

DADDY'S GLAD HANDS

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"I don't understand why the fuck the pizza isn't here! What's going on?"

"You didn't order it, baby! You just wrote down what we wanted, but you didn't actually call it in yet!"

"Where the fuck is it? We ordered it an hour ago!"

"You didn't call it in, Dad!"

"Where the fuck is it?"

"You didn't actually order it! You just wrote down what we were going to get, but you didn't actually call it in yet!"

"I ordered it an hour ago!"

"No, baby, no. You wrote down what we were going to get. But then you never actually got on the phone and ordered it!"

"But it was over an hour ago!"

"But you didn't order it! You never actually called it in. Remember? We discussed what we were going to get, and you wrote the toppings down on the back of that envelope, but you never actually picked up the phone and ordered it!"

"It's been a fucking hour! What the fuck is wrong with them?"

"Dad, you have to call it in!"

"You didn't call it in, baby. You wrote down what we wanted, but you never called the pizza place, Toby."

Toby ran his veined hands through his orange, grey, white hair. "It's been a fucking hour!" He rolled his blue and red eyes at the black microwave oven, at its digital clock's pulsing green colon.

"Fucking hour! Where is it?"

"You never actually ordered it, baby! You only wrote down what we wanted! You never actually picked up the phone and placed the order."

"What?"

"We decided on the toppings, but you never actually picked up the phone and ordered the pizza. We started talking, and you never actually got around to actually ordering the pizza."

"I didn't order the pizza?"

"No, you didn't! We discussed what we were going to get, and you wrote down the toppings, but you never actually picked up the phone and ordered it."

Toby looked down at the back of the envelope, the overlaying triangle of yellow whiteness against the rectangular white, the black ink sliding across the flap. Black olives, sausage, pepperoni, mushrooms. His phone number, his address, his name. "It's been a fucking hour. You're saying this is my fault? What the fuck-- what is this? What's going on? Where am I?"

"We didn't actually order it! We discussed it, decided what we would get, but then you never actually called it in!"

Toby looked from where he sat at his place at the kitchen table out past the wide square doorway of the kitchen, out across the shadowy white carpet of the living room, to the distant, silent front door. "Didn't we?"

"No! We never did!"

"We never- I never ordered it? Actually?"

"No!"

"Oh. Well, what time is it now?"

"Almost two a.m."

"Well, they probably don't deliver this late."

"Probably not."

"They probably stop delivering around midnight or so."

"Probably."

"It's probably too late for us to order a pizza tonight."

"Probably."

"Is that okay?"

"We could just eat what we have."

"So...I just want to get this straight in my mind. There's no pizza coming?"

"No. We wrote down what we wanted, but we never ordered it. We talked about the toppings we wanted, and you wrote the toppings down, on the back of that envelope, but then we never actually picked up the phone and placed an order with them."

"So we're not having pizza tonight?"

"No. We never actually ordered a pizza. We only discussed what we would order. We never actually picked up a phone and placed an order. We never actually called a pizza place and said, 'This is what we would like to order'".

"So we never actually ordered it?"

"Right."

"So, we have to eat what we have at hand?"

"Right."

"Because there's no pizza coming?"

"Exactly. We never actually ordered the pizza. We discussed it, but we never actually picked up the phone and placed an order with the restaurant that delivers pizza to your home."

"So it's not coming."

"Right."

"So we have to eat what we have here in the house."

"Yeah. We could, like, there's a whole package of bologna, I could fry it up and we could have fried bologna sandwiches, with mustard."

"In a way, I think that's even better than pizza. At least at this point"

"Okay, so do you want me to do that?"

"Have the fried bologna sandwiches, instead of the pizza?"

"Yeah. Chris, is that okay with you?"

"Sure, Mom."

"Toby?"

"Well, we're not having pizza, right? They're not going to deliver it? It's too late?"

"Right."

"And you're saying let's have fried bologna sandwiches instead? With mustard?"

"Right."

"Well, that'd be okay with me."

"It would?"

"Yeah. Now, what happens if they deliver the pizza just as we're about to sit down to the fried bologna sandwiches?"

"Well, what do you think we should do?"

"In a way, I think I would prefer the fried bologna. That's the way this evening turned out. Fuck it. Fuck them."

"So should we like, ignore the doorbell if it rings?"

"Yeah. Yeah, we should. I mean, come on. Fuck 'em. It's what, after midnight already? Again?"

Black rings overlapped each other in the skillet, creating eights where round bologna slices had puckered, popped, sweated.

Nicotine filled the air, giving the kitchen a peanut butter smell.

At the kitchen table, the filterless cigarette in Toby's limp right hand dribbled orange smoke down across the grain of the table, curling around the cold curve of his glass, spiraling upwards around the ice and wood-colored whiskey inside, smoke tendrils rising off the iced rim, rising vertically up the front of his face, up past his cheeks' angularity and piercing blue eyes, his face even at sixty-six peach and black and sharp-edged, elegantly wide black eyebrows, nose length, smooth burst-vein cheeks making other men's faces look plain. Behind him, on the long glossy white counter below the white mini-blinded window, a white and pink birthday cake, off-center, topped with wavy plastic numbers, 33, sat unlit.

Chris, eleven, sitting on his hands at his kitchen table seat, stared blue-eyed at his father, curled black lock hanging down across his tall forehead.

Toby rolled his head back on his neck, puffing smoke upwards, the grey exhalation bouncing softly off the ceiling, scudding across the high, black-rimmed wall clock. Three o'clock.

Cinder ducked her head, rolling her eyes under her wrinkled forehead at the unknifed cake. "That bologna was even better than a pizza."

"Someday we'll eat a lot better than bologna. And we still have pistachio ice cream for dessert."

"Oh, I know." She put a hand on top of his. Two wedding bands, around bony fingers, gold and apart and expensive. "I bought blue napkin rings today."

"Someday we're gonna go on a river, right Dad?"

"Damn right. We'll get on a riverboat, the three of us, and ride down the river to a gaily-lit restaurant on its shore.

We'll eat oysters and fresh river fish, and have cherries jubilee for dessert."

"And you'll leave a big tip on the table."

"And then we'll ride back upstream, standing at the rail, listening to a college kid in a black tuxedo play Beethoven's Waldstein, looking at the mansions we pass set up off the bank."

Cinder ducked her head. "I always wanted to ride on a riverboat." She rolled her eyes. "I'll need a dress."

"You'll have the finest white dress ever made, light and billowy, with white lingerie sewn in Paris."

"Toby, not in front of Chris."

"I don't mind."

"The boy has to learn. If you care about someone, you tell them about the world."

"Mom, you'd look real pretty in a white dress. You have dark hair."

"I'd have to lose a little weight first. I know that."

"That's fine. They make dresses in all sizes. Once I saw a white dress as big as a bus, with huge ruffles halfway down and a little black hole in back for the exhaust pipe. Chris. Gettin' late."

"Can I stay up a little longer?"

"Nope. Time to get tucked in."

"Aren't you sleepy, sweetheart?"

"Not that much."

"The bags under your eyes are purple again. Let's go."

Chris drew his feet up onto his chair, as if something were running around on the kitchen floor. His pure profile, perfect nose, dark liquid eyes, wide dark lips, his youth and promise, swiveled around, from unconditional love to floor to father. "Dad? Can I just stay up until I'm sleepier? I know they're in there, whispering in the walls, waiting for me. If we go in too early I see their toes sticking out of the electric wall sockets."

"You can't hide from them, Chris. They rest on the ceiling and slide down the walls once your breathing becomes regular. That's inevitable. Don't try to fight the inevitable. I know. I tried. I failed." Toby

took another long, cold swallow of his whiskey, head rolling back away from its ugly neck, overly-stylish hair under the ceiling light banding orange, grey, white. His completely unbuttoned white shirt showed the boniness of his chest, his sagging nipples, his red, grey, white chest hairs.

"Toby, maybe we should speak to a doctor or the government or something. He's losing a lot of school."

"That wouldn't do. Half of them are in on it anyway. The world is controlled by puppets. It has been for centuries. The days when people like you and me would sit under an apple tree, wearing white and reading poetry to each other, are gone forever. Dog-sized, hybrid insects decide our lives now."

"Sometimes they scare me so much though Dad I can't keep my eyes shut."

"Always. Fucking always keep your eyes shut."

"Toby!"

"I'm protecting him! Never open your eyes. Always pretend you're asleep. Let it happen. It happens, they slide back up the walls, that's it. The sun comes back up, you walk out here and your mom's fixing breakfast. Always keep your eyes shut. Focus on the bacon and eggs."

"Why don't they go after you or mom? Why do they always go after me?"

"They prefer children."

"Why?"

Toby made a helpless upper body gesture, face wrinkles and forearm muscle cords. "I don't know."

"The other kids at school, they don't have aliens going after them once the lights are out."

"Chris, they may not even know about it. It may be happening to them too, but they may be blocking it. They may be too ashamed. It may not even dawn on them until thirty years later, when they're standing in front of a urinal in an airport terminal, and suddenly, whoom! There it is. Pee spraying all over your pants. And you still have to wash your hands and get out of there. And catch a flight"

"Well, I wanna block it too!" Chris' small perfect face, a copy of Toby's but smoother, much softer, crumpled around the eyes, the child angles, clenched on the skull where the wrinkles will be forty years from now. "I don't want this to be happening to me! I don't want them putting their multiple knees on my bed!"

"I know it's hard. I know. I'll protect you until you're asleep, and they finish conducting their experiments and leave. Let's go."

Chris switched his large, blue eyes to his mom, pleading with a look that worked for staying up late laying on the carpet on his stomach, blue-jeaned legs spread, in front of the TV.

Cinder put her fingertips in the ashtray, like it was a fingerbowl, blackening and greying her fingerprints. She swung her eyes at her unlit birthday cake, sitting store-bought and pink and white and still and unlit and unknifed behind her husband Toby. Ducking her head, peering under her eyelashes at Toby, she patted the swirled crown of her baby's head, here but gone forever, all that electricity underneath., "That's how it is. That's it. That's how it is."

Toby led Chris hand-in-hand into the boy's bedroom.

It was a great, green-wallpapered room, half the room occupied by the bed, the rest by the yellow moons in the window squares. The bed was higher off the floor than usual, under an extravagantly plump coral and crimson canopy, broad flounces and flourishes draping down the bed, making it its own room-within-a-room. Relaxing across the white oblong of the bed lay an impossibly puffy, yard-high pink comforter embroidered with rabbits, cows, bears, kittens and mice.

Chris turned his back on his father, slipping down his blue school clothes, small bare body ripe as smooth, suffused mozzarella cheese, pulling up his striped green and white pajamas with a little boy's head-bent pride in mastery of waistbands and buttons. Toby turned modestly away from the strip-down and pull-up.

Once Chris got under the huge pink comforter, almost half as high as him, Toby sat on the edge. A father's hand on a son's slim, striped shoulder.

Where do I begin?

"Your Mom and I had been having sex for about a year when she stopped bleeding. She went to a clinic, a dirty place with plywood sign-in counters, and orange, fake leather sofas where you waited for hours until they called you by a three-digit number. The following week in an 'office' the size of a closet with opened doors on both sides, anonymous people passing by in corduroy pants, they told her she was pregnant. I still remember her giving me the news in our kitchen. We cried, and made out our wills.

"I was living with her then, so I could see the changes every day. It got harder and harder for her to get out of bed, the weight distribution was all wrong, and more and more when she did leave the bed in the morning it was to throw up near the toilet. I feared for her. I really did. Everything I loved about her-- the fresh milk in her face, the swing in her breasts, the belly-buttoned breathing of her stomach--went away. She got swollen. She got a 'pregnancy mask' like she was Italian or Arabic, with hair on her arms that spread to her legs, circles under her eyes, moustache on her lips. Her belly got bigger than her breasts, then bigger than anything on her, stretching sideways and frontwards until her pores were huge, and streaky white stretch marks scarred her abdomen. Her teeth started to go, because you were sucking the nutrients out of her. Do you know what that's like, to lose three of your teeth? Forever? To have to eat a sandwich lopsidedly for the rest of your life?

"It got worse and worse, and then you were born. She was in horrible agony, hour after hour, getting hairier and hairier. Her big, ugly body, sunken-eye face, thinning hair, looked like it was covered in vaseline, the worst sort of dark vaseline, like what's wiped off after homosexuals finish anal intercourse, then this veiny red tumor sagged out between her legs, swelling as big

as a fist, a basketball, a watermelon, and the maternity doctor kept pinching and pinching the white tip of it, kept pinching and pinching it, and finally he popped it, and you burst out of the blood and pus, wet mouth gumlessly whining, red hands opening and clenching around air.

"We had to take you home. We were responsible for this happening to her. At the time she most needed relaxation to recover, to get the flush back, the giggle, the girlish curves, the wiggle in the walk, which never did come back, you started crying and crying hour after hour from where we caged you. We tried to help you. We let you in our bed some nights, only to see you crawl across her while she was trying desperately to recover, flat on her back, you heading towards her cracked, super-sensitive nipples to suck on them. Even then.

"We placed you on your stomach every night in your crib, hoping you would die from sudden infant death syndrome so we could go back to our happy days of picnics and fucking on the kitchen floor with her back rammed against the stove or dishwasher, but there you'd be each morning, lying on your fat back, fingers and toes in the air wriggling for a tickle under the cartoon-character mobile we bought four months into Cinder's pregnancy.

"Bad as it was then, we didn't anticipate you walking. Once you started that, you could get upright, waving your pudgy arms for baby balance, and jerk forward foot to foot to no matter where we were. The end of fucking. That's what that meant. Then the end of arguing, too. Because you would bawl when you tightroped into a room and saw me backing your mom into a corner during a shirt-off, voice-up argument.

"But then, about the time you turned seven, I started noticing how nice your skin was. I mean it really was. And still is, though I know that won't last. Look at me. But seeing you lying on your stomach on the living room floor in front of the noisy blue glow of the TV, like any dad I started noticing how smoothly your skin stretched over the bones of your arms and legs, and

once, when you lay down to watch TV without a top on, and I saw the perfect porelessness of your back, something kicked in.

"Because that's all it is. It's skin. We build cathedrals, stand on top of the green grassy hill and put a helmet on our head while horses gallop down the slope, bend over illuminated manuscripts with ruby and charcoal on our white fingertips, tap animated gifs in HTML, stand behind the white van marked in block letters Fresh Fish unloading dead bodies instead, the weight of head wobbles and stiff limbs passed hand to hand, all of it for skin.

"So here we are. And what am I supposed to do, me with a destroyed wife? Is that skin, that sensuality, infectious? Let me tell you something, father to son. In this world there are terrible mysteries, and hints that caress us, ghostly fingertips under our chin. Sometimes, the best gift in this world is ignorance. God never showers His kindness more on us than when He allows us to forget." Toby swiveled his carefully coifed head. "Uh-oh. I just heard the insectile antennae-tapping slide down the inside of the walls, towards the sockets. I think their three-fingered hands are starting to reach out, reach out towards you."

Chris shivered, just a child.

Toby pulled out a text.

"In the great green room there was a telephone. And a quiet old lady whispering hush."

"And a quiet old lady whispering hush."

"Goodnight Mom. Goodnight clocks. Goodnight stars. Goodnight air. Goodnight noises everywhere."

"Goodnight Mom. Goodnight air. Goodnight noises everywhere."

"Goodnight faith. Goodnight hope. Goodnight young bodies that smell like soap."

"Goodnight faith. Goodnight hope. Goodnight the power of soap."

"Here we go. Just like before. Here we go, behind a closed door."

"Here we go, behind a closed door."

"I'm not a gem. I'm not hard and crystallized that way. I do what I want to. What the hey."

"What the hey".

"Here they come. Here come the aliens. Tell me, what do you think of as you fall asleep?"

"I pray for you. I pray for Mommy. I think of the wonder on the waiter's face."

Chris shut his eyes double-tight, a poor, innocent child chosen for this. Face so much like Toby's but fifty-five years younger.

You had to admire his courage. You had to think, each time.

Toby looked down at his son underneath his yard-high coverlet. "Here they come." His left hand draped down, immediately seized by Chris' clawing fingers. "Here they come."

Toby raised his right hand, left hand weighted down by the grasp of Chris' fear. Holding Chris' squeezing terror in his left hand, feeling it jump and clench in his left hand, Toby's right hand rose in the air, piercing blue eyes once again watching his index finger glue against the thumb, middle finger stand out, ring finger and pinky glue against each other, until his right hand had but three fingers, not an easy thing to do, left hand still held in the painful squeeze of his son's fear. The three-fingered right hand slipped under the yard-high covers. Slipped onto that smooth, suffused mozzarella cheese, such a dirty, dirty little brain rolling round in a car trunk, and when Chris' lower limbs, once again touched, surprised, threatened, invaded, stiffened, Toby said in his hoarse whiskey voice, "Don't worry, little one," as the hand glided upwards. "Don't worry, my dear. Daddy's here."