

A Story

by Jessica Smith

I can only remember my mother's face when I look at her picture. I pick up the frame and see her smiling through the cracked glass. Why I never replaced the glass? I don't know. Perhaps because she had bought the picture frame. Behind her picture is one of my father and mother together.

My father is dead. At least he is to me. He is still alive legally, somewhere. I don't know. I was old enough to remember, yet young enough to be swept away from his presence forever.

My mother and I had gone to the grocery store. Not an important trip for most people. For my mother, it was her outing of the week. We only had one car which my father drove to work. It often had problems, and I would hear my father's cursing, loud and violent. My mother would hold me tight and try to cover my ears from his wrath.

A neighbor took my mother to the grocery store, and she was late in picking us up. When we got to the store the neighbor went her separate way. My mother, who usually was quiet, laughed and tickled me. I smiled and squirmed and tried to get away. By the meat counter she impulsively swept me up in her arms. She looked at me closely and said, "I love you, my little baby. Do you know that?"

"I love you too, Mommy," I said. I wiggled out of her arms and pressed my face against the glass to watch the meat man help my mother. I helped her gather jars and bottles and boxes into our car. We met our neighbor at the check-out line.

It was later than usual when we arrived home. My mother looked a little worried as she hurriedly put groceries away. She quietly asked me to go into the family room and out of her way. I could hear the clink of dishes as she hurriedly prepared a dinner. I could feel the tenseness. My father did not like his dinner to be late.

She was still working over the stove when he came in. I was carrying dishes that my mother had quickly pulled from the cupboard. I stopped in the middle of the kitchen and stared at the floor.

"What is this?" he demanded. "I work hard to put food in this family's mouth and I can't even come home to a dinner myself." He continued on while I stood rooted to my spot. My mother was working quickly, her back turned to him. Outraged, he grabbed her arm and spun her around. She reached backward to gain her balance and her hand fell on a hot burner. She screamed and jumped. I screamed and ran from the room. I had seen my father in his rages before but I had always tried to run when he started beating my mother. I was helpless to her pain and fear, and his rage. I clattered the dishes on the table and ran to my room. Shutting the door, I was free to cry out my fear, and I sobbed while I heard the yells and crashes. I heard only his voice, and after awhile I couldn't hear her cries. I realized later, as an adult, her only revenge was to remain silent so his blows would not bring a response.

After an hour or so I ventured from my room, my eyes swollen and my cheeks stained where the tears had made lines in the dirt and smudges. I slowly tiptoed out into the living room. I could hear sobs but they weren't my mother's. I stood in the doorway and watched my father crying over my mother's body, crumpled and bloody on the kitchen floor.

My wedding was small but it was what I wanted. I knew I would be happy, forever. My grandmother, my mother's mother, had tears in her eyes as she wished me well. She had raised me since I was six and I was closer to her than anyone else. I was brought to her, small and scared, speechless of the pain I had seen and felt. She helped me speak, she helped me to love someone again. Now I was in love and leaving her for my own new life.

I had gone to high school with my husband. We had met our junior year and had dated steadily ever since. He was the first man I dated. I was afraid of men, but he seemed to treat me well. I thought I was out of line a couple times, and he let me know it. But I thought it was OK.

We started having problems after I got pregnant. We had neglected to get maternity coverage on our insurance, and the doctor bills were high. Suddenly we were scraping for every penny. We sold our car for something older. We made a little money on the deal, but my husband was in a constant battle to keep the car running. His cursing would bring pains in the pit of my stomach. I could feel the baby kicking. Sometimes it seemed I could hear it crying.

I started having nightmares. My husband would be awakened when I cried out. He shook me until I woke up. I would lie in bed, shivering with sweat and staring at the growing mound on my body. My husband would soon be asleep again, and I would listen to his snoring until the darkness of night faded.

"You look like hell," he told me one morning as I fixed him breakfast.

I told him it was my nightmares. He wordlessly pulled his plate closer to him and turned on the small TV he had set up on the table. He watched the cartoons. I listened to him laugh at the same cartoons over and over again while I scrubbed the morning dishes, my back turned to him.

I realized one day that he no longer touched me unless it was to wake me up. I lay in bed and noticed he kept a gap of space between us. I reached out with my foot to stroke his calf and he withdrew, mumbling. He watched TV more and more. He would remark on how pretty the newscaster looked each night. He never used to watch the news.

In the middle of the night I began having labor pains. I was afraid to wake him, his sleep was so important on weeknights, he said. I lay in the dark, my knees drawn up to my swollen belly, gritting my teeth and gently rocking. I thought of my grandmother. I tried to think of my grandfather. He had died when my mother was only eight. My grandmother never spoke of him. I only knew of him from some dusty albums I had found when playing in her attic as a child. I wondered what my grandfather did when Grandmother went into labor. I tried to

imagine him excited and running around senselessly while my grandmother packed an overnight bag. All I knew about my mother's birth was that it was in the hospital. I thought of my mother, probably all bones and dust by now, and the thought seemed to bring on an intense contraction. I sat up on the edge of the bed and rocked myself from side to side, holding my arms tightly across my ribs. My husband mumbled and began snoring again. I looked at him and thought of our senior prom. He had convinced me that sex was the thing to do. We left the prom early and parked in a remote place. He grappled with my clothes and then my body, clumsily trying to find his way on strange territory. My grandmother was not up when I got home, my hair and dress ruffled, but it seemed the next morning she looked at me differently. I asked her if she had a prom she went to. She looked away and quietly said, "yes."

I got up and went out to the kitchen. I sat in the dark and stared at the vacant TV screen. I stared so long I began to see images and then pictures in the screen. I cupped my chin in my hands and sleepily watched pictures I hadn't seen for years. My mother waved at me and I dreamily waved back. She seemed so happy. Her dress flowed around her slender body, and a breeze ruffled her hair so she had to brush it from her eyes. She walked in a field of flowers. She looked so beautiful. Then, somehow, my father entered the picture. He strode across the screen and grabbed my mother's arm. She spun around, alarmed, and screamed. Screams.

My husband ran into the kitchen, naked except for the gun in his hand. His heavy footfalls startled me into reality. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm in labor. It hurts."

"Well, it's time to go to the hospital then," he said matter-of-factly. "Better get a bag packed."

He stepped aside to let me pass. I noticed I could not have reached him, even if I had stretched my arm out fully.

"Please call Grandma. I need her."

"Don't be silly," he said. "You're a big girl."

I didn't argue. I had never been able to argue, even with my grandmother. Silence was my only weapon, and I used it all the way to the hospital. I lay my hand in the middle of the seat, once, to see if he would take it and comfort me, but he kept both hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road. I withdrew my hand when another contraction caused me to grab my sides for strength.

At the hospital I realized I hadn't been touched for over a week. Not since I had visited my grandmother on a Saturday. She gave me a kiss and a hug. "Don't forget your prayers, honey," she said. The nurses touched me on my arms and body. One took my hand and squeezed it as I was wheeled into the delivery room. I turned around to see my husband, but he was nowhere in sight.

I watched with horror and fascination as my child slowly burst into the world. "It's a girl," someone whispered. I wondered how they could tell anything from the bloody, brown, wrinkled thing that had come from my body.

"Where's my husband?" I asked. One of the nurses sheepishly

looked at me and said, "He said to tell you he had to go to work."

I love my baby. I want to shelter her from all the harm and pain that has happened to me. I want her to have everything in the world and know there can only be happiness for her. My husband is jealous of my baby, and I hate him for that.

He started touching me again a couple months after the baby was born. His touch, though, seemed cold. I had read somewhere that women could be raped by their husbands. I wondered if that was what was happening to me. I remember one night when he began touching me, roughly grabbing me. I cried out in pain, suddenly, a response to his roughness. The baby began crying. I instinctively sat up to go to comfort her. He pushed me down and pinned my shoulders with his hands. I looked away as he proceeded methodically, seeming to become more excited as the baby's wails became louder.

During the day when he was away the baby seemed happy. She gurgled with content. She seemed to be making normal progress—putting things in her mouth at the right age, walking at the right age. I delighted in her progress. I hugged her and kissed her. I remembered how my mother loved me, and I loved my baby even more. I would not let my baby suffer the way I did.

When my husband came home the baby became quiet and sullen. She often cried and when I ran to comfort her my husband would grab my arm and pull me away. Once I yanked my arm from him. His eyes flashed for a moment and he slapped me. The baby stopped crying and stared, an object poised at the corner of her mouth. I fled from the room. I saw the red mark on my cheek as I sat on the bed and stared at my reflection. I heard the TV playing loudly in the kitchen.

Several days later I told him I wanted to visit my grandmother the following Saturday. I hadn't seen her for three weeks and she lived only 15 miles away. My husband told me to find a ride. Later that night I told him I had secured a ride and he hit me. I looked at him for an explanation to his reaction. He turned and walked from the room. I heard the outside door slam and the car engine start. I sat on the edge of the bed, shredding a Kleenex until my little girl woke me from my trance. She put her chubby little hands on my knees and looked into my face. I could see in her eyes that she knew the world was not a wonderful place. Tears fell down my cheeks and dropped onto her silky golden hair. I smoothed the tears into her hair and rocked her gently. "I love you, my little baby. Do you know that?" I asked.

She sleepily mumbled, "I love you too, Mommy." I carried her to her bed. I sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair until her breathing was regular. I looked around the room at the teddy bears evenly lined up on the wallpaper as if they were ready to go somewhere.