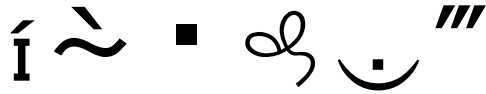


The



go for it daddy

By

J
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Hartma N

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... What I like about James' Hartman's, "The Father," is the way in which the story plays with the tension of uncertainty. Parent or no, there is a palpable anxiety that comes from being stuck in the middle of not knowing what is to come next and whether or not you'll ever be prepared enough. That underlying tension permeates throughout this story, and, in doing so, is able to elevate the emotion and tenderness that ultimately becomes one of the main themes.*

If there is one thing I've learned from being a father all of one year is that any idiot can be a dad.

Pull out game not that strong?

Dad.

3% of that condom didn't work?

Dad.

Try and be a father?

Dad.

Having a kid does not make one worthy of being called a father.

Where most parentals fall short, it seems, is selfishness. Can you forgo something you may love to refocus your purpose on a child? One day, I would hope I can look back on myself and say with some modicum of confidence that I did pretty decent.

I can honestly say that I do not know that answer, but I try and, I guess, in the trying there is the doing.

Nice work.

Five stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

“Bill,” Chad said, sighing. “I’m twenty-nine years old but I feel...eighty. This chronic pain? Christ.” He tilted forward and groped a hand up his back. Grimacing, he lowered himself very hesitantly against the cushion, his back looped like a long painful comma. “Fuck, there’s always something. You’re either in horrible pain, or you’re not in horrible pain but you’re thinking about how horrible the pain will be when it comes back. But I’ll tell you what I realized, man. I figured out what makes all this anguish worth it. That’s what you gotta do, figure out what makes all your hell and anguish worth the suffering of. Well, I may feel eighty damn years old but at least I’ve found it. It’s this, man. You know what I’m sayin? It’s *this*.” Chad arranged his hands so they emulated holding a guitar, his fingers wriggling like the hairy legs of a maniacal bug. Bouncing his head and flapping his tongue, he squeezed his eyes joyously shut. “Rocking the fuck out of thousands of people! Night in, night out! I promise you, man, I’ll be in a wheelchair and still be rocking the fuck out of everyone.

The Father

Whenever Cynthia got like this, wanting and missing a baby, she needed to be around Lily. She said it made her feel normal. Lily was Sarah and Chad’s two year old, and after Cynthia told me about her latest test results she said we were going over to Sarah and Chad’s for dinner. How did I feel when my wife told me about her latest test results? Relieved. I was relieved that she still could not have any children. It was complicated. I don’t know if I had ever felt totally enthusiastic about having children, but neither did I ever feel outright that I absolutely

did not want children. That I feared children, that I did not feel reliable enough to care for them, that I maybe worried I had too many of my own deficiencies and anxieties wearing me down, corroding all that space and energy that was required to raise them well—maybe my wife picked up on some of that, maybe she didn't. Our conversations didn't evolve much beyond the main fact, which was that Cynthia was not biologically equipped to produce a baby, and that made her feel less than human.

Sarah worked from home as a switchboard operator for Miami Dade College where Cynthia taught finance, and Chad was the lead guitarist of an alternative rock band named *Cold Authority* that toured nine months out of the year. He was currently home for six days while they worked on new material in the studio.

Sarah and Chad were now in the kitchen showing Cynthia a new appliance they had bought. I was on the couch in the living room, watching Lily draw. I felt awkward, sitting across from her. Her knees were bunched to her chest and she was flinging her fist back and forth across the sketchpad beside her hip, the pencil clamped inside her fingers like an ocean-stranded mariner at the mercy of something mighty and supreme. Her head kept lolling almost in sync with her clamped hand, until she retched her eyes closed and, yawning her mouth open like some miniature beast, screamed, “Kwap!” Then her eyes flashed open, mirroring dark waves of frustration, and she threw her arms at the ceiling. “Kwaaaaap!”

I looked behind me, thinking, hoping, that maybe one of them would do something, anything, about this, but the three of them were all bent over, inspecting what looked like a stainless steel trash can.

Lily started pounding, or punching, the sketchbook with her fists. “Kwap, kwap, kwap!”

My body whirled around as if I had no control over it, and I said, “Crap. For God’s sake, it’s crap.”

Her hands froze, and she blinked up at me, her eyes big whites of confusion.

“Kerraaaap,” I said.

“Papa, I need to pee pee!”

“I’m not your papa,” I shook my head.

Swooping in from behind me, Sarah scooped Lily up into her arms, whispered something into her ear, and carried her down the hallway.

Cynthia stood before me, glaring. “Is that the kind of father you would be?”

Everything was skipping so fast I couldn’t think.

“Because if it is,” my wife said, “then I’m glad I can’t have children.”

She followed Sarah down the hallway. A door clapped shut.

Outside the sky thundered and hard gusts of rain smacked the windowpanes. All these slap, slap, slaps.

Chad handed me a Guinness and sat next to me. At 5’8 he was unnaturally thin and walked like a shrimp, the result of a freak accident one year earlier involving a golf cart while on tour in Deadwood, South Dakota. His spine had been decaying since, slowly shriveling into itself. But like his idol Mick from Motley Crue, the guitarist with that back problem, he didn’t let it stop him from performing.

“Did I tell you we’re gonna open up for Shinedown this fall?” he said.

I rolled the ice cold beer around in my fingers.

“Thirty city tour across North America,” Chad said, belching, then massaging his lower back. “Mother fuck.” He drained half his beer. “The exposure on this tour is gonna be huge.”

I looked at where Lily had sat, her sketchpad overturned on the floor, its papers twisted out like wreckage. “I wasn’t too hard on her, was I?”

“We start the tour at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. You know that place, the Hollywood Bowl? Fucking legendary. You play the bowl, man, and you’re goin places.”

I tried to breathe out. “Was what I said really too harsh?”

Chad gulped the rest of his beer, his throat convulsing with the effort. Then he looked at me with an odd crease in his eyebrows, and the longer I looked back at him the more I think he realized that I expected him to actually answer my question. His head ducked back, as if bewildered. He suddenly appeared very uncomfortable sitting next to me. He kept flicking his right earlobe. “Uh, well, kerrraap sounds about right to me,” he said, and bobbed his shoulders, repeatedly, as if he didn’t know what else to do.

“I wasn’t *mean* to her though, right?” I said, and realized I was holding my breath.

“Bill,” Chad said, sighing. “I’m twenty nine years old but I feel...eighty. This chronic pain? Christ.” He tilted forward and groped a hand up his back. Grimacing, he lowered himself very hesitantly against the cushion, his back looped like a long painful comma. “Fuck, there’s always something. You’re either in horrible pain, or you’re not in horrible pain but you’re thinking about how horrible the pain will be when it comes back. But I’ll tell you what I realized, man. I figured out what makes all this anguish worth it. That’s what you gotta do, figure out what makes all your hell and anguish worth the suffering of. Well, I may feel eighty damn years old but at least I’ve found it. It’s this, man. You know what I’m sayin? It’s *this*.” Chad arranged his hands so they emulated holding a guitar, his fingers wriggling like the hairy

legs of a maniacal bug. Bouncing his head and flapping his tongue, he squeezed his eyes joyously shut. “Rocking the fuck out of thousands of people! Night in, night out! I promise you, man, I’ll be in a wheelchair and still be rocking the fuck out of everyone. I’ll be on oxygen, I don’t give a shit! No health condition is gonna stop me from loving what I love!” He dropped his hands and, very slowly, opened his eyes, as if he hated to depart his treasured reverie. Then he pointed one finger down the dark hallway. “It makes all *that* bearable.” He wrinkled his face. “All that...*bullshit*.” Then he turned to me, and smiled. “You gotta know what’s worth your pain, man. It’ll change your world, I promise you.”

I sat forward. “But I wasn’t too *hard* on her. Right?”

Chad frowned, his eyes narrowing down the dark hallway. “Regret, too. Doing what you love can push out all that regret until it feels like what gave you that regret in the first place doesn’t exist.” He nodded. “Never *did* exist.”

I didn’t know what to say. Even if I did, what would it achieve? So I just sat there, as the suddenly black and silent night invaded through the window, squeezing me like a vise.

Chad fell asleep, his chin magnetized to his chest. Three beer bottles lay empty at his feet. I couldn’t fall asleep. I couldn’t stop wondering what they were doing in that backroom. They liked to watch movies together if I didn’t come over and Chad was on tour, but when we were all together we always watched something, together, in the living room.

A white golden light gradually leaked across the hallway floor, and a small wobbly figure stepped into it, clouded in shadow. I sat up. The shadow slid quietly across the wall until it broke apart and Lily emerged in the white golden light, enwrapped in bright lime clothing. Her

fingers wiggled out of her sleeves as her eyes darted from me to her sleeping father, back to me, before settling on the kitchen behind my shoulder.

“I get aqua,” she said.

I didn't know what else to do but watch her, her eyes, big and white, peering uncertainly into the kitchen.

“I get aqua.”

She began moving again when I noticed the red Kong, their daushound Troy's favorite toy, Troy who scampered into the bathroom whenever Cynthia and I came over, Troy who was six years old and whom I'd only ever seen two or three times. The red rubber toy, in the shape of a pyramid, was parked in Lily's direct path to the kitchen, about two feet away from her, and she was too busy studying the kitchen to see it. But she would notice it eventually, and then realign her direction.

So this wasn't a big deal.

She placed her foot down straight toward the toy. Then she placed her other foot down faster, straight toward the toy, her big and white eyes latched onto the kitchen.

And all at once I became irritated at their damn dog for leaving his toy in the middle of the hallway. And then something like mild rage aimed at Chad and Sarah because wasn't it their responsibility to clean up their own home? To make sure there were no hazards lying around that could threaten their two year old child's safety?

Lily placed another foot down. About five inches existed between each of her steps, and the toy was now maybe a foot away, so if she took one more step of similar size, followed by another, and another, it was entirely plausible that she would step over the toy—if, of course, she

didn't notice it by then, which she invariably would. Kids, from what I had seen in television shows and movies, were in almost a constant feverish state of swiveling curiosity.

She placed another foot down, straight ahead, about five inches away from her previous step, her big and white eyes still latched onto the kitchen. Then she placed her other foot down, still straight ahead, still about five inches away from her previous step. And when she placed her foot down again, she would've had lifted it up and completely over the toy. So I sat back, unconcerned. Not that I was, at any time, concerned. Lily was most likely already very accustomed to Troy leaving his favorite toy lying around the apartment, and might have even acquired a sixth sense for detecting its proximity.

Lily now raised her foot high, higher than any of her previous steps, and paused, her eyes whiter, bigger, her mind fixating both on the kitchen and her extremely present danger. Then her foot fell. And I wondered if I was witnessing an optical illusion. Because there was such a discrepancy between what I had believed and what I saw. Her foot did not fall, or at least I thought I saw initially that her foot did not fall, beyond the red rubber toy. Her left foot, it seemed, landed on the sharp tip of it, and now she hung there, suspended. For one very confusing and disorienting moment, she looked like she really would slip, twist, and drop. But I did not believe this would happen. I was still trying to reconcile what I had believed and what I was now seeing. But then she did. She dropped. All of her was now falling, her face collapsed in shock as her arms thrashed at the air. And no longer occupied by anything but urgency I lurched forward and extended my body, reaching and stretching my arms until finally they ringed her in a snug embrace. And as I cushioned her body to my chest, I became aware of my momentum curtailing me too quickly forward and so, curling my hands around her head, I swiftly turned my back.

My spine crashed against the floor, followed by my legs. Then the back of my skull cracked against it, and everything around me glittered. It felt like a large bullet had zoomed through my head, altering my senses. My eyes throbbed. My temples stung. Very carefully, I squinted my eyes open, and saw Lily looking up at me, blinking her big whites of confusion.

“Oh crap! You hit your head!”

I tried to sit up, but the pain in the back of my head was proliferating down my spine, as if hooks were screwing into my bone. Lily moved up with me, crawling toward my face, her big and white eyes steady on mine. I found my arms lifting in order to cradle her weight, and her legs folded over my elbow as her head landed softly on my other bicep. The very width of her eyes expanded, and I saw inside them a blue translucent violet. One of her hands gingerly moved around to the back of my head, and feeling smooth, delicate fingers brush through my hair, my breath caught in my throat.

Lily giggled, her cheeks bubbling, and her blue translucent eyes sparkled violet as her fingers, like the silky tendrils of a leisurely wind, kept massaging my head.

I could actually feel the stinging pains receding.

“I make better,” she said, nodding.

Feeling the pains being numbed away and watching her giggle, I nodded too.

“I’m getting sleepy,” she said, and giggled quietly.

Shadows swelled over us. I looked up and saw Chad, head still drooped, passed out on the couch. Standing in the hallway were Cynthia and Sarah. My wife’s eyebrows were arched, and Sarah’s mouth was curved. She nudged my wife and murmured something in her ear, but I did not see Cynthia’s reaction, for I was focused only on Lily, in awe of the way her arm relaxed around my neck the moment she closed her eyes.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story originated from a random but very detailed image of a little girl crying out, "Kwap!" over and over because she's frustrated with her drawing and a man sitting across from her getting increasingly irritated. I don't always know where a story will end up, but in this case I did, which was kind of a relief, because I could simply focus on how and why we end up where we do. I knew this would necessitate an exploration of fatherhood and some of the subsequent anxieties that may stem from wondering what becoming a father would be like, and I was excited by that. I'm not a father, and I probably won't become one, but this was a chance to experience maybe a semblance of what that could feel like. I naturally gravitate to composing a minimalistic story. I don't like telling a reader how to feel. I'm more interested in presenting a situation, and allowing the reader to summon how they feel about that situation in their own way, and that's what I tried to do here.*

AUTHOR BIO: James Hartman's fiction appears in *Blue Fifth Review*, *December*, *Raleigh Review*, *Gris-Gris*, *Paper Dragon*, and *New World Writing*, among others. His story, "A Junior Whopper, Please, With Cheese," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions, and his story, "The Range of Acceptability," was an Honorable Mention in *New Millennium's* 50th Annual Flash Fiction Award. His scholarly work is featured in *The Hemingway Review*. He lives in York, Pennsylvania. You can reach him at jhartm17@yahoo.com.