

Sympathy for the Devil

By C. Doyle

The sun from my partially open venetian blinds woke me, a single band of light falling across my eyes. I propped myself up on an elbow and looked at my alarm clock. 9:35am. I stared sleepily at the numbers, until jarring anxiety made me throw off my covers and jump out of bed. *School*. I was late for school! Why didn't my dad wake me up?! The bus came at 7:30 every morning; I had missed almost two periods of class by now.

My mother usually made sure I was up in the mornings, as I had a habit of hitting my snooze button until she got so angry she would come in and rip the comforter off my bed, throwing it into the hallway. My mother was not here today though; she and a few friends had taken a road trip from New Jersey to Troy, New York to visit my sister at RPI. My dad was supposed to make sure I was up and out the door to catch the bus.

"Daddy!"

I yelled from my room, hopping up and down on alternating feet, trying to simultaneously put my socks on and pull a t-shirt over my head. I grabbed my jeans off the floor from the day before and fastened the button as I ran down the hallway, taking the corner with a hand on the wall and flying down the two flights of stairs in my bi-level house.

"Daddy!"

I shrieked again, sliding on the tile floor, looking around frantically for my father. He was sitting in the office, the computer's screen saver making intricate patterns out of neon lines as my father slept in the swivel chair, head hanging back and snoring like an eighteen wheeler. He snapped into an upright posture, startled to see me standing in the doorway, my eyes wide and hands thrown up in exasperation.

"What? What's wrong, what's the matter?"

His words were slurred but it didn't really register to me. He rubbed his eyes and squinted at me, like I was blurry and he was trying to pull me into focus.

"School! You were supposed to wake me up for school! Do you know what time it is?!"

He was silent for a moment, scratching the back of his head nonchalantly before letting out a long sigh.

"You wanna play hooky?"

My anger evaporated. This was not the reaction I was expecting. I was used to dealing with my mother, who flew off the handle at any added stress to her already strictly planned out days, down to the second. I was used to reactions of harshness and snappy sarcastic responses. She was always in a rush, telling me I took too long, to smile when in public, commenting about what I was wearing or how I looked. Playing hooky sounded great to me. No commitments, no bullies in my sixth grade classes, no plans. We could do whatever we wanted.

"Could, could we see a movie?"

My dad turned to the computer, and with pointer fingers only, typed in our local movie theater. I saw "The School of Rock" at the top of the list and knew that was a movie he had wanted to see, but wasn't the type of humor my mother would ever sit through. Standing next to him, I could smell beer and cigarettes under his strong aftershave.

"Let's see a matinee, it'll be cheaper." He winked at me. "How does "School of Rock" sound?"

“Yeah, yes! Let’s go see that!” I couldn’t keep the excitement out of my voice. A PG-13 movie in the middle of the day? The first thought that popped into my head was *mom should leave town more often*.

I carefully applied black eyeliner and eye shadow, makeup my mother would never let me wear. I couldn’t keep the smile off my face as I danced around my room to my boom box, trying on combinations of clothes after raiding my sister’s closet. I settled on an outfit that I thought made me look older; more sophisticated. I was seeing my first PG-13 movie after all. When I was finally ready with just enough time to make it to the theater, I went to find my dad, who was in the garage with the radio on. I opened the door and saw him quickly throw something into the recycling, covering it with a seltzer bottle. There was a second refrigerator in the garage, one we used for extra storage around the holidays, but mostly it was just filled with beer. My dad stumbled a little when he walked over to the workbench to turn off the small radio. I frowned, watching him fumble with the dial, but pushed any thoughts I had away, excited to be playing hooky with my dad.

“You all set?” He asked, ruffling my hair as he walked past me and into the bathroom to run a comb through his receding hairline. He didn’t say anything about my makeup or what I was wearing. I felt simultaneously grown up and like a little girl, my daddy was taking me to a movie, he wanted to spend time with me. I impulsively hugged him, making him sputter the mouthwash he had just taken a swig of. He grabbed his keys and wallet and we jumped in his little Honda.

I loved watching him watch the movie. The plot was based around a music teacher that teaches his class how to play and perform in the same vein as the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, and other bands of that era that my father and I shared a mutual passion for. He always played the Stones in the car, singing along. He seemed so carefree, so happy, laughing his signature guffaw without being shushed by my mother. Not the usual depressed lump of a person he was at home, either sleeping or getting into screaming matches with my mother about finding work or his drinking.

“That was great!” My dad roared as we exited the theater into the afternoon. We quoted snippets from the film on the way to the car, imitating the actors, singing Stevie Nix at the top of our lungs so off-key people in the parking lot turned to smile. Just a normal father and daughter.

“Really?!” I exclaimed as my dad pulled into the parking lot of the Riverstar Diner. He had just finished a can of what he said was soda and tossed it onto the floor of the backseat. I wasn’t stupid. I was 11 and could obviously read, but I didn’t want to spoil today. A movie *and* going to my family’s “special occasion” diner? I couldn’t believe how upset I was this morning about school.

“Order whatever you want,” my dad said with a sweeping gesture of his hands. We had picked out a booth with a view of the river rushing behind the building. The smiling older waitress brought out my dad’s beer with foam still on top and a chocolate milkshake for me. I ordered a cheeseburger and french fries and we joked about how mom would kill us if she found out we had indulged in “forbidden foods.” We talked about the movie, dipping our fries into my milkshake, my dad guzzling down another few beers. “National Bum Day” was the name we had christened the day with; vowing to do it again the next time mom was out of town. We ended our

meal in a comfortable silence, both reclined into the plush vinyl of the booth, stomachs extended with our gluttony.

“Let’s go, we have one more stop before it starts getting dark.”

My dad jumped up, a big smile across his face, icy blue eyes sparkling, holding the edge of the booth to steady himself. I looked back as we were leaving, our waitress watching us walk to the car, concern creasing her forehead. I snuck a glance at my dad. His eyes were glazed over and his gait had taken on a more meandering path. I looked back at the waitress. I waved and smiled, prompting her to do the same. *Everything’s fine* I said to myself. *Everything’s fine.*

Our last stop was farther than the movie theater; the strip malls and chain restaurants replaced by sprawling farms with sheep grouped together under shady trees, a single llama on sentry duty with its head sticking up absurdly from the middle of the group like a periscope. The sun sparkled and danced across lakes and strobed through corn fields until we turned into a dirt parking lot that looked like the head of a hiking trail.

“Where are we?” I turned to my dad who only shrugged innocently and got out of the car. I followed him down a well-kept path until I could see pieces of fence and high cages. *Cages?* Then I heard the birds. We were at a bird sanctuary, with enclosures as tall as four story buildings and as wide as my whole house. I wandered around with wonder, looking at all the beautiful feathers, listening to the trills and chirps, wondering how my father knew about this tiny paradise in the woods. I found him in front of the snowy owl cage, where three sleepy owls were bunched together on one branch. My dad made one of his signature silly noises usually reserved for newborns and all the owls opened their eyes at once, tilting their heads in unison, staring back at us.

“Even the birds think you’re weird!” I doubled over with laughter, trying to catch my breath. My dad feigned offense and laughed along with me. We stayed there for at least an hour, until it was getting dark enough that we had to head back to the car. The ride home we recounted the names we had given each bird, or the ones we could remember anyway, and my dad put in a Stones CD that we both sang along with, the windows down and the wind whipping my hair around.

Later that night, as I changed into my pajamas, I decided to run downstairs to say goodnight one last time to my dad. I really wanted him to know how much fun I had had with him, because it never seemed like he had fun days anymore. I got to the bottom of the stairs and stopped, letting my shoulders slump. He was already asleep on the couch, empty beer cans on the coffee table, an unfinished one grasped in his hand. I gently slid it out of his grip and placed it on a coaster. I leaned over him and kissed the top of his head.

“Goodnight, daddy. Sweet dreams.”