

### Is It True?

It's not that I don't like my father's mother. It's not even that I mind visiting her every Saturday afternoon. It's just that today, on this particular Saturday, I don't want to go. My father's beginning to lose his patience with me; I can see the muscles in his jaw tighten.

"You have no choice," he finally says.

"But I want to stay home." I cross my arms at my chest and stamp my right foot on the carpeted floor.

He snarls back at me; something I don't understand, and walks away.

Things are not the same.

In the car, on the way over to my grandmother's flat, he drives slower than usual and keeps his eyes focused directly on the road in front of him, as though if he changes his line of vision the car will veer off the road and into an imaginary ditch.

He's not talking.

I press my forehead against the side window. It feels cool and smooth. Giant cotton-woolly clouds in so many shades of grey and white fly across the blueness of the sky, playing

peek-a-boo with the sun. I try concentrating on the passing scenery, struggling to remember the next intersection, the roads we'll turn down, the traffic lights we'll go through, before we're at my grandmother's. It's just a silly game I play.

Today I'm losing the game.

Is it true? I want to ask my father. Is it true she doesn't love me?

I look over at him. His mouth is set tight, thin-lipped and pale. Laugh lines—left-overs from another time—crease his cheeks from his nose to his mouth, and spread out from his eyes to his temples.

Does he feel my stare?

I turn away.

We are stopped now, stuck in a traffic jam as we come to the Heath. Toy sailboats race across the man-made pond by the road. Their owners cheer the boats on as the wind picks up, then guide them to shore with long wooden poles when the wind dies and the boats are becalmed. Behind the pond there's a scruffy, hilly plot of land where small children are queuing up for pony rides. As the traffic inches on, I can see the Punch and Judy show set up on a patch of asphalt, just beyond the pond. Children and adults are gathered around the puppet theater. They stand to watch, the smaller children hoisted on their fathers' shoulders. Everyone is clapping and laughing as we pass by. I don't understand their laughter. Perhaps I just don't understand Punch and Judy. It's the fighting—the startling, whacking sound of wood on wood, as they hit each other over the head with their tiny, puppet cricket bats—that frightens me.

Traffic eases up and we're moving again. Sometimes there are outdoor art shows set up on the wide pavement across the street from the pond. Today the pavement is empty. Now we're past the Heath and driving down the winding, hilly road that leads to the High Street.

My father parks the car outside my grandmother's block of flats on the Wedderburn Road.

"Come, let's go in and have some tea," he says, as though that were my reward for the silence I've allowed him on the way over.

He drapes his arm around my shoulder as we walk to her ground floor flat. It feels heavy, oppressive, like the too many unspoken words between us.

My grandmother opens the door for us. She pinches my left cheek and kisses my right, then kisses my father.

"You're late," she says to him. "Everyone is already here."

Everyone only means my uncle Willy, my auntie Liesl and their two sons, my cousins.

"Traffic was heavier than usual," he says, as we come into the dining room where they're all sitting around the table. I kiss my aunt and uncle hello. My uncle pinches my cheek between his index and middle fingers. I don't like him. He smiles with his mouth, not his eyes and although the brothers are very close, I have the feeling I mean nothing to him. Once we're settled at the table, conversation—amid the pouring of tea and the cutting of apple strudel and cheesecake—turns immediately to the Suez Canal and the problems of the Middle East.

I am surprised and confused that no one has asked where my mother is. Nothing feels right. I have the odd sensation of not belonging here, of being an imposter in this family ritual.

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Sunday morning I'm in the car again with my father. We have errands to run, lunch to buy. First, we go to Sam's Deli. I love the smell of pickles and smoked fish. Today my father decides on Frankfurters. Then, it's on to Grodzinski's, the bakery, for rye bread. My father pulls

a ten shilling note out of his pocket. He waits in the car while I sneak up in the queue to buy the bread. When I come back to the car, hungry from all those delicious smells, he says it's too early to go home.

“We'll go for a little drive,” he says.

It's alright with me because, deep down, I think he's going to talk to me, tell me the truth, untangle my confusion.

We set out for our drive, riding around London's northwest suburban streets. Every so often he stops the car in front of a house that has a 'for sale' sign outside it and asks me what I think of it. It's always a beautiful house, bigger than ours and on a more prestigious street.

“Are we going to buy it?” I say, as we get out of the car to look at one more closely.

“Of course not,” he says, “it's much too expensive.”

“Then why are we looking at it?”

“Because it interests me,” he snaps back.

I follow him around the outside of the empty house and peer in at the windows he peers in.

“I wish we could have it,” I say. “I bet Mummy would love it too.”

He moves on. At the next window, he shades his eyes against the sun that's just peeked out from behind a cloud.

The fenced back garden is big and overgrown. The grass almost reaches the wood swing that hangs from a large chestnut tree. Children lived here. I try to imagine them. I wonder why they moved away. I look up at the red brick house, at the bare windows, the panes crisscrossed with so many mullions, and try to guess which room was theirs, which their parents'. And then I wonder: Did their father also sleep alone on a couch in his study?

“Come on,” my father says. “Let’s go home and have some lunch.”

I have to run to catch up to him. He’s already on the driveway and walking towards the street where the car is parked.

On the way home, we’re sitting side by side again in the Daimler, silence once more between us. I don’t even try to play my game, I feel so odd inside, so strange and disappointed; as if it were my birthday and no one has remembered.

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It’s Monday and I’m sitting on the stairs, watching my mother at the front hall mirror. Her back is towards me. There are two suitcases by the door. The door is wide open. The beige carpeting is scratchy on the back of my bare legs. I look down at my shoes. I lick my finger and rub at the scuff marks on the toes. The brown leather darkens for a few seconds, and when it lightens, I try once more with another finger. But when it lightens again, I give up. I rest my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. This Monday it doesn’t seem to matter that I’m still in my school skirt. The old pair of woolly trousers I’m supposed to change into as soon as I’m home is draped over the desk chair in my room upstairs.

“You’ll see,” my mother says, looking at me through the mirror. “I’ll be back in no time flat.” She’s adjusting the sequined beret to the perfect angle on her head. Next, she shapes her mouth into an O, twists open the tube of lipstick she has pulled from her handbag, and reddens her lips.

A sudden draft whirls about me. I shiver. I wrap my arms around myself. A car’s impatient horn begins to hoot outside...once, twice. It’s the taxi she’s been waiting for. My mother is at the open door and holds up her hand. A moment, she mouths across the expanse of our front garden. Just one moment. She comes to me, takes my hands and pulls me up and into

her. My mother's body is warm. She moves her hands up and down my back, stroking me the way she does when we hug just before she tucks me in at night. I bury my face in the folds of her silky blouse and circle my arms around her waist. She pulls back, bends down to my height and stares into my face, then quickly turns from me. She puts on the matching navy jacket to her narrow skirt, picks up her suitcases and, without another word, walks out through the open front door. I watch her go down the driveway.

“Is it true?” I say quietly to myself.

She's getting into the taxi.

“Is it true?” I say again, this time yelling at the top of my lungs as the taxi starts up.

I watch the sequins on her beret through the cab's back window. They glint and wink in the sunlight.

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