

Her Father's Eyes

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It was so long ago that fathers were still gaunt from the war, their awful scars still livid; so long ago that mothers wore frocks, made fancy Jell-O desserts in ring molds. And that summer, there was enough money to go for a trip on the train. She was taken along because she had been so sick she had almost died, so it was a reward for surviving.

She was hurried along between her parents, holding their hands, wondering what a *dome coach* was and why it was supposed to be special. Then there was a gap in the sea of adult legs, and the high silver cars of the train shone out at her. She stared up at the row of windows in the coach roof, and thought it looked like the cockpits in the bombers her father was always pointing out.

Inside it was nicer, and much bigger, and there was no possible way any German or Japanese fighter pilots could spray the passengers with bullets; so she settled into the seat she had all for herself. There she watched the people moving down on the platform, until the train pulled out of the station.

Then her parents exclaimed, and told her to look out the wonderful dome windows at the scenery. That was interesting for a while, especially the sight of the highway far down there with its Oldsmobiles and DeSotos float-ing along in eerie silence, and then, as they moved out into the country, the occasional field with a real horse or cow.

The change in her parents was more interesting. Out of uniform her father looked younger, was neither gloomy nor sarcastic but raucously happy. All dressed up, her mother was today as serene and cheerful as a housewife in a magazine advertisement. They held hands, like newlyweds, cried out in rapture at each change in the landscape, and told her repeatedly what a lucky little girl she was, to get to ride in a dome coach.

She had to admit they seemed to be right, though her gaze kept tracking nervously to the blue sky framed by the dome, expecting any minute steeply banking wings there, fire or smoke. How could people turn on happiness like a tap, and pretend the world was a bright and shiny place when they knew it wasn't at all?

The candy butcher came up the aisle, and her father bought her a bag of mint jellies. She didn't like mint jellies but ate them anyway, amazed at his good mood. Then her mother took her down the car to wash the sugar from her face and hands, and the tiny steel lavatory astonished and fascinated her.

From time to time the train stopped in strange towns to let people off or on. Old neon signs winked from brick hotels, and pointed forests like Christ-mas trees ran along the crests of hills, stood black against the skyline. The sun set round and red. While it still lit the undersides of the clouds, her parents took her down to the dining car.

What silent terror, at the roaring spaces between the cars where anyone might fall out and die instantly; and people sat in the long room beyond, and sipped coffee and ate breaded veal cutlets as calmly as though there were no yawning gulf rushing along under them. She watched the diners in awe, and pushed the green peas round and round the margin of her plate, while her parents were chatting together so happily they didn't even scold her.

When they climbed the narrow steel stair again, night had fallen. The whole of the coach had the half-lit gloom of an aquarium, and stars burned down through the glass. She was led through little islands of light, back to her seat. Taking her place again she saw that there were now people occupying the seats across the aisle, that had been vacant before.

The man and the lady looked as though they had stepped out of the movies, so elegant they were. The lady wore a white fur coat, had perfect red nails; the man wore a long coat, with a silk scarf around

his neck. His eyes were like black water. He was very pale. So was the lady, and so was their little boy who sat stiffly in the seat in front of them. He wore a long coat too, and gloves, like a miniature grownup. She decided they must be rich people.

Presently the Coach Hostess climbed up, and smilingly informed them all that there would be a meteor shower tonight. The elegant couple winked at each other. The little girl scrambled around in her seat, and peering over the back, asked her parents to explain what a meteor was. When she understood, she pressed her face against the cold window glass, watching eagerly as the night miles swam by. Distant lights floated in the darkness; but she saw no falling stars.

Disappointed, cranky and bored, she threw herself back from the window at last, and saw that the little boy across the aisle was staring at her. She ignored him and addressed her parents over the back of the seat:

"There aren't either any meteors," she complained.

"You're not looking hard enough," said her father, while at the same time her mother said,

"Hush," and drew from her big purse a tablet of lined paper and a brand-new box of crayons, the giant box with rows and rows of colors. She handed them over the seat back and added, "Draw some pictures of what you saw from the windows, and you can show them to Auntie when we get there."

Wide-eyed, the little girl took the offerings and slid back into her seat. For a while she admired the pristine green-and-yellow box, the staggered regi-ments of pure color. All her crayons at home lived in an old coffee can, in a chaos of nub ends and peeled paper.

At last she selected an Olive Green crayon and opened the tablet. She drew a cigar shape and added flat wings. She colored in the airplane, and then took the Sky Blue and drew on a glass cockpit. With the Black, she added stars on the wings and dots flying out the front to signify bullets.

She looked up. The little boy was staring at her again. She scowled at him.

"Those are nice," he said. "That's a lot of colors."

"This is the really big box," she said.

"Can I draw too?" he asked her, very quietly, so quietly something strange pulled at her heart. Was he so quiet because he was scared? And the elegant man said:

"Daniel, don't bother the little girl," in a strange resonant voice that had something just the slightest bit wrong about it. He sounded as though he were in the movies.

"You can share," she told the little boy, deciding suddenly. "But you have to come sit here, because I don't want to tear the paper out."

"Okay," he said, and pushed himself out of his seat as she moved over. The elegant couple watched closely, but as the children opened the tablet out be-tween them and each took a crayon, they seemed to relax and turned their smiling attention to the night once more. The boy kept his gloves on while coloring.

"Don't you have crayons at home?" she asked him, drawing black dough-nut-tires under the plane. He shook his head, pressing his lips together in a line as he examined the Green crayon he had taken.

"How can you not have crayons? You're rich," she said, and then was sor-ry she had said it, because he looked as though he were about to cry. But he shrugged and said in a careless voice,

"I have paints and things."

"Oh," she said. She studied him. He had fair hair and blue eyes, a deep twilight blue. "How come you don't look like your mommy and daddy?" she inquired. "I have my daddy's eyes. But you don't have their eyes."

He glanced over his shoulder at the elegant couple and then leaned close to whisper, "I'm adopted."

"Oh. You were in the War?" she said, gesturing at her airplane. "Like a bomb was dropped on your house, and you were an orphan, and the soldiers took you away?"

"No," he said. He put back the Green crayon, took a Brick Red one instead and drew a house: a square, a triangle on top, a chimney with a spiral of smoke coming out of it. He drew well. "I don't think that's what happened."

She drew black jagged lines under the plane, bombed-out wreckage. She drew little balloon heads protruding from the rubble, drew faces with teardrops flying from the eyes. "This is what happened to the war orphans," she explained. "My daddy told me all about them, and I could see it when he told me. So that didn't happen to you?"

"Nope," he replied, drawing a window in the house. It was a huge window, wide open. It took up the whole wall. He put the Brick Red crayon back in its tier carefully, and selected the Gray crayon. "The War is over now, anyway."

"Everybody thinks so," she replied, glancing uneasily up at the dome. "But my daddy says it isn't really. It could come back any time. There are a lot of bad people. Maybe those people got you from an orphanage."

The boy opened his mouth, closed it, glanced over his shoulder. "No," he whispered. "Something else happened to me. Now I'm their little boy. We came tonight so they could see the meteors from a train. They never did that before. They like trying out new things, you see."

With the Gray crayon, he drew the figure of a stick-man who towered over the house, walking away from the window. He gave it a long coat. He drew its arms up like Frankenstein's monster, and then he drew something in its arms: a white bundle. He put away the Gray crayon, took out the Pink and added a little blob of a face to the bundle.

"See," he said, "That's—"

"What are you drawing, Daniel?" said the elegant lady sharply. The little boy cringed, and the little girl felt like cringing too.

"That's a man carrying wood into his house for the fireplace, Mother," said the little boy, and grabbing the Brown crayon he drew hastily over the bundle in the man's arms, turning it into a log of wood. The little girl looked at it and hoped the lady wouldn't notice that the man in the picture was walk-ing *away* from the house.

"I'm going to be an artist when I grow up," the little boy said. "I go to a studio and they make me take lessons. A famous painter teaches me." He sketched in a row of cylinders in brown, then took the Green crayon and drew green circles above the cylinders. "That's the forest," he added in an undertone. He took the Dark Blue and drew a cold shadow within the forest, and sharp-edged stars above it.

"Is he taking the baby to the forest?" she whispered. He just nodded. When he had drawn the last star he folded the page over, and since she had used up all the room on her page she did not complain, but took the Olive Green crayon again. She laboriously drew in stick-figure soldiers while he watched.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked.

"A waitress at the dinette," she replied. "If I don't die. And a ballerina."

"I might be a dancer too, if I don't die," he said, reaching for the Gray crayon. He began to draw cylinders like oatmeal boxes, with crenellations: a castle. She took the Black crayon and drew bayonets in the soldiers' hands, re-marking:

"Boys aren't ballerinas."

"Some boys have to be," he said morosely, drawing windows in the castle walls. "They have to wear black leotards and the girls wear pink ones. Madame hits her stick on the ground and counts in French. Madame has a hoof on one foot, but nobody ever says anything about it."

"That's strange," she said, frowning as she drew the soldiers bayoneting one another. She glanced over at his picture and asked: "Where's the king and queen?"

He sighed and took the Blue Violet crayon. On the top of one tower he drew an immense crowned

figure, leaving the face blank. He drew another crowned figure on the other battlement. "May I have the Black, please?"

"You're *polite*," she said, handing it to him. He drew faces with black eyes on the crowned figures while she took the Red crayon and drew a flag on the ground. She drew a red circle with rays coming off it to the edges of the rec-tangle, and then drew red dots all over the flag.

"What's that?" he asked.

"That's the blood," she explained. "My daddy has that flag at home. He killed somebody for it. When he told me about it I could see that, too. What did your daddy, I mean, that man, do in the War?"

"He sold guns to the soldiers," said the boy. He drew bars across the win-dows in the castle and then, down in the bottommost one, drew a tiny round face looking out, with teardrops coming from its eyes.

The little girl looked over at his picture.

"Can't he get away?" she whispered. He shook his head, and gulped for breath before he went on in a light voice:

"Or I might be a poet, you know. Or play the violin. I have lessons in that too. But I have to be very, very good at something, because next year I'm seven and—"

"Have you drawn another picture, Daniel?" said the elegant man with a faint warning intonation, rising in his seat. Outside the night rolled by, the pale lights floated, and the rhythm of the iron wheels sounded faint and far away.

"Yes, Father," said the boy in a bright voice, holding it up, but with his thumb obscuring the window with the face. "It's two people playing chess. See?"

"That's nice," said the man, and sat down again.

"What happens when you're seven?" the little girl murmured. The boy looked at her with terror in his eyes.

"They might get another baby," he whispered back. She stared at him, thinking that over. She took the tablet and opened it out: new fresh pages.

"That's not so bad," she told him. "We've had two babies. They break things. But they had to stay with Grandma; they're too little to come on the train. If you don't leave your books where they can tear the pages, it's okay."

The boy bowed his head and reached for the Red Orange crayon. He be-gan to scribble in a great swirling mass. The girl whispered on:

"And you're rich, not like us, so I bet you can have your own room away from the new baby. It'll be all right. You'll see."

She took the Sky Blue crayon again and drew in what looked at first like ice cream cones all over her page, before she got the Olive Green out and added soldiers hanging from them. "See? These are the parachute men, coming to the rescue."

"They can't help," said the little boy.

She bit her lip at that, because she knew he was right. She thought it was sad that he had figured it out too.

The boy put back the Red Orange, took both Red and Yellow and scribbled forcefully, a crayon in either fist. He filled the page with flame. Then he drew Midnight Blue darkness above it all and more sharp stars. He took the Black and drew a little stick figure with limbs outstretched just above the fire. Flying? Falling in?

"I'm almost seven," he reiterated, under his breath. "And they only like new things."

"What are you drawing now, Daniel?" asked the lady, and both children started and looked up in

horror, for they had not heard her rise.

"It's a nice big pile of autumn leaves, Mother," said the little boy, holding up the tablet with shaking hands. "See? And there's a little boy playing, jumping in the leaves."

"What a creative boy you are," she said throatily, tousling his hair. "But you must remember Mr. Picasso's lessons. Don't be mediocre. Perhaps you could do some abstract drawings now. Entertain us."

"Yes, Mother," said the little boy, and the girl thought he looked as though he were going to throw up. When the lady had returned to her seat she reached over and squeezed his hand, surprising herself, for she did not ordinarily like to touch people.

"Don't be scared," she whispered.

In silence, he tuned to a fresh pair of pages. He took out a Green crayon and began to draw interlocking patterns of squares, shading them carefully.

She watched him for a while before she took the Silver and Gold crayons and drew a house, with a little stick figure standing inside. Then she took the Olive Green and drew several objects next to the figure.

"That's my bomb shelter, where I'm safe from the War," she explained. "But you can be in it. And that's your knapsack, see it? I made it with big straps for you. And that's your canteen so you can be safe afterward. They're colored like what soldiers have, so you can hide. And this is the most important thing of all." She pointed. "See that? That's a map. So you can escape."

"I can't take it," he said in a doomed voice.

"That's all right; I'll give it to you," she said, and tore the page out. Folding it up small, she put it into his coat pocket.

Moving with leisurely slowness, he put back the Green crayon. Then, holding his hands close to his chest, he pulled off one of his gloves and took the folded paper out. He thrust it into an inner pocket, glancing over his shoulder as he did so. Nobody had noticed. Hastily he pulled the glove back on.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," she replied.

At that moment gravity shifted, the steady racketing sound altered and became louder, and there were three distinct bumps. Nobody in the car seemed to notice. Many of the grownups were asleep and snoring, in fact, and did no more than grunt or shift in their seats as the train slowed, as the nearest of the lights swam close and paused outside the window. It was a red blinking light.

"Ah! This is our stop," said the elegant man. "Summerland. Come along, Daniel. I think we've seen enough of the Dome Car, haven't you?"

"Yes, Father," said the boy, buttoning his coat. The elegant lady yawned gracefully.

"Not nearly as much fun as I thought it would be," she drawled. "God, I hate being disappointed. And bored."

"And you bore so easily," said the man, and she gave him a quick venomous glance. The little boy shivered, climbing out of his seat.

"I have to go now," he explained, looking miserable.

"Good luck," said the little girl. The lady glanced at her.

"I'm sure it's past your bedtime, little girl," she said. "And it's rude to stare at people."

She reached down her hand with its long scarlet nails as though to caress, and the little girl dodged. Two fingertips just grazed her eyelid, and with them came a wave of perfume so intense it made her eyes water. She was preoccupied with blinking and sneezing for the next minute, unable to watch as the family walked to the front of the silent car and descended the stair.

But she held her palm tight over her weeping eye and got up on her knees to peek out the window.

She looked down onto no platform, no station, but only the verge of the embankment where trees came close to the tracks.

There was a long black car waiting there, under a lamp that swung un-steadily from a low bough. The elegant couple were just getting into the front seat. The little boy was already in the car. She could see his pale face through the windows. He looked up at her and gave a hopeless kind of smile. She was impressed at how brave he was. She thought to herself that he would have made a good soldier. Would he be able to escape?

The train began to move again. People woke up and talked, laughed, commented on the meteor shower. She sat clutching her eye, sniffing, until her mother got up to see if she had fallen asleep.

"Did you get something in your eye?" her mother asked, her voice going sharp with worry.

The little girl thought a moment before answering.

"The rich lady's perfume got in it," she said.

"What rich lady, honey? Don't rub it like that! Bill, hand me a Kleenex. Oh, what have you done to yourself now?"

"The lady with the little boy. They sat there. They just got off the train."

"Don't lie to your mother," said her daddy, scowling. "Those seats have been empty the whole trip."

She considered her parents out of her good eye, and decided to say nothing else about it. By the time she was bundled off the train, wrapped against the dark and cold in her daddy's coat, her eye had swollen shut.

It was red and weeping for days, even after they'd come home again, and her vision in that eye remained blurred. She was taken to an eye doctor, who prescribed an eyepatch for a while. The eyepatch was useful for pretending she was a pirate but did not help, and made her walk into walls be-sides.

She knew better than to tell anyone about the things she saw out of the other eye, but she understood now why the boy had wanted so badly to escape. She thought about him sometimes, late at night when she couldn't sleep and the long lights of passing cars sent leaf-shadows crawling along her wall.

She always imagined him running through a black night country, finding his way somehow through the maze of wet cobbled alleys, hiding from the Nazis, hiding from worse things, looking for the dome coach so he could escape; and he became clearer in her head as she thought about him, though that always made the headaches come. She would pull the covers over her head and try to hold on to the picture long enough to make the train arrive for him.

But somehow, before he could slip into the safety of the station, bright morning would blind her awake. Sick and crying, she would scream at her mother and knock her head against the wall to make the pain go away.

In the end the doctor prescribed glasses for her. She started kindergarten glaring at the world through thick pink plastic frames, and no one could persuade her she was not hideous in them.