

Mommy Takes the Tie to the Washing Machine

When Rachel arrives at the nursery school to pick up her daughter, Mrs. DeSoto meets her at the door. “I have the cutest thing for you,” Mrs. DeSoto says. “Or rather, Victoria does.” Over Mrs. DeSoto’s shoulder, Rachel can see Victoria in the play area, a gigantic leather purse slung over her arm. “Pretend you’re my baby,” Rachel hears her tell a little boy. He doesn’t look at her, engrossed as he is in rolling his truck up and down a stuffed bear. Victoria bends over and strokes his hair the way Rachel strokes Victoria’s. “Bye, honey,” Victoria says to him. “I’m going to the liquor store.”

This is my life, thinks Rachel. These days, she’s lucky if she can have one meaningful conversation a month, spending a morning at a Tupperware party down the street discussing the prospects of the ERA passing. Mrs. DeSoto is still talking, and Rachel nods as if she’s heard. She is tired and foggy, heavily pregnant and impatient to give birth, ready to have two kids already. Although truth be told, she is also dreading it. As her due date approaches, she is suddenly remembering how much work a newborn is, the crying, the lack of sleep, the spit up, the endlessness of diapering. Not only that, people keep telling her how much more work it is with two children. *Now* they tell her, now that this baby is so irrevocably coming. These thoughts can keep Rachel awake, even as Todd snores contentedly beside her. Everyone else is so excited about the baby. But Rachel worries. What will she do? Mothering Victoria alone is exhausting.

Mrs. DeSoto is still talking, and suddenly Victoria is there, also talking as she approaches, leaving half of her thought behind her in the play area. "...the library, Mommy?" is all Rachel hears. The play purse is still over Victoria's shoulder.

"Maybe," Rachel tells her. "Let's talk about it in the car." She reaches her hand out to stroke Victoria's hair, but her daughter has run off on an undisclosed mission. Victoria's pink Keds are untied and on the wrong feet, making her run like a pink and purple penguin. Rachel wants to laugh, but part of her worries that Mrs. DeSoto would disapprove. Victoria runs to her cubby and grabs a paper booklet, then stops in the play area to give another small girl the purse. She talks urgently for a few moments, and Rachel is sure her daughter is giving precise instructions about the handbag and its uses. Then she totters back to the doorway. "...for lunch, Mommy?" she is saying.

"Maybe," Rachel says. "Let's talk about it in the car."

Victoria thrusts her little book into her mother's hand. "Here, Mommy, I made this!" Rachel tucks the booklet into her purse.

"She worked really hard on it," Mrs. DeSoto says.

"I believe it," Rachel says.

They walk down the hallway toward the exit. "Mrs. DeSoto wouldn't let me write it myself," Victoria is saying. "But I wrote my name."

"You wrote your name?"

"I did! I wrote it!" Victoria runs down the hallway. "I'll open the door, Mommy! I'll open it for you!"

Victoria talks all the way to the car, a running commentary on her classmates and the purse, the dried leaves in the parking lot and her own shoes, which she put on all by herself. “I didn’t want Mrs. DeSoto to tie them, I wanted you to tie them, can you tie them, Mommy?”

“Sure,” Rachel says. “Let’s get you in the car so I can reach them.” Just as Victoria did, the baby is keeping her from doing all sorts of things – kneeling to tie shoes is just one of them.

The wind gusts for a moment, and a leaf scuttles across the asphalt in front of them. Victoria runs after it and jumps on it. “Look, Mommy!” she yells. She jumps on another leaf. “Mommy, look!”

“I see you, honey,” Rachel says. “You’re jumping on the leaves.” She isn’t sure if this is the response Victoria is looking for, but Victoria is chasing another leaf. Maybe it is. Maybe her daughter just wants the assurance that she is seen. Doesn’t everyone?

Victoria climbs into the car, and Rachel fastens the safety strap, so her daughter can stand and look out the window, but still be restrained in the back seat if there is an accident. Victoria sticks her foot out. “Shoes, Mommy!”

“Mommy, will you please tie my shoes?” Rachel suggests, positioning her daughter’s foot against her thigh.

“Mommy, will you please tie my shoes?” Rachel can feel Victoria’s hand patting her head. “I like your hair, Mommy.”

Rachel smiles down at Victoria’s foot. “Thank you, honey.” She ties the left shoe, trades it for her daughter’s right foot.

“Mommy, what’s the baby’s name?”

“We don’t know yet, honey. We have to wait until the baby comes out. It might be a brother, or it might be a sister. You never know until a baby is born.” The truth is, she and Todd are having trouble agreeing on names.

“Can we name it Racer?”

“Racer, huh?” Rachel asks. “Why do you want to name it Racer?”

“Cause it races so fast in your tummy.” Victoria isn’t wrong. The baby is restless, kicking fast and often. Racer seems as good a name as any. Rachel ponders synonyms – Speedy, Lightning, Mercury. Racer seems the best of the lot.

“Well, we have to talk to Daddy.” Let Todd be the bad guy on this one. “I think Daddy wants to see if the baby is a boy or a girl first.” On three separate occasions, Rachel has had elderly women stop her in the grocery store to tell her that she is carrying high and thus having a daughter. Todd thinks it’s ridiculous, but something in Rachel thinks these women are right. The baby feels female to her. It may be ridiculous to a man, she thinks, but Todd hasn’t carried a baby.

Victoria has moved on to another topic. “Can we have SpaghettiOs for lunch?”

Rachel finishes tying and stands up, putting her hands on Victoria’s head, a maternal blessing. “I think so,” she says. “I think we have a can at home.”

They listen to the radio on the way, “Let it Be,” the song released by the Beatles right after they broke up last year. “Letter ‘B,’” Victoria says from the back seat. “That’s the one like this, right, Mommy?” And in the rearview mirror, Rachel watches her daughter trace a giant capital B in the air.

They do have a can of SpaghettiOs, and Rachel lets Victoria stand on a chair at the stove to help stir. This is a fragile time of day, when Victoria is tired enough either to throw a huge tantrum or to fall asleep in the middle of the floor. Rachel has learned from experience the importance of keeping her daughter gently occupied long enough to eat before putting her down for a nap.

“Tommy doesn’t like SpaghettiOs,” Victoria tells her, staring down into the pot and stirring it with the wooden spoon. Tommy is the boy who lives across the street. He and Victoria ride their tricycles together in his driveway. “Why doesn’t he like SpaghettiOs, Mommy?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel says. “Everyone is different, Victoria. Everyone likes different things.”

“But we like SpaghettiOs,” Victoria says.

“We like them,” Rachel agrees. It is a partial truth. Victoria loves them; Rachel tolerates them. She much prefers the homemade sauces her mother or grandmother made, but she does like the convenience of a can of food. Open, dump, and heat. The perfect recipe for the exhausted pregnant woman. She writes a commercial in her head, one starring herself and her energetic, talkative daughter. “Open, dump, and heat!” she says brightly to the TV cameras.

“Leaves plenty of time afterwards to sit with your feet up!”

“We love SpaghettiOs, right, Mommy?!” her TV daughter says.

“We love them!” her TV self answers.

“I don’t want to cook anymore,” her real daughter says now. Her voice has a perilous whiny edge to it.

“They’re done,” says Rachel. “Climb down.”

“I want you to put me down, Mommy!” Victoria holds her hands up.

Rachel turns off the burner and takes bowls out of the cupboard. “As soon as the baby comes, I’ll be able to pick you up as much as you want,” she says.

“But I want you to pick me up now, Mommy!”

Rachel’s feet hurt. She pours SpaghettiOs into two bowls and puts them at the table. “SpaghettiOs are ready!” she says brightly, omitting her next thought, *We don’t always get what we want!*

Victoria climbs off the chair, taking care to keep her face set in a frown so her mother won’t mistake compliance for pleasure. If she weren’t so tired, Rachel would laugh.

At naptime, Victoria is suddenly weepy. “Lie down with me, Mommy,” she says. She has recently started sleeping in a real bed, and sometimes she is still anxious about it. Rachel sits on the edge of the twin and smooths her daughter’s hair. Victoria pats the pillow beside her head. “Lie down with me, Mommy,” she says again. “Rest your dogs.” This is something Victoria’s grandmother says, and Rachel suppresses a smile as she lies carefully on her side.

“How’s that?” she whispers, gently brushing Victoria’s auburn wisps from her face.

“Sing to me, Mommy,” Victoria says. Her eyes are so serious, searching Rachel’s eyes for something. She reaches up her pudgy arm, touching her mother’s hair lightly. “Sing ‘Hush Little Baby.’”

“Hush, little baby, don’t say a word,” Rachel sings softly. She pictures feathers, fluffs her voice a little, lets it catch a breeze and drift toward her daughter. “Mama’s gonna buy you a mockingbird. And if that mockingbird don’t sing, Mama’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.” It takes only a verse and half before Victoria’s eyes close and she begins breathing softly and

evenly. Rachel keeps singing, oh so gently, watching the soft cheeks, the pink lips. Victoria's chin is Todd's, her eyes and brow her mother's. Sometimes, when Rachel is annoyed with her husband, she watches Victoria sleep. *Our child*, she thinks, and feels her heart soften under Victoria's spell. *Our child*, she thinks now. Motherhood was not something she ever wanted, but here it is. She feels herself expand and contract in its grip every day.

She wakes to Todd's voice. "Rach?" he is calling from somewhere. She starts, which wakes Victoria, and she struggles to roll onto her back. "Rachel?"

"In here!" she calls back.

"Which is?" It doesn't sound like his voice is moving. Unlike Rachel, he won't wander around and look for a person.

"Victoria's room!" Rachel squirms her way off the bed and reaches over to shake her daughter, who has fallen back asleep. "Hey, Victoria," she says. "Wake up, baby, Daddy's home."

Todd comes up behind her then, peeks over her shoulder. "Hey, Munchkin!" he says. He puts his arm around Rachel's shoulder, nuzzles his nose into her neck. "No dinner?" he asks.

She turns to look at him. "Sorry." She is still wrapped in a fog of sleepiness. "I fell asleep." They watch Victoria struggle to ratchet her eyes open, until Todd bends down and tickles her. Rachel bumps Todd with her hip. "Maybe you could cook for me," she says. "I am carrying your child, you know."

He looks her up and down. "Maybe," he counters, "I could buy takeout for you. Cooking seems like so much work."

Rachel sighs. "Story of my life."

Todd uses the kitchen phone to call Mr. Li's, reading the paper menu he keeps in the utility drawer. When he leaves to pick up dinner, Victoria sits at the play dashboard he made her, turning her steering wheel, honking the horn. "I'm going to buy dinner, Mommy!" she says. "I'll see you soon!"

"See you soon, honey," Rachel answers. She snaps on the television, which is brand new and in color. Todd only recently came home with it and Rachel is still startled every time she sees Barbara Walters in a bright red scarf in their living room. She stands turning the dial, longing for a newscast. Most nights, Victoria is in the tub during the news. Rachel's daily contact with the real world usually consists of reading headlines in *The New York Times* while she makes Todd breakfast.

Suddenly, she remembers the little book, the one that so delighted Mrs. DeSoto. She digs it out of her purse, seeing that Victoria has indeed written her own name on it, a staggering line of capital letters filling most of the first page. There are three people on the cover, all with huge round eyes, their legs and arms emerging from their heads. Mrs. DeSoto's neat round writing is at the bottom of the cover. "My Family," she has written. Rachel notices the circles at the ends of the legs. Victoria has explained to her that since she can't draw feet, she puts wheels on people instead. Rachel pictures Todd, Victoria and herself rolling down the street to the park, laughing a bit when she finds her brain puzzling over how to attach an axle to an ankle.

The first page shows another stick figure, with a body this time, holding a rectangle. "Daddy goes to work in the city," is the caption. Rachel assumes the rectangle is Todd's attaché case, which Victoria loves to open and close. There are other rectangles behind Todd, buildings, maybe? Buses? The second page has two people on it. "Grandma knits me a hat," Mrs. DeSoto

has written. “PopPop has a boat.” The page after that has an oval with two big eyes. “The baby is coming!” is the excited caption under this illustration.

The last page is captioned, “Mommy takes the tie to the washing machine.” There is Rachel, with her glasses and an enormous, crazed smile. It is the smile of a woman imprisoned in a world of washing ties, maybe someone who hits the bottle every afternoon at lunch. In fact, it’s clear that Victoria first drew the mouth and then jaggedly outlined it in red, making Rachel look like someone who applied her lipstick in the bathroom of a moving bus. Victoria has also drawn ears, close to the chin, and she has even given Rachel earrings. Clearly, Rachel dresses up when she does the laundry.

Is this really how Victoria sees her? Not “Mommy gets up in the night with me when I wet the bed.” Not “Mommy makes me SpaghettiOs,” or “Mommy takes me to the library,” or “Mommy beats Daddy at Scrabble.” Her role in the family, apparently, is to wash Todd’s ties. It is the most mundane of tasks, and one that does nothing for Victoria or for herself. Clearly, to her daughter, Rachel is most importantly her husband’s helpmate.

How can she be a good mother to her daughter if the example she sets is so small, so subordinate? She can’t sort out her feelings – is she angry? Is she helpless? Or is the life of a mother simply one of unexpected lacks – a lack of appreciation, a lack of choices? This can’t be her legacy, can’t be a roadmap for Victoria’s life, doing laundry for a man who works in the city. It sounds like another century, a widow living alone, taking in sewing and laundry. In the other room, Victoria honks the horn on her dashboard. “Hurry up, buddy!” she yells, something Todd does. *Daddy gets a speeding ticket*, Rachel thinks.

Rachel dishes out the food onto plates before putting them on the table. Todd ordered spare ribs for Victoria, her favorite, which she insists on eating independently, off the bone. Within minutes, her face is smeared with barbecue sauce, from chin to eyes. “Osmosis eating,” Rachel tells Todd. “She absorbs the nutrients through her cheeks.”

“Hm,” he says. “Maybe if we wait a few hours she’ll soak up all the sauce. We won’t have to clean her.”

“We who?” Rachel says. *Mommy fills the tub with water. Daddy watches the news.* She can’t seem to shake this bitter tone in her mind. It isn’t Todd’s fault. Or is it? Did he ever encourage her to keep her job? She can’t remember whose idea it was for her to stop working. But they had kids. That’s what everyone she knows did. Had kids, quit working. It is suddenly suffocating, this route, and tightening itself around her. She pushes on the arm of the chair to stand, picks up the plates. “Thanks, babe,” Todd says.

“Thanks, babe,” Victoria echoes.

Mommy clears the dishes, Rachel thinks grimly. Mommy sneaks into the garage to smoke and cry.

Despite the occasional Tupperware-fueled conversation, feminism seems inaccessible to her. She envies those women on TV marching with their signs, Gloria Steinem undercover in Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Club. They look free and empowered, fierce as warriors, but they don’t seem remotely connected to her life of SpaghettiO’s and nursery school. How can she be a feminist and still be a wife and mother? On the other hand, how can she look Victoria in the eyes if she is not one?

Standing at the sink, rinsing dishes for the dishwasher, she feels Racer suddenly, kicking her in the ribs. It hurts, and she turns off the water, pressing her hand where she pictures the

baby's foot is. This must be a daughter, kicking her into some sort of righteous action. The pain subsides, and she stands motionless, considering her own eyes reflected in the window. *This is what I look like*, she thinks. And leaves the dishes where they are.

“Sing to me, Mommy,” Victoria says. She is in the tub, splashing a storm around her floating Fisher Price toys. *I'm going back to school*, Rachel thinks. *When the baby turns three, I'm going back to school*. She feels marginally better when she thinks this. It gives her a goal, gives her something to show her two daughters. She imagines herself on campus, taking her girls to a sit-in at the administration building. Victoria reaches a wet hand up to her face. “Mommy, sing ‘Hush Little Baby.’”

Rachel clasps her daughter's hand. “I've got a better song,” she says.

Shout little baby, shout like a girl. Mommy's gonna build you a better world.