Everything Is All Right

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I told you to leave me alone!" a man hollered from downstairs. Then a door slammed shut shaking the headboard on my bed. I yanked my comforter up below my eyes and nose, clutched my doll, and turned my head towards the door trying to listen for the voice again. Daddy never yelled that loudly and never in the middle of the night.

I didn’t hear anything so I slid my feet onto the carpet and stood to the side of my half-open doorway, still clutching my doll’s hand. I peeped into the hallway and dim yellow light flooded my face. I didn’t see anyone so I gradually slid the door all the way open, cautious not to allow it to squeak. I tiptoed towards the stairway, automatically stepping over the invisible spots in the avocado green carpeting that hid creaky floorboards. I plopped onto the top step to wait. I looked down at my doll’s face. Her pink cheeks reflected the hall lights and her blue eyes had bright, white sparkles in the corners. She wore a bright red dress and matching black and red shoes. Daddy had given her to me two weeks ago after he had returned from his business trip. She had become my favorite doll and has never left my side. As I looked at her, my eyes began to droop and my head to fall into my lap, but it flew back up again when the shouting bolted me awake.

"Shut up! Don’t tell me what to do! I’ll go to sleep when I feel like it!" Daddy barked out his orders like a drill sergeant. His voice had never blazed so wildly before, not even when I ruined his
best tie playing dress-up last year.

"Just calm down, Richard. You’re just getting yourself more upset by yelling. If you don’t lower your voice, you will wake the girls." Mommy took long, calming breaths in between each phrase, and her soothing voice came to a gradual and powerful crescendo.

"I will not be quiet! I’ll be as loud as I very well please!" Daddy hurled back.

I sprang up and ran back to my room, forgetting the creaky floorboards and squeak of the door. I felt like a puzzle dropped on the floor, with all its pieces scattered in different directions. I tried to dream about playing tag and going to birthday parties, but Daddy’s wrath shattered them.

The next morning at breakfast I sat silent, pushing my scrambled eggs into a design on my plate, wondering if I had been dreaming last night. Mommy scurried around the kitchen, searching for odd pieces of fruit and leftovers to put into our lunches. Daddy sat at the opposite end of the table, eating his fried egg, sunny-side-up, with two pieces of toast, and reading The Boston Globe. My sister Kata gobbled up the remaining bites of her scrambled eggs and ran back upstairs to get ready for school. I usually slept late on school days, but this morning I had rushed out of my bedroom as soon as I could and raced into the kitchen. I waited at the table, hoping Mommy and Daddy would explain the shouting voices I had heard, but by the time I had to leave for the bus, neither of them mentioned it. I decided it must have been a nightmare and went off to school leaving my fears at home.

That night Mommy tucked my flowered, rose comforter all around me and gave me a kiss. Before she turned out the lights, she gently squeezed my shoulder and patted my face. I turned onto my side to face the hallway and floated off into a dream. Hours later I jolted awake to the same shouting as before.

"Just leave me alone. I don’t need you around, telling me what to do! I’m just fine by myself!"

I knew this could not be a dream. I took my pillow in both
hands clutching each end, molding it around my head, choking away the tormenting voices. The bellowing transformed into tranquilized whispers under the feathers, and I fell asleep.

My pillow became my life preserver over the next few weeks, saving me from drowning in the waves of shouting and confusion. If I awoke during the night, I mechanically pulled it over my ears. Only once did I ever sneak back into the hall to listen to the conversation below me. I had eavesdropped at the top of the stairs as Mommy plucked out the tones of a telephone number and spoke.

"Hi, Mara? Yeah, it's Mom. He's getting out of hand tonight. Could you come over?" Mommy's voice quivered but it did not break. She spoke, stressing each syllable with urgency. Within a minute after Mommy had hung up the phone, I saw my second oldest sister Mara slip through the front door. She had a house-sitting job next door and only had to run through both yards to get home. I clambered back into bed, knowing Mara could handle Daddy even better than Mommy could.

The next day Daddy didn't come home from work, and Mommy's errands ran late, so Kata and I had stay at a friend's house until she picked us up.

"Where's Daddy?" I questioned as we walked into the house. "He's never late from work."

"Don't worry about it right now, Honey," Mommy replied. "I'll tell you everything after dinner, but right now I'm starving."

He must be on another business trip, I thought. He always told me he had an important and busy job and has to go on a lot of business trips.

After dinner Mommy called us into the family room, sat us in front of her, and looked at us, her face taut.

"Girls, Daddy didn't come home tonight because he's not feeling well."

"He's sick? Does he have the flu? I hate having the flu," Kata interrupted.

"No, he doesn't have the flu," Mother continued, her facial
muscles tightening even more. "We don’t know what he had so he has to stay at the hospital for a little while to find out. That’s where he is now. The doctors are going to figure out what is making him sick so they can make him better." She stopped and looked deep into our faces, trying to analyze our thoughts.

"When’s he gonna come home, Mom? He’ll be home for my birthday, won’t he?" I waited for her to answer me because I knew she could always make things right.

"I hope so, Honey." Mom’s reassuring voice started to shake. "But you know what we can do before he comes home? We can go visit him and cheer him up! He’ll be awfully lonely and he will miss you both very much. You two want to do that?" She forced a reassuring smile at us.

"O.K. Mom, but how can Daddy be so sick? He didn’t look sick this morning."

"I’m not sure, Honey. Things happen that can’t always be explained," she answered, as she got up to finish the dirty dishes.

Three weeks later, the smooth beige doors slid apart and we stepped into the familiar fluorescent-lighted hall with sickly yellow walls and sticky brown floor tiles. We turned the corner and walked to the family-room-style visiting area, with tightly woven rust carpeting and brown and orange plaid couches. A t.v. sat high on a shelf in a corner, tuned to a black and white cowboy movie, and a few battered checker boards with several missing pieces sat on the end tables. Daddy sat alone on one of the couches, staring at nothing.

"Hello, Richard. Do you want to play checkers with the girls? I have some paperwork to take care of before we go home."

He turned towards Kata and me and stared.

"Rena and Mara are sure growing up, aren’t they, Harriett?"

"Yes, dear. But this is Kata and Anya, your two youngest," Mom corrected.

He only nodded. His face never looked alive or full of happiness anymore, only empty and confused. His cheek bones stuck out and his shirt hung loosely over his body. He looked like a little
boy.

Kata and I played checkers with Daddy while Mom spoke to the doctors. She had said Daddy could probably come home with us today because the doctors knew what sickness he had and could start making him better. When Mom finally came back over, I smiled because I realized Daddy would be home for my tenth birthday next week, and I was going to have a big party!

A nurse came and took Daddy to his room to help him pack his suitcase while Mom sat with us on the couch. She pressed her lips into a thin smile, but her eyelids sagged.

"Daddy’s coming home today, girls! Isn’t that exciting?" She waited for us to respond, but we didn’t. We wanted her to explain. "You know how Daddy keeps forgetting our names all the time? Well, the doctors said it’s because he has a bad disease. It’s not because Daddy doesn’t love or remember us. It’s the disease that’s making him forget."

We couldn’t ask any questions because we didn’t understand what she was saying except that Daddy was still very sick.

"He’s going to keep forgetting a lot of things," Mom continued, her eyes flooded with tears, "but it won’t be his fault. He still loves both of you very much so don’t forget that, O.K.?"

"O.K. Mom, but when will he be better? Will he be better by my birthday?" I questioned her knowing she could make everything right.

"I don’t think so, Honey. The disease he has lasts a long time and it can’t be cured fast."

"What’s it called, Mom? Does it have a name?" Kata asked for the first time all day.

"It’s called alzheimers disease," Mom answered as she lowered her face into her hands and began to sob.

I looked down and in my lap lay my doll. Dirt splotched her face, hiding the sparkle in her eyes. Deep circles of grime had turned her bright red dress brown.

I knew then that Mom couldn’t make everything right.