Just Like Mom

April Paul

"...because as a student, I was starved for examples..."

I settled into my chair only a minute or two late to my fiction writing workshop. The professor—undaunted by my tardiness—continued talking about his personal experiences. I felt my A.D.D. kick in.

Starved. Yes, I am—starved. I wish I had some more Wheat Thins. Nah, that box was too small for $1.89. But it is such a cute little box. Funny, you don't normally think of boxes as being "cute." Cute is reserved for little freckled girls with curly, brown hair tied up in pigtails complimented by shiny sea green ribbons. And oh! Those little saddle shoes, the black and white kind. I remember owning a pair of those once. My father gave them to me for—was it Christmas? Oh, no, it was for my seventh birthday, right after a particularly bad day...

"...in fact, it wasn't until I read Carver..."

My dad used to be a carver. A woodworker, actually. He didn't carve so much as he made furniture and things out of wood. One time in the third grade I got myself into a bind because I didn't know the difference between carving and woodworking. Our class was reading a story about a man who did all this carving—the usual ducks and stuff—and when the teacher asked if anyone knew a person who carved, I went crazy. Hysterically waving my hand through the air—being a scrawny, simple little girl, I was never the center of attention—bouncing up and down as best I could while sitting Indian-style (although I don't think it's called that anymore, because it's not politically correct), I called out, "I do! I do! My dad does that!"

And then, that fateful day, when my dad came to our class to show off his carving abilities, having to embellish what few carvings he had done—because he was really a woodworker, mind you, not a carver—so that I wouldn't look stupid in front of everyone. And he didn't disappoint; the class loved his little snowman ornaments and beehive shaped jewelry box. I sat at my desk with a proud, goofy grin, knocking my black and white shoes together in time to the attention I received from classmates. It felt good to be the center of attention for once.

My reverie about being in class reminded me where I was. I looked over to the professor, seeing him look up for the first time since he had begun speaking, only to meet the blank stare of seventeen pairs of eyes. I looked around as well, trying to get past the emptiness of those eyes to what really lie beneath. I was dying to know if anyone had anything interesting going on in their lives. He was concerned with the students as well "...does anyone have any questions?"

Why, as a matter of fact, I do! But I'll bet no one really knows the answers to my questions. Questions like: why do Suave shampoo bottles offer "beautiful, shiny hair for less than the more expensive brands"? I've always wanted to call up Mr. Suave and say, "Of course it's less—that's what makes the others more expensive!" I haven't though, not yet. And on a different note, I've always wondered why bad things happen to good people. To be honest, I'm not so concerned with why good things happen to bad people. It would be just fine with me if good things happened to everyone. I just want to know why God would create small children and beautiful women, unable to fend for themselves, and then let them be hurt. That doesn't seem very loving.

"...a little disappointed in the journals you've done so far. I can see clearly..."

I closed my eyes, resisting the urge to hum. *Ah, that takes me back! I can hear it now, blaring from the black plastic radio my mom kept in the kitchen or the old brown one with the broken antenna that she kept in her sewing room. Man, we had a lot of radios. Anyway, what was that song? Oh yeah... "I can see clearly now the rain is gone/I can see all obstacles in my way..." Who sang that song? Ah, who knows. Doesn't matter. What matters is that those were definitely the good ol' days, even though my mother and I both knew that it's impossible for anyone to see clearly all the time. It is much easier to just accept that there will always be obstacles, and that sometimes we can't do anything about them.*

But that was the last thing on my mind as I sat on the floor in my mother's sewing room, amusing myself with scraps of fabric and naked Barbies, wondering why only their underwear was built-on. Didn't they need bras, too? Regardless of the fact that nothing would become of those scraps except smaller scraps, I sat working contently, listening to Sunny 101.5 play their "seventies, eighties, and nineties." Of course, the nineties had only just been born. I, on the other hand, was seven, and my mom, she was, well...beautiful. I wanted to be just like her.

"...a valid point, but commas can be used at the author's discretion. For instance, Aaron..."

I have two cousins named Aaron. Same side of the family and everything, practically the same birthday. Two of my dad's sisters were pregnant at the same time and each decided she wanted to name her son Aaron. They got in a big argument about it but neither would back down, so now we have two Aarons. A little strange, I think...but strange things always happen on my dad's side of the family. Someone ended up at the hospital during my last family reunion, no kidding. I smirked absentmindedly. *I don't think they were taught conflict resolution.*

"...of course we don't sympathize with the mother..."

That seems odd; mothers are the epitome of sympathy, aren't they? My mother was always a pretty good mother, I think. It's hard to say, because I don't have another mother to compare her to. But she was beautiful, so beautiful. Doesn't every daughter want a beautiful mother? I think so. You expect to grow up to be just like your mom, so you think she's beautiful, because you want to be too.

So many things in our house were beautiful. Of course, everything my dad made in his workshop was beautiful. And those things filled our house: two beds, several lamps, a love seat, two end tables with a matching coffee table, lots of picture frames, a jewelry box, a quilt rack. The quilt rack was my mom's favorite piece of furniture, because she loved sewing so much. She used to show off some of her most extraordinary quilts on that rack, placed right in the entryway of our house. Every time guests would visit they'd look at the quality woodworking and gorgeous quilts and exclaim, "Why, what a lucky little girl you are, to have such talented parents!" Yes, our house was definitely beautiful, if nothing else.

"...the character of the father. How does he act toward his child?"

And that's when I remember her. I try to push her away, back into that corner of my mind filled with vague, rotting images. But she's pushing harder than I am, begging to be remembered, and for once I do see clearly. Too clearly.

A little girl, sitting in an old-fashioned armchair – an ugly, faded brown one. She's got

those little bouncing pigtails with the shiny sea green ribbons, and perhaps those freckles. I don't know; I can't tell because her face is turned from me, her small neck craned awkwardly toward her father who towers over her. Almost everything about him screams "hug me"—soft brown hair, worn red and navy checked flannel shirt with one missing button, straight-legged jeans dirty from a hard day's work, and loose white socks with pink stitching and blue toes. But the truth is in his eyes, shiny with anger. Those cold, dark brown eyes with narrowed pupils blaze down on the pale, upturned face.

"...I don't see him as a loving father..."

And then he grabs her, quickly and firmly, by her tiny forearm; she squeals in pain and fear. I want to help her, but I can't. I'm frozen in fear just like her mother who is standing in the doorway, her lips moving silently in protest. Or perhaps she isn't silent, perhaps I just can't hear her soft voice for the radio—I'd like to think that's what happened. Regardless, I watch her as she sails through the air—yanked from the chair as though it's on fire—into an empty quilt rack setting against the wall. Her little brown head snaps forward as it ricochets off the bottom rung, her right arm painfully thwacking the wall behind it. I've always thought that was an ugly wall, what with the miniature yellow and blue flowers spiraling across it. And now the flowers seem sickly sweet, a mockery of the ugliness that has just occurred.

"...parents seem to have issues, and the child is caught in the middle..."

The father, burning red now, strides from the room as the mother, finally remembering how to move, rushes toward her tiny broken daughter. The little brown-haired girl is screaming, sobbing and snorting, afraid that she will be punished again because there's now a small puddle forming beneath her. The mother tries to comfort her, tries to draw her child close but succeeds only in hurting the bruised child further. So she does all she knows to do. Untying the shoelaces of those tight black and white saddle shoes, she removes them and sings to her daughter—songs, undoubtedly, from the seventies, eighties, and nineties.

"April. How do you feel about the mother?"

Caught off guard, I answered, "Um, she seems passive, I guess." *But she's probably beautiful, very beautiful like my own mother.*

"And the father? How is his relationship with the child?"

"I think..." I hesitated because I didn't know what I thought. "I think he probably tried." *Yes. Yes, I think he did.*

"And Immanuel? Do you have any thoughts about Immanuel?"

Immanuel. Emmanuel. I know I read somewhere what that means...oh yes! "God is with us." Is He, really? All the time? Was He standing near the quilt rack or hiding in the little yellow and blue flowers or was He simply protecting my mom instead of me? Yes, that must be it. My beautiful mom needed protecting.

"No," I smiled lightly. "No thoughts."

it. You don't know how many times I live with the advice to "move on." I want to scream, "Do you think I don't want to? I want to 'get on with my life'—only 'my life' isn't there anymore!"

Others presume to know what music I like, what food I eat…Yes, I like watermelon… Do *you*? Is it "culturally significant"? My lack of basketball skills disappoint a lot of people. No personal rebellion, no political statement—I just don't like basketball.

Am I making you uncomfortable? I'm forgetting how to be a "good sport", that's part of the duties of Being Fat. That word again—FAT. There, let's just say it. I *know* every politically correct version: chunky, curvy, solid. I even get "voluptuous" once in a while, usually from men who want some…I'm like the special project for people who care about me—only their definition of help is "change," not "acceptance".

But I'll tell you *my* dream—my dream is that I won't be expected to justify either the degree of my ethnicity or my Americanism, because it won't be a contradiction anymore.

The security, the confidence, the freedom of myself—it was stolen. Most days, I have faith that I can replenish it—but now I know vulnerability. What is me can be taken from me.

In a funny way, pressure to change makes me not want to. Don't get me wrong, if I could wake up a size 8 tomorrow, I'd be all over that…but I don't want to *change* because somebody else—*everybody* else—says I should. If I "change," who will I be? Will I like whoever's left?

Some days I feel invisible—but I trust myself to know What Matters. The issue is choice. What is 'important'? Who gets to decide?

As my body dies slowly, "I" am not trapped. I have discovered a freedom from your rules and your expectations. I am without need of your approval. I pity you, you of this shallow society, for you are unprepared for what lies ahead.

Though you refuse to see, I am your future.

I have a voice…I have a voice…I have a voice.

[Alternating voices]

I have a voice.