

Prologue

He slammed open the door with enough force to leave a hole in the drywall. The figures Tim had been playing with were suddenly forgotten. His eyes turned towards the doorway and his stepfather who stood in it; face a deep, dark red.

“What did I tell you?” He spit out. His plaid work shirt hung open and his gut hung out over his belt. In his outstretched hand he held a green plastic army figure. He gestured towards Tim who was cornered in the bedroom. Tim hadn’t the slightest idea why his stepfather waved the army figure in the air, or what he had supposedly told Tim. All Tim knew was what was about to happen.

His stepfather took a giant step into the room. “Well?” He asked, his voice lower, “What did I tell you?”

Tim could guess, as he’d done on many occasions before, or say that he didn’t know. Either way the punishment would be the same. There was no way of escaping what was about to happen. Many painful lessons had taught him that, just as he had learned that his mother wasn’t going to come to his rescue. No one was going to come to his rescue, and Tim wasn’t brave enough to stand up to the onslaught before him. Few seven year olds would be.

“W-what did you t-tell me?”

“I said to keep your toys in your room. Is that so hard to keep this shit in here, but when I came home, what did I have waiting for me in the middle of the living room?” He threw the army man at Tim. It hit the wall next to him and landed at Tim’s feet. The toy had chew marks on it, Tim noticed, but didn’t mention this. There was no point in mentioning that Spreckles had been in Tim’s room, just as he normally went in Tim’s

room, and that he had been the one to leave the army man in the living room. Once Tim's stepfather decided to punish Tim, he never changed his mind, even if there wasn't anything to punish Tim for.

"Now you come over here and pull up that shirt," he said while taking his belt off.

Tim fought back the tears. Only a few of them bubbled up in the corners of his frightened eyes. He walked away from his corner and closer to the man he had been told to call dad. The sound of the television floated to him from the living room. His mom was in there watching TV just like she was always in there watching TV. On one occasion he ran to her for help. He had found out first hand how much she cared.

"The better you do," she had told him once when he was younger, "the more I'll love you. But when you do bad things, it becomes a lot harder for me to find love in my heart for you."

Tim grabbed his shirt and slowly pulled it up. Before he even had his entire chest exposed the belt was already whipping through the air. It struck with a loud smack and Tim screamed in pain. His fingers slipped on the shirt, but he didn't let it fall. If he did, the beating would only be worse.

The belt danced through the air as it came around for another strike. Tim was almost memorized by it up until it hit and he screamed again. He didn't know how many strikes he was due. The amount of pain was never consistent with the rule he had broken. No, the pain could be measured only in his stepfather's anger.

"Will you keep it down in there?" Tim's mother screamed from the living room. Tim bit back the urge to cry to her to make this man stop hurting him. She had married

him specifically for Tim, he had been told, “because if you don’t have a good father figure, who knows what’ll happen to you,” she had said.

On the third strike Tim didn’t scream. He clamped his mouth shut and squeezed his eyes tightly closed. He deserved this, he told himself, because even though he hadn’t actually left the army figure out in the living room, he hadn’t taken his stepfather seriously when he had said to keep the toys in Tim’s room, and eventually Tim would’ve left a figure out.

The fourth and final strike struck Tim’s cheek, and the surprise made Tim jump back. His foot caught on a toy and he fell crying to the floor. Through the pain he stared up into his stepfather’s face.

The red had dissipated. The man that stared back slumped his shoulders and began to put his belt back on. “Sorry I had to do that,” he said, but his voice didn’t sound apologetic. He sounded like he was reading from a script. “If you don’t break the rules, I won’t have to hurt you, okay?”

Tim’s entire body shook. His hands balled up into fists and his eyes grew wide with anger. His stepfather didn’t notice any of this. Preoccupied with the task of putting his belt back on, he turned his back on Tim and started to walk away.

“You done yet?” His mother yelled from the living room.

Tim couldn’t stop the thoughts from coming. He wanted to hurt them for hurting him. He wanted to just be left alone. He hated them so much, the people he was supposed to love—the people who were supposed to love him.

He watched his stepfather walk out of the room and down the hall, and Tim wanted to jump up, run over to his door, and slam it shut so that he didn't have to remember that his room was connected to the rest of the house.

The door flung closed with a loud crack of wood. The anger vanished and the red that had been flooding Tim's face faded into white. His own heart was the only thing he heard.

When the door opened Tim's stepfather looked in. The anger had resurfaced, but it was only annoyance, and not true rage.

"What was that?" He asked, but Tim had no voice to answer, and maybe his stepfather saw that, for he didn't ask again. He just stared at Tim's white face for a few seconds before he nodded, as if an answer had been given, and said, "Don't slam the door." And then he closed the door and Tim listened to his footsteps as he walked down the hall. He heard his stepfather and mother talking to each other, though not what they said. They didn't matter.

Tim told himself that it had been an accident. He tried to tell himself that he had had nothing to do with the door closing. He tried as hard as he could to believe it, and a small part of him did. That's all he needed. That one small part said that the door closing had nothing at all to do with him.

He listened to it.