

Angel Marie

Flash Fiction – “Daddy’s Gun”

Word Count 1502

Daddy’s Gun

Out of my entire childhood I only recall a smile crossing Daddy’s face a total of three times. I walked in on him once, in a room in the basement whose only mercy to the darkness of its vacant pits was a kerosene lamp that sat on a rickety desk beside him. He scrubbed softly and scrupulously with a rag at a hunting rifle he normally kept displayed on a hook about a foot above the desk he sat at. The gun he polished was long, the extended barrel he cradled in his lap like that of a newborn calf.

I recall the start of anxiety it instilled within me, pushing the door open — letting it screech to announce my entrance for me. *What could he possibly be doing at this hour?* The tip of my thumb hung over my bottom lip as I nibbled the head of it softly, granting myself a sense of calm and peace, a relief from the unease that maintained a tight grip around my throat. It was not hunting season, this I was certain. No matter how good the prey, it never flowed into the new year, always ending the month before. The blankets of white over took the farm fields outside for much longer that year, and so this memory never left my mind. With the end of hunting season came daydreams staring out the window and yearning for green pastures freckled with flowers. I remember how I truly believed I’d never feel the warm kiss of sun on my skin again. The sunlight meant picnics, full fields and sustenance for the precious crops that kept Daddy sane. But the sun came late that year.

The way Daddy looked flickers in my mind like the reels of an old film; the image of him in the office strokin' his gun luling from side to side with trance like motion, his gaze fixed longingly on the cracks that snaked down the aged wall of the house like veins before him. The soft *drip drip* of the leaking ceiling above accompanied the deep silence that hung in the air like a thick smoke. I could see the edges of his mouth, which on a regular day appeared sunken down, almost inward as if he were rotting into himself like an animated corpse, now suddenly creased upward. The beginning of the grin continued growing and growing the longer he polished at the piece's rib. He maintained an almost loving stare down the bead, into the depths of the barrel. Daddy's eyes — for once the tired old man looked *alive*.

Finally it grew much too warm for the snow to sit on the fields in blankets. Late February it began to melt and Mama left the house with a slam and a spray of mud from her new man's truck tires. I couldn't tell you what number this one was, she kept them all in her back pocket like playing cards for a cheap trick. Daddy must've really upset her, because she played this man from the deck quick and we — Daddy, little Joseph Jr and I — knew that her extended absence guaranteed that her return was not in our own cards. As the night of her fleeing got later and the crickets punched in to hum their night hymns and the stars emerged to paint the country sky, she still had not returned. I heard Daddy go outside, exiting out the back through the kitchen to the yard, hardly closing the door behind him.

I could see him from the kitchen window, pacing amongst the grass near the chicken coup, in between the end of the yard and the start of the fields. He paced slowly, step by step his two feet seemingly growing heavier and heavier. His neck craned upwards, eyes straight up to the pattern of stars above him that illuminated his path dimly. Carelessly he continued and his walk screamed that he led not by sight but surely by muscle memory. A path of broken blades

told me enough – he had walked this path, back and forth along the edge of the crops, over and over and over again, so much so that the pathway became as much a part of the fields as the soil and the rocks and each blade of grass was. I dare not step out the back door. For once, I didn't want Daddy to know I could see him and I didn't want the summer mosquitoes to mistake the skin my nightgown left exposed as a midnight offering.

I watched Daddy — a stumbling veil of a man encapsulated by shadows — suddenly break from his makeshift trail, setting his sights on the old scarecrow, which towered over the edge of the yard.

Daddy used to tell me, “A farmer, a *real* farmer is married to his crops. The scarecrow is only there for show; I could never love something without a pretty face attached to it.”

A smileless chuckle would follow close behind the delivered line, as if he were gagging on the words. Afterwards each time like a ritual, Daddy would stroke my soft and supple cheeks till they'd grow rose pink and I'd laugh in response, blissfully ignorant.

That night I watched him rip the scarecrow piece by piece, fragments of hay and cloth circling him like a storm as he clawed the protector of his precious, precious crops until all that remained was a pile of hay and an old floppy brown hat. The brisk night wind carried off these scraps leaving Daddy nothing. When the current of air finished stealing away evidence of his attack, Daddy turned to face the house. He stared right through me. A ghost of a man, mirrored before me in genetically shared facial features, all familiar but now attached to a stranger. The smile that stretched from ear to ear revealed glowing white pearls within his mouth – a flashlight in the dark of the night – and this made me certain that night was the night I lost my Daddy.

Three days later the sun cried a frozen rain that nipped at our cheeks until they flushed a pale pink. I clutched the soft cotton of the social worker's sweater sleeve, shivers cascading

down my spine – shivers not from that of the cold, late winter air but from the disquieted looks I received from everyone who spotted me.

“The poor farmer’s daughter,” they labeled me, shaking their head to themselves as they crossed paths with me at the scene.

Peeking through the crack the social worker’s arm made as it dangled alongside her torso, I could feel little Joey Junior and his small four year-old hands clutching my own, his tiny nails smaller than pennies once provided in our weekly allowance attached to hands half the size of my own seven and a half year old pair.

“Where’s Daddy?” his sniveling voice came out as a crackling croak, and I didn’t turn around to bear witness to his hopeless, tear streaked face.

Instead, my eyes remained glued on the two person paramedic team as they pushed out a stretcher. To control its direction upon the frozen driveway appeared to be a relentless task; while they wanted the old gurney to go one way, it desired to go another. Upon the stubborn pram lay a once stubborn, still man – my Daddy. He lay there, pale and drained, only his head peeking out from under the bright yellow sheet-like covering used to keep the state of him a secret from his kin. This proved a poor failure on the paramedics part, as his head remained out as they escorted him from his farm for the final time. The moment went quicker than a breath of air. A single moment, to affect all others after. From my sheltered viewing point, I witnessed it; a soft smile stamped upon his newly deceased face.

I am nineteen now. Somehow, before the wind carried whispers of gossip to my ears years later, I knew that the gun had taken his life. The image of Daddy cradling it in his lap – as if only its trigger could grant him the freedom he craved – never really left my mind. The bullet traveled through the right temple, exited the top of his head. That damn thing *should* have

remained pinned on the wall above the desk in the tiny room within the dull and dark basement. But I could see Daddy still, sitting next to the table, stroking it lovingly.

I moved out two weeks ago. Finally, the “poor farmer’s daughter” left the farm; no longer a farmer nor a daughter survived. Within that farmhouse I left the resentment for Daddy’s gun, boxed up with all the rest of his old belongings, deserted within the basement to rot. The gun itself I left to drown in the shadows accompanied by nothing but dust and webs and the dead spiders within them. Propped in the corner it sits — freshly polished, and alone.