

A Mum Knows Everything

By

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The elderly bespectacled gentleman calls me to speak.

I stand. Time moves slowly as I take the few paces toward him. My heels tap coldly across the concrete floor, their echo resonating and then becoming lost in the void above.

For me, the next few minutes hold nothing but fear. My legs are heavy, my brow moist. My necktie pinches my windpipe. I have accepted this duty with reluctance. Yet, it is something I want to do.

I clear my throat, preparing for my oratory. In my head, I have rehearsed this moment a thousand times. Now the words desert me.

Solemn, expectant faces crowd in.

My eyes settle on the old lady in the front row. Until just a few seconds ago, she had enjoyed my companionship. Now she sits alone, her ashen skin betraying a previously unseen pain. Suddenly she looks frail and lifeless.

My eyes glaze as I struggle to remember a time long since past. Finally, the words come.

‘Many years ago, there was a small boy: just three years old, maybe four.

‘He had a morning routine which he followed religiously.’

I look at the bespectacled gentleman who had me doing his bidding. He simply nods his assent, urging me to continue.

‘Little Jamie would wake as the sun broke through his Paddington Bear curtains. His breath would create swirls of mysterious mist as his feet fell heavily on thick, warm carpet.

‘Standing, he would feel his favourite blue pyjama bottoms sticking to his spindly legs.

‘The boy would lift his eiderdown and groan with deep dismay at the stained sheet underneath.

‘Soon his Father would return from work, and if the boy moved quickly he wouldn’t find out his son had suffered yet another accident.

‘Little Jamie would shed his damp pyjamas and run them across the room to the wicker basket. With clean pyjama trousers pulled up high around his waist, he would pull his bedspread as tight and flat as he could manage.

‘The accident fairies would make everything right. He knew this because his Mother had told him, and his mother knew everything.

‘Jumping on his bed, he would scratch a hole in the thin layer of frost on the inside of the window and press his nose against the freezing glass. It would make his nose tickle, and he had to stay his breathing so as not to re-ice the tiny spy hole.

‘He would hold this position until he saw his father approaching.

‘He wasn’t sure what work his father did, but knew he was one of the most important men in the world because he wore a uniform with a peak cap. His mother had told Little Jamie his father stopped bad men stealing all sorts of things from all sorts of places. So, Little Jamie also knew his father was very strong as well as very important.

‘Seeing his father walking toward the front door, Little Jamie would run down the stairs, jumping at the third from bottom and landing in his father’s outstretched arms. His father would always catch him.

‘For twenty minutes, the two would roll around the floor, Little Jamie’s head drowning in his father’s cap. This was their time.

‘Then his mother would call. It was time for his father to have breakfast before going to bed. Little Jamie wouldn’t go with him. Not because he didn’t want to, but because he was scared of having an accident and his secret being discovered.

‘If his father knew Little Jamie was still wetting the bed, he would never again catch him at the bottom of the stairs and play with him.

‘Which is why every morning followed the familiar routine.

‘Then one morning, Little Jamie jumped out of bed as usual. Something was different. His pyjama trousers weren’t sticking to his legs. Maybe the accident fairies had already been?

‘He lifted the bedspread, and the sheets were dry too!

‘Excited he jumped up and down on the dishevelled bed. He heard the familiar click of the garden gate and bounded downstairs, two at a time. He couldn’t wait to tell his father the good news.

‘His father strode through the door as Little Jamie launched himself from the third stair.

‘Out of breath, and safely in his father’s arms, Little Jamie started to blurt out, “Daddy, Daddy, I’ve got a surprise for you!” Then he stopped. If he told his Daddy he was dry, then he would have to tell him that he hadn’t been before.

‘His father said “What is it, son?”

‘Little Jamie didn’t know what to say. His father looked at him, perplexed.

‘It was his mother that came to the rescue. The boy hadn’t seen her standing in the doorway to the dining room. “Little Jamie’s going to have breakfast with you this morning, like a real little adult” she said, saving his embarrassment and flashing a warm smile at her two men.

‘Little Jamie’s father never knew the truth. The secret of him wetting the bed replaced by the secret of him being dry.’

Returning to the present, I flash a glance at my audience.

The priest offers me his hand as I leave the pulpit, but I refuse.

At the coffin, I pause and run my fingers over the brass nameplate: “Fred Hargreaves, Senior”: my father.

I look at the old lady sitting alone on the front pew.

‘I never told him he was my hero’ I say. ‘I should have never kept that a secret from him.’

As I sit, she takes my hand in hers and looks into my eyes. She smiles warmly. She no longer looks old and frail. Her voice is strong and steady.

‘He knew how you felt about him. You never had to tell him. It was in your eyes every time you looked at him.’

I wonder if she’s right, then I realise she is.

After all, a Mum knows everything.