

The Man Who Sat on the Ground



By Velina Derilova

Manny opened his eyes slowly, waking up to a feeling of uneasiness whose source he couldn't locate. He wasn't an early riser, not since getting out of jail a year ago anyway, so this weird dread merged with his usual morning grumpiness. Hannah came in and opened an underwear drawer. "Time to get up! Are you ready for the big day?" She was packing.

"Sure," Manny said remembering what was causing his sourness: the weekend camping trip. It held a special position on Hannah's list of what normal families do. Long afternoon barbecues and inviting people over to the house were also on it. Manny hated the list.

"There's a small change in the plan, by the way. We're not taking Truffles."

"Why not," he said.

"The twins just made a scene over breakfast. Esther called Gavriel a fag because he took a bite of her strudel. He pulled her hair, she hit him on the head and so on."

"Jesus, Hannah, they're six. I bet they don't even know what the word means."

"Oh, they know all right. They need to learn to behave. No cat this time and that's that." She took a few pairs of socks and closed the door behind her.

Like most times, Manny decided against arguing. After all, Hannah knew better, she was supposed to. She'd taken care of the kids while he was gone. She was the one who understood them, not him. Manny was still fighting the overwhelming feeling of awkwardness flooding him whenever he was around them. He was a menial worker, a high-school drop-out, a failed musician; certainly not a father.

He went in the bathroom to shave. The knot in his stomach tightened as he started gliding the razor across his face.

Manny remembered a time when Hannah had to take a night shift at the fudge factory and left him alone with the kids. He had allowed them to watch TV waypast

their bed time and thought they were in a daze over a Scooby Doo episode. He caught them at the back door right when they were trying to sneak out to the yard with two pillows and their big green camping tent. Manny overreacted. He snatched the pillows away and started shouting. He wasn't really angry; he simply thought that was what Hannah would have done. The kids started crying and didn't speak to him for days. He had little to no sense of what was right or wrong when it came to bringing them up and had no place inside him to look for it. He felt empty.

Just as he was getting to the right corner of his mouth, Esther rushed in and put her small arms around him.

"Morning, daddy!" She was squeezing him as hard as her tiny body allowed.

"Careful, sweetheart, or daddy will cut himself."

"Mommy said we can't take Truffles. Let's take her, daddy, please, please, please."

"Leave daddy alone now. I'll be out in a minute. OK?" He gently but firmly removed her small, smooth hands from the sides of his hips.

Esther looked at him and pouted her lips with childlike contempt, sensing he wasn't going to do anything about it. "It's not fair," she cried and ran off.

Manny wiped off the shaving cream leftovers and slid his fingers along his rounded cheeks. He was going out of shape but didn't mind it. It made him look more like a suburban dad than the ex-con he actually was, than the ex-killer that he was. Can you ever be an ex-killer, he wondered. He also wondered what good it would be for Esther and Gavriel to grow up around a man like him, moody and quiet, not much fun really. A man who had pulled the trigger on another human being. A man who loved his children more than anything and yet couldn't translate this love into meaningful actions; this love wasn't doing them any good. They don't teach you how to be a loving dad in prison, do they?

"Breakfast's ready," Hannah called from the kitchen. As Manny was seating himself at the table, she took a good, long look at him from over the sink where she was doing dishes.

"What's with you this morning," she asked.

"I didn't sleep well. A nightmare or something. Where's Gavriel." He was good at changing the topic. Not with Hannah, though. She knew him too well, the way only a childhood sweetheart could. She had stopped doing the dishes and was now facing Manny, water dripping on the floor from her yellow rubber gloves.

"He's outside with Truffles. Eat your breakfast, we'll be leaving soon." Her eyes were fixed on his face.

Manny finished his eggs and toast and went outside to have a smoke. The chilly morning air pinched his bare arms. He thought about getting a sweater but knew if he went inside, Hannah would want to talk, she might start a fight. Manny didn't want to fight. He wanted a smoke. He lit one of his Camels and inhaled. The pleasant smell of tobacco tickled his nostrils and he sat on the ground, putting his arms around his knees.

He hated benches and chairs. He hated beds, too. If it was for him to decide, everyone would sit on the ground, eat on the ground, sleep on the ground. That's where he felt OK, that's where he thought all people should be at home. Yes, he was a ground person. A ground person? Manny put a hand on his forehead and laughed. He laughed harder and harder until his face went red and he was gasping for air; then, suddenly, a heavy helplessness hit him like a hammer and he started sobbing. He felt tired and small—a small piece of nothing on the ground of a backyard. He buried his head in his arms, his shoulders shaking convulsively. The warm waves of regret and self-pity rushed through him like a tropical torrent. A mild wind scattered the ashes

of his half-finished smoke and tangled slightly the locks of his prematurely greying hair. He wept just like he used to when he was a little boy.

"Are you crying, daddy?" Manny lifted his head and saw Gavriel holding Truffles and looking at him with his smart, piercing eyes. "Esther says we men don't cry."

Manny wiped his nose with the back of his hand and threw the smoke away.

"Hey, buddy! I didn't see you. Where'd you come from?"

"I told Truffles she can't come with us. Now she's upset. Are you upset about it too?"

As always when one of the twins asked a question, Manny didn't know what to say. The answers never came, they were never simple. He reached out and stroked the back of the white Persian cat. Her fine, light fur felt good beneath his fingertips. He liked that animal.

"Sit down with me, Gav, will you?" Gavriel put Truffles down and sat on Manny's right side.

"Is a fag a bad thing, daddy," Gavriel asked. Manny sighed.

"Aren't you a curious guy." He thought about it and said what he believed was the right thing to say. "No, it's not a bad thing."

"Do they cry?"

"I suppose they do," Manny said. Gavriel seemed to contemplate something. He picked a small, wooden stick and started playing with it. He drew a house with a smoking chimney and a sun above it.

"Can I tell you something, daddy?" Gavriel looked at his father.

"Sure."

"I know I'm a man," Gavriel said, "but I sometimes cry."

Manny was silent, waiting for him to go on.

"But I don't cry when Esther hits me," he said, "and I don't cry when the other kids at school make fun of me."

"I didn't think you would," Manny smiled. Gavriel picked the stick up again. He drew a tree next to the house.

"But I cry when mommy yells at you and when you slam the doors." He was now drawing a man and a woman in front of the house. "Does this make me a fag?"

Manny closed his eyes and took a moment to process what Gavriel had just said. This little man, his son, was the purest creature he'd ever seen. He felt an unbelievable rush of pride and adoration, delighted and confused at the same time. This happened to him all the time. He was never able to navigate the emotions that swept through him and had difficulty identifying them. This didn't happen before prison. His emotional intelligence was put to the test in there when his nervous system was bombarded with all sorts of sensations that he hadn't come into contact with before. He often took anxiety for anger, joy for sentimentality and worry for fear. He was rarely sure of what he felt. Now, in this very moment, the only thing he knew was that he was happy.

Manny looked at the back of Gavriel's long, fragile neck and thought how much he loved this neck, this small body. He wanted to hold him but was afraid he'd be an awkward hug, that he'd look ridiculous by once again doing what Hannah or someone else would do. He put a hand on Gavriel's shoulder instead and answered his question.

"No," he said. "It doesn't."

Gavriel finished his drawing by inserting himself and Esther in the picture. He put big smiles on all the faces. Truffles was lying next to Gavriel, purring. Manny decided to do the least he could do. Try.

"Hey, buddy," he said, "are you excited about camping?"

“Yes, yes!” Gavriel’s eyes widened with innocent glow.

“Me too,” Manny said, “me too.”

“Daddy, mommy says we’re leaving. Daddyyy!”

Esther was standing at the back door with a pink straw hat on. Her voice came as if from far, far away, but sounded familiar. Manny wasn’t confused. Yes, it was a sweet voice. A voice he liked hearing.