

The Peach Tree

By J. Reyome
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I can hear him now. He's downstairs. Just stepped through the hall into the unfinished addition to our home we've jokingly dubbed Area 51.

The upstairs portion, then, is of course Dreamland. But not tonight, I think.

"Daddy?" he says, his voice remarkably gentle but audible above the music I have playing. "Are you up there?"

I don't say anything. I just keeping typing.

So he had sassed us again, and again he was on his way to the Naughty Step.

Daryl Randle II, aka Deuce, was, it always seemed, basically a good hearted child. That's what everyone told us anyway. A bit spirited, perhaps, and more than a little free with his mouth, but then he's at the age when kids start to test their parents' authority, almost twelve, and as our only child he was certainly spoiled rotten. Nor had he been struck very often; I can count on one hand how many times I'd actually spanked the boy. Oh, there was the occasional dope slap to the back of the head, not hard enough to hurt, more to get his attention, and once or twice I'd socked Deuce in the meat of his forearm. Now the kid's so big there isn't a whole lot of point in hitting him anyway.

He gave us little enough cause to *want* to hit him. He's good hearted, remember. A very affectionate boy who adores his Mother and Grandparents, loves his animals (he has several pets, all of which he takes care of enthusiastically) and who, while possessing of a somewhat hearty personality, has plenty of friends at school.

Note please: how he feels about his father is left out of the description, and intentionally. I was never really sure. Oh, he said he loved me often enough, and god knows I tried to get the point across to him that I loved him too, that he was as much as my reason for living. But his dirty looks, sly (he thinks, anyway) rolls of the eyes, and remarks under his breath were enough for me to have my doubts. I realize in retrospect this all sounds pretty awful, and that perhaps I've been setting myself up for this all along.

But then, maybe that's the whole point.

He's crossed the room now, past the recliner in front of the TV in front of which he spends way too much time zoned out on mindless kiddievision or

video games. I wonder what he's thinking as he perhaps casts a glance in that direction, if he has any notion of how his life is about to change. Not for the obvious reasons, but those more subtle. Does he give it a thought, or is this all just being done in an impulse?

Or is it something else, premeditated perhaps? And if so, how, and by whom?

*"Dad?" he calls again, mounting the first step, that step, **his** step.*

I often thought: if I'd talked to my Dad the way he talks to us, I'd have gotten a helluva lot more than just a "time out".

We called it the Naughty Step, that unusual angled portion of the ladderway (sue me, it's the Marine coming out) leading up to the loft, after something we'd seen on television. You've seen it, I suppose; a professional nanny comes into a house and sets a dysfunctional family straight, that sort of thing. I'd always been more interested in the nanny (an attractive Brit with a voice that would melt steel) than the show, but the concept of a specific time out spot had stuck both Sarah and I as legit. "Why not at least try it?" she suggested one night.

We did. Ten minutes was the initial length of time for the punishment, but when he lipped back at us and refused to go, ten became fifteen, then twenty. Eventually he left the living room and disappeared into the den, where he took up the perch on the second step, as directed. Sullen. Teary-eyed.

"You're mean," he said to me on the way. "And hateful."

"Of course I am," I said. "Twenty five minutes." I pointed to a clock on the wall that bore the smiling faces of Wallace & Gromit. "At 7:55 you can come back in and apologize. And you'd better mean it."

Amnesty was declared after fifteen minutes. It was a first offense, of course, and a new paradigm in punishment. I figured it was the right thing to do. He apologized, sincerely it seemed, and went to his room as directed to get ready for bed.

And that was how it started. Every time he was arrogant, mean, or overly willful...off to the Naughty Step. He did come to know it pretty well, I suppose, he spent enough time there. And more often than not, it was me sentencing him to it. And oh, how it hated it. You'd have thought the boogeyman was there for as hysterical as he would get on being told to make his way back to the step. Often I wondered if he'd sooner get spanked than sit on that step, but I never offered it as an alternative. I wonder now if perhaps that might've been at least prudent.

It was attitude that got him into trouble more than anything. Willful, arrogant, snotty, sarcastic...he was at times all of those things and more. I figured what it all came down to a lack of respect. Sometimes for his mother,

but mostly the worst of it was directed at me. And perhaps in a way it was understandable. I never was the best of examples. I mean, how can you ask a kid to keep his room clean when I'm a pretty shoddy housekeeper myself? Can you blame a kid for being snide when he gets as many lessons in sarcasm as I inadvertently taught? Who's to blame for his loud mouth, his mother, who is if not reserved is at least not loud, or me, who will more often than not say the first thing that comes to mind under duress, never mind who it might hurt?

There is a peach tree in our yard, not far from the barbed wire fence that separates the homeplace from the field where we used to graze cattle. Used to be you could actually eat those peaches, before the tree became blighted and we had to trim it heavily. Now it might not bear fruit for years, maybe tens of years. And when it does, the fruit could be...bad. Bitter.

We talked about that once, he and I, after he'd been stung by a yellowjacket that had burrowed into a rotten apple that had fallen to the ground. Better it get you on the hand than in the mouth, I told him. Why did you pick it up in the first place?

Not a worried, are you okay? Or even, let's get something on that to take the hurt out.

More an object lesson to be learned.

He learned, all right. And now, as the stairs creak under his weight, I think the time has become that he believes it's time for him to become the teacher.

I still don't know what it was that made me try the phone in "room monitor" mode that first time. Curiosity, I suppose. It was a nice unit, that new phone, two handsets along with a central unit that would serve as a charger for one handset as well as a digital answering machine. The second handset had its own charger and could be located in just about any room in the house. It could serve as a speakerphone as well as an intercom, which in a house as spread out as ours is a real boon. They weren't cheap, and we couldn't afford them when I bought them, but they were on sale, we needed them, and as such I managed to skosh out a little on the monthly budget to make them manageable.

Oh. The "room monitor" mode. Yes. It was a feature included on the phone, much like a baby monitor, that allowed you to use one of the handsets to monitor sounds in whatever room the other handset was in. A nice touch. Not exactly an a-list need, but you never can tell when it might come in handy. Like...

...like, hearing what your son was muttering under his breath while he sat on the Naughty Step.

I knew, we both did, that he was probably uttering choice comments while he sat back there, studying on the insulation on the walls we still haven't covered with paneling that still leans against the unfinished stairs. It was inevitable, even understandable. But to actually hear what he was saying...

"We could," I told Sarah. "He'd never know."

"It would be like spying," she demurred. "Besides, you say nasty things under your breath all the time and I don't call you on them."

"Sometimes you do. Besides, I'm not twelve years old."

"Don't do it," she urged me. "Let him have his cooling-off time."

"What you say on the Naughty Step stays on the Naughty Step?"

"Not funny, Digby."

She was right. I didn't listen in. Not that time, anyway.

Halfway up the steps now. He pauses. I have stopped typing, listening. Then the creaks begin again. He knows I am here, and he knows I know he's on his way up the stairs. Slowly. Not stealthily by any means but with a quiet purpose.

She wasn't at home the night he went off on his tirade with me. Again, it was some petty little things that was the spark; he had a nasty habit of leaving the seat up on the commode—one of my wife's pet peeves—and he'd been getting "no TV" days as punishment. Now he owed us so many it was possible he might not get to see any TV till he was well into his teens. Having thus indicated that losing telly privileges wasn't enough of a punishment, we brought the Naughty Step back into the equation. Leave the seat up on the commode, ten minutes on the Step. Miss an assignment in class and get a demerit? Fifteen minutes. Show disrespect to his mother or I? Twenty, or more depending on the severity. I'd just sent him there for that very reason, in fact, tacking on an extra ten minutes (with no possibility of parole) for his overly dramatic reaction to the sentence and his initial refusal to go. But he *did* go, knowing that the longer he resisted, the more time would be tacked on.

Now he sat there while I watched an old Bela Lugosi film in the living room. I love that sort of thing, old B (or C) movies, and with the advent of cheap DVDs there's a lot of them about. The sound wasn't all that good, but then what can you expect for a buck? It was spotty enough that I could hear Deuce in the back room muttering...something.

And despite myself, I was curious. What the heck, I thought. It'll be between him and me anyway, I won't tell Sarah...let's just have a listen at what the little ras-cule was sharing with the ether...

I pressed the button.

"...mean and hateful. He hates me. And I hate him."

That hurt, that did. I loved Deuce, completely, to the point of taking his side at times Sarah would've just as soon have him shot. But the bond between mother and son was too strong and inevitably I would end up being viewed as the villain. But that was okay. I was comfortable enough with that, and believed in the end that he'd come around, much like I did with my own father.

"He's the worst father in the world."

Well, I couldn't argue that. I never felt I was cut out for the job anyway. Who is?

"Hate him. Hate him, hate him, hate him. I wish he was dead."

A knife, stuck in my heart, and twisted.

"Maybe when he goes to the hospital he won't come back."

Wait a minute. This was hitting pretty close now. I was to go in for heart surgery—a catheterization, actually—and he was rooting for me to not come back? Whoa. I was actually getting to my feet when I heard one more utterance...

"But I couldn't do *that*."

That. It sounded like a reply. To whose question?

I picked the phone up and put it closer to my ear. I heard him again:

"You're scaring me." He didn't sound scared though.

An instant later, I was the one who was scared.

I heard another voice.

Not his. It said: "But if you *really* hate him, you could do it, and get away with it too."

There was a moment or two of silence on the line, then a soft, "How?"

Oh, dear god.

That voice, weirdly familiar, began to lay out a plan.

Before it could get too involved, I pressed the disconnect button on the phone and called him in. Time to end this.

He came around the corner, looking down at the ground. Not sullen, but not contrite either.

How was I to confront him on something like this? Could I at all, without coming off like an idiot?

Well, he hated me already, right? Might as well be direct. "Who were you talking to?" I asked him quietly.

"Nobody," he said, staring straight at me, not looking away, not evasive at all. So it seemed.

"Are you sure?" I persisted. "It sure sounded like you were talking to someone."

"No," he murmured. "Nobody. Just myself." No hesitation.

I paused, then said, "All right then. You can go to your room and play if you want to."

He turned and walked toward his room.

"Deuce?" I said. "You know I love you...don't you?"

He stopped, looked back at me with sad eyes, and said, "Yes, Daddy. I know." Then he left the room.

No mention of any love for me.

If I were to look to my right I would see him now. He's always been tall for his age, nearly six feet tall at 12 years old, so I'd see his blonde locks right at floor level up here. Another step and I'll see his face. So young, so handsome. So innocent.

So corrupt.

I think about that tree often. At once it is a metaphor for my life and, perhaps, a graphic embodiment of it. Something once so alive now crippled, perhaps useless, giving off fruit that is just as wasted.

That's terribly melodramatic, I know. But then the hopes and dreams I once harbored aren't so far off in the distance that I can't at least see them, think of what I have missed, and missed mostly by my own choosing. Sloth, my father called it, laziness at its worst. I could've been a pilot. I was good at it too, I had a natural feel for aircraft from a very young age, went to ground school when I was sixteen and soloed as soon as I was old enough, that very day, in fact. My shirttail still hangs from the wall of my hometown airport's pilots lounge. It's one of the few goals I ever set myself to in life that I ever saw through.

How many jobs since, though? How many cities? How many times did I prove to how many people that I had no sense of responsibility and no desire to acquire one?

Sarah had been patient. I once went nearly four months without a job and she supported us ably. You'd think in that time I'd learn to help out around the house, but no, I didn't do that either. Woman's work? Maybe, maybe not. But nothing I cared to do. I had other things to do, like go hiking or play video games or surf the internet or write stories that would make us millions of dollars. Yeah, surrre as one of my friends was wont to say.

I tried to be a loving husband, as much as I could be, but I wasn't very good at that either. I was faithful, but distant. I tended to wrap myself in my own little world, mostly confined to whatever world I was creating in my stories at the time. None of them could've been very appealing to Sarah, and that she'd stuck by me despite the advice to the contrary she was no doubt receiving from friends and relatives either was a testament to her true love for me, or an honest monument to ignorance. Either that, or she felt at her age—we were in our thirties when we married—that she had no where else to go.

And of course there was Deuce.

He is looking at me now. I can feel it. I won't—can't—look at him, but I know he is staring at me. It is the intensity that gives it away. He has always been that way, piercingly intense. He stares right at you when he's speaking to you. It's something that has always been at least interesting, and in the case of more than a few of his teachers, disturbing. But he is engaging and bright, if not terribly studious, and even the ones who were "creeped out" the most looked past it. And that was a good way to put it too.

There was a lot about Deuce that people had to look past. Maybe that was part of the problem though, maybe instead of looking past him we should've all looked into him. Maybe then we would have seen the good in him, the good I believe lies within every child. It's not that the child is born...wrong, if you will. It's the environment that molds them.

So I wasn't much of a father, or a husband. But an example? Oh, I was a dandy example. A bad one to be sure, but an example. Would Deuce have become the lazy, insolent child, young man now really, that he is now if he'd had someone else as a father?

I think back to the peach tree again, and an old saw: *the fruit never falls far from the tree.*

It's true. I have proof. It's standing at the top of the steps right now, not moving, staring that intense stare into the back of my head.

I never sent Deuce back to the Naughty Step again. He was too big for it really, and it didn't seem to be doing any good. Besides, I didn't want to have any chance of hearing again what I'd heard that night.

I did, however, keep my eyes open. And when the revolver disappeared from Daddy's gun case, I was as scared as I'd ever been in my life. It was an old Colt, probably early 30s vintage, and quite heavy. I'd picked it up before and handled it. It was well balanced though, and Daddy had taken good care of it through the years, cleaning and oiling it on a regular basis. It probably

hadn't been fired in years, but it probably could be; there was always a box of ammunition next to it in the case, probably meant for the odd prowler should one ever be unfortunate to pay a visit.

The box had been full. Now it was missing six rounds. So, there was a weapon missing, and it presumably was loaded.

I could've raised a fuss then. Probably I should've. But I didn't. What good would it do? If he had it set in his mind to do something, better that he go ahead and do it than put it off, better to follow through than to suffer the pain of regret later.

No really, that's what I'm thinking as I turn to look at him.

"Hello son," I say quietly.

"Hello Daddy," he murmurs, stepping slowly across the room to where I sit on the futon.

I nod toward the weapon in his hand. "Daddy's Colt," I say. Not a question, not an accusation. Just a statement of fact.

"Yes, Daddy." He raises the pistol, points it at me.

I smile. Faintly, but a smile nonetheless. It is for the best, I think; he will be better off without me. He knows well enough how to dispose of the gun, he will clean himself thoroughly, he will call 911. Everything he needs to do has been arranged.

I know how it will be done. I heard it all as it was detailed to him.

In my own voice.

Perhaps removing the bad fruit from the tree would be enough to save what was left. Is that the motivation? Is that what I would want? I would like to think so.

One last thing to say, and to hear: "I love you, Deuce."

There is a tremor in his voice, but thankfully, not in his hand, as he pulls back the hammer. "I love you too, Daddy."

And he means it too. I know it in my heart.