

Exile

Volume 27 | Number 1

Article 22

1981

Story

Dane Lavin
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lavin, Dane (1981) "Story," *Exile*: Vol. 27 : No. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol27/iss1/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

By Dane Lavin

He first noticed it when his mother was cleaning out the dusty patch of floor space under his bed. She bend down uncharacteristically on one knee and contorted her head and arms to reach the tattered box of comic books and gum cards that was wedged against the farthest leg of the bed. She sat upright on her knees at the side of the bed and sorted through it casually, wiping away the grime from its surface with a soiled dust cloth and a squirt of Endust. He had never seen her squat on her knees like that before, with the bare dirty soles of her feet showing beneath the rim of her buttocks. Later that day when she was supposed to be basting the chicken breasts he caught her slumped against the refrigerator next to the stove with a *Cosmopolitan* in her hands and her forehead pointed in a studious frown. When she looked up and saw him he turned defiantly and went into the den without saying a word and turned on the television. She stayed in the kitchen until his father came home.

He would think about it often during the bus ride to school or during study period. At recess he would sometimes avoid the usual sandlot baseball game and head instead for the swings, where he would pull himself up into the highest seat and sit for the full thirty-five minutes, watching his sneakers dangling aimlessly below him making colliding shadows on the smooth surface of ground where the bigger kids' feet rubbed. He felt himself growing more and more uncomfortable walking the three-quarter's of a block to his house, having to go through the motions of greeting and hugging her when he came through the door. He was grateful for the distractions school would sometimes bring, leaving him breathless and sweaty after a football game or a whirl on the jungle gym. But eventually it would always come back to him, punctuating the smell of the breeze moist and salty on his skin with the acrid hurt of stale on his tongue, the stiff shock of reality that brought the facts home to him with irreversible clarity once again. It would creep up on him at night, just as he was barely conscious of crossing the netherline into full sleep, and in an instant his eyes would part wide in sharp alertness and bring in the faceless image of the plain darkened white of the wall by his bed. Every once in a while one of them would open the door to check on him and he would close his eyes and snap his body into a facsimile of sleep, deliberately calming his breathing and parting his lips to make it look authentic. In a few seconds the bright hall light would fade from his eyelids and he would open his eyes again and sigh, relieved at the familiar dark of his room and the slip outline of yellow around the closed door where the light still seeped through.

His father was harder to detect but he noticed some signs showing through in the way his father sloopily tossed the liquor into the glass when he came home from work and how he walked with his feet out more toward the side than he had before. After dinner his father would often

slump down into the armchair by the divan and watch T.V. with his stocking feet propped up on the coffee table without bothering to remove his loosened tie and good pants. The smell of lilacs had come even sweeter and sooner than last spring and his mother had for some reason taken to standing for long periods by the lilac bushes, sometimes half the afternoon or more, cradling one of the clumps of violet blossoms to her face every once in a while. Sometimes she would be there when he returned from school. He was used to seeing his parents outside as the weather warmed but they were usually mowing the lawn or bent over the garden or something. Occasionally he remembered them sitting until dinnertime under the umbrella by the picnic table, next to those hedges.

The past couple of weeks he knew that they suspected and he watched them become even more conscious of their actions. He lay awake some nights with his hands folded behind his head trying to remember the first time, the very first time when he had noticed, when it had begun to make sense to him. It had been a slow, smoldering start, he recalled, but so long ago. He was no longer sure just when he had first known.

He was "sullen," according to them at the breakfast table, and "moody" at dinner. Once his father erupted angrily and ordered him to bed without eating. His mother did not transgress against him, calmly avoiding her son's stare as he marched down the length of the dining room to the hall to his room. He had felt a soothing sense of pride underneath the jangle of his nerves as he entered his dim bedroom and shut the door firmly behind him. He was angry and fearful of his father's temper, but he felt a heightened sense of accomplishment at the confusion and reddened exasperation on his father's face.

When he left for school the next day his mother kissed him on the forehead and carefully straightened his bangs into place afterwards. She stood at the front door and watched him almost the whole way to the bus stop at the end of the curb. He could feel her eyes boring into the back of his Dodgers jacket, poking at his skin. He had watched her before, all polite and loving to him in the morning, at least pretending to be, and then heading for the car almost as soon as he had gone, leaving the house empty and locked up until just a few minutes before he got home in the afternoon. He could tell because she would forget sometimes and leave the key in the back door or forget to open the kitchen windows like she normally would have had she been home all day. She still set a place at the kitchen table for his father, for when he came home at noon for lunch from his office, but he caught her once setting the table with the same spoon with the faint coffee stain in its center that was at his father's place that morning and should have been soaking in the dishwasher that afternoon.

So all in all he was not surprised by the events in school that day. Mrs. Pickering who used to be his home-room teacher came quietly into Mrs. Magnus's grammar class and whispered politely to him to go out into the hall with

her. He looked up calmly and found she was smiling slightly and smelled vaguely of face powder. He remembered that her eyes were the same autumn brown as the rims of her glasses and the tight bun of hair at the nape of her neck. He noticed that Mrs. Magnus was eyeing him with concern as he followed Mrs. Pickering to the door even though she was trying not to lose track of her lesson. He glanced at her bravely as he passed out into the hall. Mrs. Pickering continued down the barren corridor without a word and ascended the wide first-floor stairs leading to the administrative offices on the second floor. He had been there (to see the Principal) only once, but he recognized the way Mrs. Pickering passed the Principal's office and went through a little foyer leading to a separate, smaller corridor of dark brown doors. She stopped at the last one and paused with her hand over the brass doorknob. "In here, please, Shaun," she said.

He went in and sat at a large red vinyl chair facing an imposing wooden desk. Behind the desk was a tall, well-dressed woman in the kink of lady's dress suit his teachers sometimes wore. She rose and stood behind her desk as he entered, with a symmetrical smile that was pleasant, almost motherly, the kind that don't show any teeth. She stood so that her fingertips were lightly poised against the emerald blotter on the desk top. As Mrs. Pickering closed the door on her way out the woman behind the desk nodded her head amiably at him and spoke. "Good morning, Shaun," she said, "I'm Mrs. Ladky."

He could read the nameplate at the front edge of her desk. "Hi," he said.

"I've heard a lot of nice things about you from your teachers." She sat down at the desk with a cordial sigh. "Mrs. Magnus is very proud of your work in her class."

He looked closely at her face and noticed the thin tilt of her nose and the curious downward curve of her eyelids that ended in little sloping furrows at the corners. Her eyes were round and the color of faded denim. Her voice was quiet and sounded smooth, the way most adults did when they were talking to children. Hers was especially smooth and courteous.

"What did you want to see me about?" he asked. He pushed himself back in the chair so that his shoes came up off the surface of the floor.

The woman crinkled up her eyes in a widened version of the first smile. "Right to the point, well," she looked away momentarily. "I just wanted to have a talk with you. I'd like to get to know you." She stopped smiling and looked at him with genuine question, "Do you mind that we talk today?"

He shrugged. "No," he said at length.

"Okay, good, Shawn," she began, "Can we talk about school?"

He was fidgeting with the thread dangling from one of his shirt buttons. He pretended to nod.

"Do you like school?" she went on, smiling inquisitively. "What's your favorite subject?"

He paused and shrugged again. "I like geography, I guess. I don't like math at all. I like reading in Mrs. Magnus's class better now but I didn't used to I had dyslexia."

"Dyslexia, yes," Mrs. Ladky said with understanding. "Yes, that can be a real nuisance, can't it?"

He twirled the end of the thread around one finger. "I don't have it anymore."

"What do you like to do in school? Say, for fun?" She smiled wider and raised her eyebrows. "You like recess?"

He gave a little smirk and nodded, "Yeah."

"What games do you like to play at recess?"

"I dunno. I like football a lot. I like to receive, then I zig-zag in and out and stuff." He made little wavy motions with his hand like a fish. "It's fun."

"Yes, I think I've seen you boys in action in those football games, you play pretty rough!" She chuckled.

"I don't like it when the girls play. Then I can't knock anybody down. They try to break in and play every once in a while, but they always end up complaining."

"So if they're going to play they'd better learn the rules of the game first, huh?" she observed righteously. "That seems fair. I used to play football once in a while myself. I had a lot of brothers around when I was little."

He gave her a quick glance and returned to his button. He smiled slightly and waited until it faded. "Sometimes I go and sit on the swings at recess."

"All alone?"

He shrugged.

"Don't you need somebody to give you a push?" She was trying to be friendly. He looked up at her with a little annoyance showing slightly.

"Not usually."

She looked away, changing the subject. "What about at home?" She put the accent on "home." "What do you play there?"

"Same thing. I play football."

"Who do you play with? Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He shook his head. "I have a dog, and a hamster."

"What about Mom and Dad? Do they play with you?"

He had started getting suspicious when she mentioned home. He suspected she was onto it somehow. He thought she was asking about them on purpose. He didn't answer. "Shawn?"

"Yeah, they play with me sometimes." He felt his body flush with shock and the nerves tingle all the way down his limbs. Mrs. Ladky went on.

"Do you wish you had a brother or sister to play with instead?"

He shrugged quickly. "I dunno," he said.

"You know, Shawn," she said, shifting around in her chair, "I always would get angry at my parents for some reason or other. I remember one time," she said animatedly, "one time when I was about nine or so; well, right around your age, I suppose. And my mother washed my

favorite blue sweater one day and she forgot to use the right kind of detergent and she accidentally bleached it, she put bleach in the water by mistake, and the sweater came out all blotchy and ugly looking. And I was so mad at her that I swore I wouldn't talk to her for weeks. Well, forever, really. Because my mother had a lot of us on her hands, and she and my father had a hard time supporting all of us when we were young, so my mother was always kind of stern, and very proper, and I always felt that she would never be the kind of person to make that kind of foolish mistake." He could feel her watching him from time to time. "And so I swore that I wouldn't speak to my mother ever again for ruining my good sweater, and I didn't for about, oh, a week, I'd guess. And my mother purposely ignored me and pretended not to notice. But finally at the end of the week my mother was tucking me into bed when she suddenly started to cry, and she told me that she would have given anything to buy me a sweater as nice as the last one, but that she couldn't afford it right then. We just didn't have the money. I had never seen my mother cry before." She turned to face Shawn. "And of course, I felt terrible about being so cruel to her. But it made me realize that she felt as bad as I did, all along, but she just, for a lot of reasons, tried not to show that." She paused. "Does that make sense?"

He looked her straight in the eye and nodded. "Sometimes," she went on, "sometimes when we keep things inside because of our own hurt just as badly by the way we act. Whereas if we could have told them, first thing, that something they did made us unhappy, we could clear up the problem in no time. Can you understand what I'm trying to say?" She smiled again. "Maybe I'm not doing a very good job explaining it."

"No, I understand," Shawn said.

"So you see Shawn, if there's something bothering us, there's no sense in hiding it and secretly holding a grudge against people, especially someone we love. Chances are they didn't even realize they'd hurt our feelings in the first place."

She waited quite awhile for the words to clear the air and watched him pensively study the tips of his loafers. "Is there something bothering you, Shawn?", she said at last. "Is that why you sit alone on the swing sometimes? Is it school? Is someone bullying you?"

He made no reply. "Is it at home? Is it your parents, Shawn?"

It slipped out before he could stop and think about it. His mouth and throat constricted in a little click, almost clipping off the last word. As it was, the entire phrase was barely audible. But he had said it, and he cursed himself inwardly for having done so, having been so careless even after the long weeks of preparation; he had had, in his stoic silence, to let it go so helplessly, and in her presence. His body shot through like a lightning bolt as he heard the echo of his own mousy voice in his ears: "They're not my parents." "I'm sorry?" She leaned forward and frowned slightly. "I couldn't quite hear, Shawn."

He made absolutely no sound, no movement. He did not breathe. "Did you say they weren't your parents? Are you adopted, Shawn? I didn't know that."

He felt the rims of his eyes begin to sting and the skin on his ears grow rosy warm. "No," he said. "I'm not adopted." He shook his head apprehensively. "I didn't think you were. Why would you say that, then?" He could tell from her voice that she was frowning, like Marcus Welby in the reruns on Channel 9. "I dunno." His voice was choked. "Can you tell me why?"

They sat in silence for several minutes; she did not ask him again. Slowly a single tear began to make its way down one cheek and he wiped it away without looking up. When she finally excused him he did not look up either, and he did not raise his eyes from the speckled grey linoleum that lined the foyer and the hall to the stairs until he was back in Mrs. M's classroom with his pencil in his hand.

As he came around the house and up to the back porch he saw them standing together in the open doorway. He stopped at the back steps and looked up at them with his lunchbox jiggling gently against his leg. "Did you ask her to talk to me?", he asked. They nodded. They were smiling similar to Mrs. Ladky. He realized his father had deliberately come home from work to be there to meet him. His father would never get off this early otherwise. He moved past them through the doorway and on into the house. He took his jacket off and threw it over his chair by the kitchen table. He set his lunchbox by the sink. He heard them coming behind them, their feet whispering on the thick rug. "What did you talk about, honey?", she said. "How did it go?" "I didn't say anything." He filled a dixie cup with orange juice from the refrigerator and drank it while they stood there. He glared up at them derisively as he tossed the cup away under the sink. "Don't worry," he said. He went to move past them to head towards his room, when she moved in front of him and reached to hold him back. "Please, Shawn..."

"Don't touch me!" he snapped. "I said I didn't tell her anything." He tried to move by her and she grabbed one of his arms impulsively. He jerked away from her instantly, so hard that he nearly fell back against the wall. "Let go," he shouted. "Don't touch me, I said!" His father opened his mouth to speak but apparently could not. He set one hand weakly on her shoulder. Shawn stared up at the two of them in a sudden swell of anger and began to stagger back from them to the open hall doorway. "I don't know who you are," he began, "but I know all about you. I know what you're up to." He started to shake his head rapidly. His eyes began to sting again. "You're not my parents. You're not my parents. You're...imposters, or...spies, or, I don't know. I don't know who you are." The woman who pretended to be his mother was wearing a ridiculous expression, the likes of which he had never seen before. The man looked even worse. With sudden fury and fear

He looked her straight in the eye and nodded. "Sometimes," she went on, "sometimes when we keep things inside because of our own hurt just as badly by the way we act. Whereas if we could have told them, first thing, that something they did made us unhappy, we could clear up the problem in no time. Can you understand what I'm trying to say?" She smiled again. "Maybe I'm not doing a very good job explaining it."

"No, I understand," Shawn said.

"So you see Shawn, if there's something bothering us, there's no sense in hiding it and secretly holding a grudge against people, especially someone we love. Chances are they didn't even realize they'd hurt our feelings in the first place."

She waited quite awhile for the words to clear the air and watched him pensively study the tips of his loafers. "Is there something bothering you, Shawn?", she said at last. "Is that why you sit alone on the swing sometimes? Is it school? Is someone bullying you?"

He made no reply. "Is it at home? Is it your parents, Shawn?"

It slipped out before he could stop and think about it. His mouth and throat constricted in a little click, almost clipping off the last word. As it was, the entire phrase was barely audible. But he had said it, and he cursed himself inwardly for having done so, having been so careless even after the long weeks of preparation; he had had, in his stoic silence, to let it go so helplessly, and in her presence. His body shot through like a lightning bolt as he heard the echo of his own mousy voice in his ears: "They're not my parents." "I'm sorry?" She leaned forward and frowned slightly. "I couldn't quite hear, Shawn."

He made absolutely no sound, no movement. He did not breath. "Did you say they weren't your parents? Are you adopted, Shawn? I didn't know that."

He felt the rims of his eyes begin to sting and the skin on his ears grow rosy warm. "No," he said. "I'm not adopted." He shook his head apprehensively. "I didn't think you were. Why would you say that, then?" He could tell from her voice that she was frowning, like Marcus Welby in the reruns on Channel 9. "I dunno." His voice was choked. "Can you tell me why?"

They sat in silence for several minutes; she did not ask him again. Slowly a single tear began to make its way down one cheek and he wiped it away without looking up. When she finally excused him he did not look up either, and he did not raise his eyes from the speckled grey linoleum that lined the foyer and the hall to the stairs until he was back in Mrs. M's classroom with his pencil in his hand.

As he came around the house and up to the back porch he saw them standing together in the open doorway. He stopped at the back steps and looked up at them with his lunchbox jiggling gently against his leg. "Did you ask her to talk to me?", he asked. They nodded. They were smiling similar to Mrs. Ladky. He realized his father had deliberately come home from work to be there to meet

him. His father would never get off this early otherwise. He moved past them through the doorway and on into the house. He took his jacket off and threw it over his chair by the kitchen table. He set his lunchbox by the sink. He heard them coming behind them, their feet whispering on the thick rug. "What did you talk about, honey?", she said. "How did it go?" "I didn't say anything." He filled a dixie cup with orange juice from the refrigerator and drank it while they stood there. He glared up at them derisively as he tossed the cup away under the sink. "Don't worry," he said. He went to move past them to head towards his room, when she moved in front of him and reached to hold him back. "Please, Shawn..."

"Don't touch me!" he snapped. "I said I didn't tell her anything." He tried to move by her and she grabbed one of his arms impulsively. He jerked away from her instantly, so hard that he nearly fell back against the wall. "Let go," he shouted. "Don't touch me, I said!" His father opened his mouth to speak but apparently could not. He set one hand weakly on her shoulder. Shawn stared up at the two of them in a sudden swell of anger and began to stagger back from them to the open hall doorway. "I don't know who you are," he began, "but I know all about you. I know what you're up to." He started to shake his head rapidly. His eyes began to sting again. "You're not my parents. You're not my parents. You're...imposters, or...spies, or, I don't know. I don't know who you are." The woman who pretended to be his mother was wearing a ridiculous expression, the likes of which he had never seen before. The man looked even worse. With sudden fury and fear he bounded out of the room and raced for his bedroom door. Halfway across the den leading out of the kitchen he could hear them running after him, and it struck him in an icy flash that he should have gone out the back door and tried to escape, now that they knew he knew there was no telling what they would do, just as there was no telling why they had come. They had just appeared, with their disguised faces and their carefully learned habits, imitating his parents down to the finest detail. But there were slip-ups, more and more as time went on, more and more incongruities in their behavior. They even looked different to him after awhile. But he was afraid to run, afraid to escape for fear they would find him, and they would know that they were no longer secret. They caught up with him just as he reached his bedroom at the end of the hall; he felt the man's thick hand clamp on his shoulder and spin him around. She immediately grabbed him and tried to hold him close, but he resisted her, striking at her breasts and stomach with frenetic slaps and kicks. He knew he was getting too big to hold. He shut his eyes and tried to wiggle out of her arms and through the door. There had been so many things, so many strange looks on their faces, so many tense silences and whispered conspiracies in the dark. He had heard them so many times, late at night, plotting. And yet as he felt the hot tears soaking his face he wanted

before, had never really known the face as it became known to him now. He waited for her to speak and was silent until she did.

"Your father brought me - that man, in there - brought me these when we were engaged. Every month for fourteen months I got a bouquet of these on my doorstep. I still don't know where he got them or how, all those months. These just remind me of that...that time. That's all." She sighed and pulled a few errant leaves from the stems of her plus bouquet. He looked at her face and dry eyes and firm chin. "I will always love your father, Shawn. You don't stop loving someone overnight for no reason. Whatever happens in life, I want you to know," she sighed slightly, "I'll always love him." She set the vase on the rack of dishes above the stove and turned to look at him for the first time. She knelt down a few feet away from where he stood and left her hands at her sides. "But the most important thing," she said, "is that we will always love you. Don't forget that. Both of us love you very, very much, and that will not change, ever. You mean everything to us, Shawn. You're...everything we have going for us, is you."

He watched her for a few minutes and then turned back into the living room and down the long hall to his room. The sun had gone and the room was black and lifeless save for the vague taint of the streetlights. He sat on the edge of the bed in the dark and listened to them. The cool yellow light from the hall made streaks in the carpet through the cracks in the door. He waited to hear the sound of her feet creaking the kitchen floor and the rush of water above the clinking of plates, and the rattle of icecubes, and distant crowds laughing from the den.

to give in, to let them take him, to relinquish his fate to whatever cruel forces had somehow seen fit to disrupt his life with such a subtle, sly, cancerous crime. He wanted his mother like a baby, and he said so. She was clutching at his clothes and he could still feel the wide palm of the man's hand cradling one shoulder. He turned his face away from them and spat out whatever words he could think of. He was tiring and he was glad. "You're not my parents," he said for what must have been the thousandth time. My parents love each other."

She let him go and he stumbled into the bedroom and slammed the door shut, then locked it. He could think of nothing but to lie on the bed and sleep - running was of no use and either was crying. Things seemed immediately doomed for him but at the same time, perhaps because of that, relievingly final. He felt a glowing pang of justice, of proud self-righteousness, even in the face of the enemies that had struck upon him so viciously. The sun was going down. The room was dark and deep like the inside of a tunnel. Within seconds he was asleep; for long minutes he was numb.

When he awoke he walked calmly down the hallway and into the living room to avoid his father in the den. As he turned to enter the foyer he could just glimpse him in the armchair in front of the TV, but the room was silent. He had his hands folded around his chin and his eyes wide open.

She was in the kitchen sorting a handful of lilac blossoms into a wide-mouthed ceramic vase. She did not turn when he came in, but he sensed that she knew he was there. He stared at her in bewilderment, with painstaking studiousness. It struck him that he had never seen her