinching her little titties. While my father zips his pants and moves to the bathroom to flush the condom, the tenant hollers through the door, "well, if he pinches you again, kick him in the nuts. You have to learn to do for yourself."

The tenant was fifteen, homeless, and pregnant with her first child when she learned that hard lesson for herself. Food stamps and welfare checks only go so far when childcare payments don't come through. She has no family to call on. Sure, she has an uncle and a father, but she never wants to see that son-of-a-bitch uncle or her father after the bastard kicked her out for getting knocked-up. She caught a bus from Lynchburg to Richmond and learned to do for herself.

The first few times she paid rent to my father this way she acted a little, a moan, as though my father had touched what makes a woman quiver. A couple of months earlier the landlord came by when she was on her period, crampy, not in the mood to tolerate him. My father tells her he doesn't like the way she gives head, only a fuck will cover the rent. She lets him go to it and cleans up the blood later. From that time, she distracts herself when he comes to do it. She makes two weeks rent in minutes.

She hears my father piss and wash his hands. When he comes out of the bathroom, she asks, "we good?" My father nods by way of reply and walks past her to the door and away from her nothing life.

This arrangement will continue until the week after my father sees her walking, hand-in-hand with a black man in green fatigues and two chevrons on his sleeve. My

father goes by her apartment and casually places an eviction letter in her mailbox. It is typed and signed by my mother.

I knew none of this. I only knew, as I sat on a urine scented couch in a room adjacent to the freshly painted one, that the afternoon shadows are growing in an already dim basement apartment. I consider turning on the hot, two-hundred-watt work light my father has constructed from half-inch copper tubing. He told me not to touch it because it is not grounded. I could get shocked.

I sat hoping my father will bring a Hostess Ding-Dong. Sometimes he brings one when a trip to the hardware store takes longer than he thinks it might. He has been gone so long I consider asking for a Yoo-Hoo and a Ding-Dong on the way home. I consider leaving the basement apartment and climbing upstairs to the Kestner's apartment to ask if I can use their phone. I did that once before. Even though I clearly remember how angry my father had gotten when my mom asked him where he had gone, I am beginning to worry he may have had an accident. If he had, I reason, someone would let my mom know. Before I can decide, I hear the leaf springs on his old work car creak into the driveway. I see the Dodge's rear fin slide past the windowsill like a shark at the shoreline.

I become excited. With all the real work I've done while he was gone, I know he will be proud of me. This time, some crumb of praise will fall from his lips where I can grovel it up.

Above grade, the driver's door slams. My father's feet thump heavily, descending the steps to the basement entry. A ring of keys jangle against the door. He turns the cylinder and enters. I spring up from the couch and move to the door. My eight-year-old

legs ache from standing, painting walls all afternoon. I am not accustomed to long labor. Cramps tighten and slow me. I don't want to be caught sitting or I know daddy's first words will call out laziness. As he passes me, he notices the paint on my hands and shirt sleeves. His first words are, "A real painter gets the paint on the walls."

Under the dim, single corded bulb the room I have painted looks good. The roller left only an inch-wide strip in the corners and at the baseboards. My father will complete the painting with his own brush. I stand in the doorway behind my father as he enters my masterpiece. He gazes from wall to wall.

"You think you've done a good job? You've worked hard, I can see that" he said. It is a nugget of praise. I smile, grateful.

"Working hard and doing a good job aren't the same. Let's see if it's a good job," he says unwinding the cord to the floodlight. When he flips the switch the room blazes. He turns the light to the first wall. Roller streaks race up and down. In places the nicotine stained wall shows beneath fresh seafoam green. The new paint looks minty in the glare. Four, five, eight places on the first wall, my father points, and comments.

The ache moves from my legs to my heart.

My father shifts to the next wall and merely points with his index and middle fingers outstretched. My smile dissolves. I hang my head like a dog by a shit pile on a carpet. I sink into self-loathing. My father's lips curl in the impish smirk of the boy he once was, the boy who sat with his playmates in 1934 and pulled the wings off flies.

He finishes his critique, flips off the hot light, and kneels in front of me.

Paternally, he grabs my shoulders and shakes them slightly. "You see, son? To do a good job, you need light. You can't see the mistakes without light."

I see the mistakes. It's taken decades to see them. I pray I haven't made the same ones.