The Sharing

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Loni sat in the middle of the carpet, constructing some Tinker Toy contraption that was obviously meant for boys.

“I’m hungry, Mom. When’s dinner?”

I looked up from the tax forms I had worked on for the past hour. Loni didn’t look at me; she just kept on connecting the pieces.

“I said, what’s for dinner, Mom!”

“Umm . . . eggs. How about eggs?”

She looked up at me now. “Eggs for dinner? Daddy won’t want eggs for dinner!”

“Daddy won’t be home for dinner, remember?”

“Oh . . . yeah.” She returned to the Tinker Toys, her forehead showing concern, sadness.

“Hell with this stuff,” I muttered as I dropped the tax forms and my calculator onto the floor near the sofa. The figures weren’t coming out right anyhow.

In the kitchen, I coated the frying pan with no-stick spray and cracked two eggs into the oily bottom.

“Look at this, Mom!”

Loni brought her newest creation into the kitchen for me to inspect. One round wooden piece with every hole plugged by a green or red stick.

“Nice, Loni . . . what is it?” I tried to ask this without discouraging her.

“Guess!”

I hate guessing. “It’s hard to say . . . but it looks like a star.”

“A star? No! It’s a flying saucer. Daddy showed me how to make one.”
The saucer coursed a noisy path through the narrow kitchen, crash-landing on the dishwasher. Then Loni remembered Daddy wasn't coming home. Her eyes were distant in thought. About Daddy, no doubt.

I flipped the eggs once and watched the whitish-clear part turn whiter, harder. Leaning against the refrigerator, I hoped that Loni would drop the subject about her father.

Her face unclouded. "Why are we having eggs for dinner anyways!"

"Because it's Lent and we are supposed to give up meat on Fridays, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Loni accepted that fact as if her mother would never deceive her, as if meatless Fridays were normal.

"Then it'll be Easter soon, right?" Loni helped with the toast, spreading margarine over the brown, crumbly pieces of bread.

I nodded.

"Well then, is Daddy gonna come over for dinner?"

I don't think she noticed how I stiffened at the question. God, why does she want to know all about this!

"I . . . uh, don't think so, hon."

"But why?"

Why did she have to ask? I hated telling her the truth. It would hurt, and I hated to see her soft blue eyes cry, her bottom lip tremble. The words would only make each of us miserable.

"Loni, it's just too complicated to tell you now. Maybe later. Tomorrow."

"I'm old enough! You can tell me."

She was trying to look so grown up and old for her seven years, and I nearly laughed at her, not to make fun of her, but to smile at her need to be so old, so fast. But the almost-smile faded; Loni was getting older, much older than seven, ten or twelve. Her small face already held the signs that she knew. . . .
I turned off the gas flame underneath the pan and put the spatula on the counter. Kneeling on the cracking linoleum, I held onto her shoulders and looked straight at her. Her eyes said to me, “You can tell me, Mom.” They weren’t so innocent or naive.

“You know that Daddy’s moved out. You don’t like that, do you.”

She shook her head solemnly.

“It’s hard to tell you this, Loni, but . . .”

“But what?”

“We might not see much of daddy for a while.”

She looked panic-stricken and angry, as if I had slapped her. I pulled her to my chest and was surprised that she hugged me close to her, not hating me yet.

“Doesn’t he love us anymore?” Her voice went high and cracked.

“Of course, Loni! Daddy loves us very much!”

“Then why isn’t he going to come back?”

I broke our hug apart. I wanted to see her face when I answered her. Maybe I could measure her pain, and how much she understood.

“Loni, I asked him to leave. This was all my idea, not his. You probably won’t understand.”

The tension began to show on her small, china-doll face: her cheeks had flushed and she bit her bottom lip.

“Don’t you love Daddy anymore?” she whispered in disbelief.

I saw that Loni felt her whole world was crumbling, and I hated myself for telling her. But she asked me to tell her, I reasoned. That was no excuse!

“I will always care about Daddy. But we didn’t get along; we fought all the time. Remember?”

Loni looked down at the toes of her tennis shoes and nodded in silence. Then a new, horrible thought occurred to her.
“But I don’t want another Daddy! I won’t call a new man ‘Daddy.’”

Her soft blue eyes darkened and narrowed, daring me to be angry at her.

“There will never be another Daddy, hon. You’ve got one and he will always be your father.”

I felt my bottom lip tremble, and I tried to stifle the quiver, but my chin gave way. I had held the trembling in for days, and it gushed out, like the opening of a dam. The tears fell down my cheeks in a sheet of water. I had given away the secret of my sadness, the part I had wanted to hide from Loni, to protect her.

“It’s okay, Mom.”

In her hug, in between her slender arms, I felt like a child being consoled by her mother. She patted my back, to soothe me, mimicking the actions I had used to quiet her in her own sad moments.

“I’m sorry, Loni, but moms get lonely and scared and cry, too.”

She smeared a tear away from my eye and smiled at me.

“That’s okay, Mom. I love you.”

Somehow, the cold eggs tasted fine, and neither of us complained about the dinner.