

Daddy

By James Lawless

Daddy is an important man. He has a job high up in the government. A secret job and dangerous. He doesn't say exactly what the dangers are but he talks about the dangers on the streets especially for young girls and especially at night. Daddy goes out a lot at night. Mammy and I understand. It's his job. He could be called out at any time and sometimes he comes home very late. Mammy tells me this because most times I'm asleep when Daddy comes home.

I worry about Daddy going out like that. Something could happen to him. But he tells me he's okay and he is well able to look after himself. My daddy is tall and strong. He often points to his head of hair: 'Just one, just find one grey hair, Esmé,' he would say and I would search deep, parting his hair like Mammy does searching for ticks, and not one grey hair would I find. Mammy's hair is white. She could put a dye in her hair like some of my school friends' mothers do, but Mammy can't be bothered. Her hair hangs on her head like the wool on a sheep. Least that's what Daddy says. Mammy is quiet. She doesn't tell me things. Not like Daddy. Daddy tells me things except of course about his job. He tells me stories like fairy tales but never happy-ever-after. 'Real life's not like that, Esmé,' he would say. Daddy smokes a lot. I don't like the smoke. Our teacher told us that smoking can give you lung cancer. I tell Daddy that. He tells me he will give it up just for me, but he never does. He sits me on his knee by our tall fireplace. Our fireplace is made of Italian marble and has a lovely mahogany surround with designs. Daddy likes to put logs on the fire to make the flames shoot up to keep out the winter chill, he says. We have a three-storey house and a big garden and high walls to keep us safe from harm and keep the snooping eyes away. That's what Daddy says. Daddy says it's very hard to get a house with a big garden any more. We have an orchard in the garden and I have a vegetable plot of my own where I grow string beans and white Lisbon scallions. Mammy grows all the flowers. Roses are her favourite and Forget-me-nots. Daddy loves the spring scallions in his salads.

I go to ballet classes twice a week. I started at the age of three. It was Daddy's idea.

Sometimes he comes and watches me and the older girls practising on the bars. Daddy is proud of me because I started as a snowflake and now I am a swan.

It's Monday morning. I'm getting ready for school. I'm wearing my blue pinafore and I'm putting books in my satchel with the long strap. Mammy hands me my red lunch box. She used to put a chocolate bar inside with the sandwiches, but I haven't got a bar in ages now.

Mammy is particularly quiet in the mornings. Daddy is sitting at the table behind his newspaper, ruffling it sometimes which makes Mammy sigh. Mammy's sigh is deep and long. Mammy can't see Daddy and neither can I unless we go round the table, and even then it's only his pinstriped back we'd see. Daddy is different in the mornings. He doesn't speak or look up from his newspaper when Mammy puts his three minute egg in his silver eggcup and places it down in front of him. Three minutes. Why does it always have to be three minutes? I want to ask. How different would the egg taste if it were four minutes say, or two and a half minutes? But I wouldn't ask not since Daddy pushed it away from him one morning after he'd knocked off its top.

It's evening and Daddy is sitting by the fire in the drawing room. He is much more relaxed now than in the morning time. He smiles down at me. He's drinking a brandy from a Waterford crystal glass. I'm sitting on his knee in my tutu after my ballet class. Mammy is in the kitchen making a beef curry for Daddy and me. Mammy doesn't eat meat. She has her vegetarian curry in a separate pot. One bit of my leg is getting hot from the fire. I turn the other leg round on Daddy's lap.

'Do you have to go out tonight, Daddy?' I say.

'I do, Esmé,' he says reaching over with his long arm to rest his glass on our little mahogany table.

'Why, Daddy?'

'Why?' Daddy sighs. Daddy's sigh is not like Mammy's; it's quicker, angry almost.

'Sometimes...' he says and then he pauses.

'Sometimes what Daddy?'

'Sometimes, Esmé, people have needs.'

'I don't know what you mean, Daddy?'

'Our house, Esmé, our home.' He looks at me and smiles. 'You,' he says hoisting me up in the air. And then, putting me down as if remembering something not nice, he sighs once more. 'Even you...'

I know why Daddy won't finish his sentences. It's because of his job. He can't tell his secrets to anybody, not even to me. He said that to me when I asked: 'Why can't you tell me some of your secrets, Daddy?' I mean I would tell my daddy my secrets if I had any. He told me he had to take an oath, and besides, he said, if everybody knew what everybody else was doing all the time the world would be in a sorry state.

It's late Saturday night and I'm not in bed. Mammy is busy on the phone in the hall. She's having a long conversation with her friend that I never saw; her name is Sheila. They are speaking for ages and ages. That's where Mammy does her talking, on the phone. Like it's all stored up for Sheila. It makes me a teeny bit jealous. It's getting late. I'm getting tired. When I sneak out of the kitchen with my glass of milk into the drawing room, I catch her dabbing her eyes with a tissue. I'm expecting her to shout at me at any moment to go to bed. She must have forgotten the time. I watch the TV until my eyelids grow heavy.

Daddy comes into the room looking for his car keys. He startles me. I didn't hear him come in because he's wearing what he calls his quiet shoes. He's dressed in his black leather jacket and smelling of after shave.

'What are you doing up?' he says crossly without saying my name.

He picks the keys off the mantelpiece and puts them in his jacket pocket.

I hear the sound of Mammy's footsteps running up the stairs.

'Go to bed immediately, Esmé,' he says.

I'm going out of the room and I reach up and kiss Daddy on his cheek.

'Go now,' he says.

Writing Raw

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'There's a hair on your jacket, Daddy,' I say.

'Where, where,' he snaps. Daddy is very particular about his clothes.

'Bend down,' I say .

'Quickly,' he says.

'Now, Daddy,' I say brushing it from his collar, 'now it's gone.'

I know the sound of Daddy's car. I know the crunch of his tyres on the gravel path. Mammy doesn't go out at night, but some afternoons she goes to visit her friend Sheila.

'Mammy,' I say the next evening looking up from our antique pine table in the kitchen (I always do my homework in the kitchen). 'What is it, Esmé?' She doesn't look up from her ironing board. She is ironing Daddy's silk shirt. Her voice is so tired always; her shoulders are scrunched up as she irons, making her look worn. She sighs as if speaking to me is an effort. 'I was just wondering, Mammy,' I say with my pencil at my lips, 'why your friends... why Sheila...?'

'Sheila? You were eavesdropping.'

'No, no,' I say.

'Sheila was...' Mammy hesitates...'before I was married...'

'Could I meet her, Mammy?'

'No, you could not,' she says looking up.

'Why, Mammy?'

'Cos your father...' She stops and sighs. 'Just finish your homework, Esmé.'

I'm in bed wakened by a noise. It's coming from their room. I climb out of bed and go out to the landing and see the yellow light from their room streaming from underneath their door. 'Daddy,' I shout. I always call Daddy first before Mammy. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I know Daddy will always answer me. Mammy sometimes doesn't answer me when I'm talking to her. Sometimes she doesn't talk to Daddy either and Daddy doesn't talk to her. Sometimes she just looks sad and sighs and pulls her cardigan tightly around her thin chest.

‘Go back to bed Esmé.’ Daddy speaks in a firm but gentle voice. Once I hear Daddy I go back to bed and fall asleep straight away.

Daddy drives me to school in our shiny white car – Mammy doesn’t drive. She’s a little bit nervous. She did not get up this morning. ‘She wasn’t feeling well,’ Daddy says.

When I come home, she’s in the garden wearing sunglasses. There is no sun shining. She doesn’t speak. She deadheads the roses while I tie up my string beans to bamboo canes.

Tonight I’m lying in bed with a toothache. I can’t sleep. Daddy is out and I don’t want to trouble Mammy. She was particularly quiet the last couple of days. Perhaps she’s not well. She doesn’t look well. Doctor Cotter told her she hasn’t got enough blood and to eat lots of liver, something she never did, not even once.

I can see the moon through my window. I have a little tear in my right eye which I allow to fill up. The moon is moving through the black and grey clouds, or maybe it’s the clouds that are moving, or maybe it’s the earth. I can tell time passing as the clouds become lighter. The toothache is not too bad now; it’s bearable, just a dull throbbing, still, enough to keep me awake. The moon disappears – retires for the morning, the opposite of us humans, except for Daddy of course. I wonder what he’s doing now, my Daddy.

Dawn is pecking at my window when I hear the sound of the car tyres crunching on the gravel path. I want to run to Daddy to ask him if he’s tired and if he would like me to make him a cup of tea after his long night. I want to tell him about my toothache and my day in school. But I know he wouldn’t approve of my being out of bed at such an hour.

I know he’s coming up the stairs because I hear the creak of his quiet shoes on the ninth step. I hear him opening the door of their bedroom. I hear the door closing. I hear a voice giving out. It’s Mammy’s. I hear Daddy’s voice now and the two voices together getting louder. I hear something falling. A heavy thud. Then silence.

Writing Raw

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The End

James Lawless bio: James Lawless' poetry and prose have won many awards, including the Scintilla Welsh Open Poetry Competition, the WOW award, a Biscuit International Prize for short stories, the Cecil Day Lewis Award and a Hennessey award nomination for emerging fiction. Two of his stories were also shortlisted for the Willesden (2007) and Bridport prizes (2014). He is the author of five well-received novels, a book of children's stories and a poetry collection *Rus in Urbe*. His books have been translated into several languages. Born in Dublin, he divides his time between County Kildare and West Cork. He is an experienced creative writing workshop facilitator, speaks to groups and at festivals and has broadcast his work on RTE radio. His books are at: <http://www.amazon.com/James-Lawless/e/B001J0XD96> or at his website: <http://www.jameslawless.net>