

Don't mention the C word

The two boys were squabbling. As usual. Only a year between them, best of friends, hated each others guts, jealously rarely left too far aside.

"Just wait a minute." Their mother sighed, tried patience. "Please?"

Silvia gave them an electronic appliance each and they seemed to calm down.

"I'll be back in a second." She didn't expect a reply and didn't wait for one.

Her father nodded across the garden. Familiar smells invaded, and then haunted her nose as she looked across the evening sun and waved back at the old man.

The comfort of coming home was bleached with the realities of an unavoidable future. Silvia was having a JFC moment. Her father mowed on.

"Damn" she muttered.

Above the noise of the lawnmoer she couldn't hear herself. Neither could he. Shielding her eyes with fingers over her forehead, the dying sun ruined the view: her father was little more than a shadow howevering across the horizon. The boys still had to do their homework. She needed to attract his attention, to get it over with: there would be no good moment.

Out of the corner of her eye Silvia saw their cat. Her mother's favourite, all old and arthritic.

Pausing for a moment, the lawnmower hummed without effort, hesitating in that way her father had of thinking out loud, without ever reaching a decision you wanted to achieve. The sun was fading. The sweet smell of newly cut grass filled the air, soaking up the oily refined tones of trucks heading off down the motorway.

The cat was asleep within the comforting heat of a recently used engine. The blades slashed. Her father kicked the toggle into motion. The cat was too drowsy to move. The lawnmower didn't dither. In fact neither did her father. Normal. He wasn't very good at reacting, maybe better at acting.

Silvia remembered when she was sixteen and told him she was moving in with her boyfriend: he didn't seem to be listening at the time, but what had she wanted? They'd got part time jobs, could afford it. What could their parents say?

"Is he good to you?"

"Yes."

Fathered two sons then fucked off. So in the end he wasn't. Her father never asked any more.

"The roses are turning out well. Spread a little fresh earth on them just to be sure". Nature kept her father entertained. Human nature was something he preferred not to trim.

Silvia watched his hands. How they moved in rhythm with unexpressed thoughts. The cat squealed. Blood spurted. He mowed on but she could see the tremble in his fingers. He did listen. She smelt the waft of whiskey on her ear, the stiffness of stale sweat in her hair as he gave her a good night kiss.

Her father kept his eyes on the horizon: there was always some way of avoiding what was happening. He hadn't seen the cat and now he would continue to evade it's existence, it's death. Silvia wondered if it had descendents.

"Just purrfect" Silvia shouted. The words blew away in a haze of diesel and the glare of a sun refusing to give in.

Was he paying attention? Maybe she shouldn't have said anything, just enjoy the evening air blowing in from the neighbours, autumn's glow slurring out the rift between summer and winter, the whiff of fresh earth bubbling after a refreshing shower.

Silvia had a smart comment for everything except death. She turned around for a minute: the kids were fighting probably, plugged in, entertained, oblivious to the world outside.

Smelly belly. He'd called her that when she was small. When they talked. "Big tummy" she would reply. "Silly Daddy". Until it was no longer funny. After two kids her own stomach wasn't that flat any more either.

"Smelly belly."

"Smelly belly," she shouted out again.

Something rang a bell. A slight pause but he wasn't hearing: he was letting that bloody red and green lawnmower blot it all out. Oily fumes hid the cries, burned rubber covered their tracks. Silvia needed his attention. He could avoid the cat but not his daughter.

"Smelly belly," Silvia muttered to herself. Silvia wasn't sure what to say. Her father mowed on. Silvia watched the blood seep into grass and wondered vaguely if it would be a good fertilizer or if that depended on the cat's last meal.

Silvia needed to retch. It wasn't the cat's fault. It was growing inside. Her mother had warned her. Not verbally: that would have been too direct, too unlike her parents who used side glances in a rear view mirror as directions; you were supposed to read and judge the distance correctly, without crossing the red line or the stop sign you had presumably seen. Her mother had never mentioned the illness until it took her to a point where she could no longer hide it; but she remained incapable of talking about it.

Her mother died in months. Her father partly went with her. Or maybe not.
Never a man for emotions, or words beyond the bare essentials.

“It’s just that ...”

“I’m ...”

Silvia had inherited their reluctance to bare feelings into words.

The machine ploughed on, noise soaring, grass spitting, a sleepy hale of
vegetation falling back to earth. Autumn was hefty, the smell of dusk hollering
in her ears. Jesus Fucking Christ.

The lawnmower stopped. He was looking over. He always seemed to know a bit
more than he pretended.

He didn’t speak. The shuddering lawnmower was a good excuse. The dying cat
an even better one. Maybe he had seen the animal all along and it was his
vengeance. Could she trust the boys to him? She had no alternative. They were
bickering away in the back seat. They might have to learn how to mow the
lawn when she was gone.

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