

Because That's Just Easier

Their kid was turning weird. She refused to go outside, unless she was in a car. Overnight, this seemed to be the case. She didn't want to walk. She didn't want to walk out of the front door of their loft, walk down the hall, get in the elevator, walk out of the elevator, and then walk ten paces onto the street and out into the world. No. She'd get to the door and dig in. Screaming and wailing as if she'd lost her mind. The last thing that used to work to get the child out of the house no longer worked. Cupcakes. That was all it used to take. "I bet they have the red velvet today," Frida would say. "Come on, sweetie. You're with me. I'm not going to let anything happen to you." But the last time they did that, just two days ago, a man wearing a blazer with no shirt lunged at them, muttering something about Jesus and the devil. "Devil," he kept saying. "Devil." When he said it, it sounded like "Debil." "Gimme some sugar!" he demanded. He was holding on to the waist of his pants, which had a rope as a belt. His black blazer was so dirty that parts of it glistened in the sunlight. Something that looked like lipstick was smeared on his cheeks and his long hair stood out at the ends, so that he looked like some deranged scarecrow. He lunged at them with his big hands, near enough to see the length of the nails and the blackness underneath them, and she jerked Dakota's body against her own. But the man was no longer interested in them. He had suddenly changed course, like some prop monster in a carnival ride. He walked on, muttering, and everyone on the street who saw him walked past him, eyes fixed on other things. In front of their building, Dakota begged to be taken back upstairs. "I don't have any sugar!" she wailed, and when Frida tried to calm her down, one of Dakota's bony knees caught her in the chin. Cupcakes were no longer going to cut it.

Downtown Los Angeles was a stupid place to raise a child. The move almost spelled the end of their marriage. She was happy in the Valley. They had a house with a yard and a garage. Space and rooms. Jackson had an office all to himself

where he kept all his collectibles, his Star Wars memorabilia, his comics. Two shelves full of bobbleheads. Even though it was also his workspace for his photography, Frida liked to go in and stare at his large self-portrait, where he recreated the cover of Isaac Hayes's album *Hot Buttered Soul*. She liked to stare at the smooth brown head, eyes covered in sunglasses, making him a stranger. This is what everyone deserved, rooms full of stuff. And neighborhoods, real neighborhoods with streets that had no sidewalks, streets that had dead ends, cul-de-sacs where children—her child—could run and bike and skate themselves silly. Downtown, even though they could barely afford their rent, gastro pubs and sixteen dollar cocktails and overpriced consignment shops aside, their loft was just two streets up from skid row. Every day they witnessed the hard life. There was no getting around the cold hard facts that so many people had nothing. Less than nothing. No getting around the fact that no matter how crazy a person was, talking to God, themselves, or the ghost of Buddy Holly (that was just last week), there would be nobody to help them. The only thing you could do was occasionally reach into a pocket or a purse and thrust money at the person asking for a quarter or a dollar or, sometimes, something to eat. When she gave, she did it without looking too hard or thinking too hard or even smelling too hard, taking tiny breaths until she passed the obstacle. Jackson, though, saw things differently. "I feel like a shut-in," he often said, in his campaign to move. "I want to live in the middle of people, people on top of me and below. On either side." But he spent most of his time in his car, commuting to Santa Monica to his office where he was a commercial photographer. He worked long hours to afford their loft, which was at the very top of their building. The skyline stretched out before them, the mountains emerging behind skyscrapers like backdrops in a school play. They were so high up that they rarely heard traffic or much street noise at all, only the strange and mysterious gurglings and clinks of pipes that seemed to be having an ongoing conversation for years.

Dakota had been fine, though. Taking the move much better than Frida did, until recently. Frida blamed Jackson for this. Him and his violent comic books. Frida didn't see the value of his collections. Maybe she would if they had been vintage Superman or something, but what Jackson collected was just gross. Guts

and gore. They all had big dripping titles like Horror! Terror! Chills! Weird! He was big on death these days and had started reading a comic called *Crossed*, about a plague that caused its victims to carry out the most debased and horrible things they could imagine. God. The illustrations. "Are you fucking kidding me?" she'd asked him. She lowered her voice so Dakota wouldn't hear. "Make sure our daughter never, ever sees this shit." Frida, herself, saw those images for days. Dismemberment, blood sprayed all over the place. He also liked *The Walking Dead*. Zombies who beget zombies through contagion. She had made the mistake of being talked into watching the show. "Just one episode. Just one," Jackson had said. "Just watch this one, and I'll never ask you again. If you're not hooked, I'll shut up."

So she did. They put Dakota to bed, opened wine for her and beer for him. Even before anything happened, she was anxious. She didn't want to see anything ugly and started out with her hands covering her eyes. "Nothing's happened, yet," Jackson said, pulling her hands down. "And it's fake. Just know that it's all special effects, fake blood, artificial substitutes for the real thing." But she didn't know why the fake thing, meant to look as real as possible, should be any less disturbing. People who watched scary or crazy violent movies with people dying in slow motion, revenge flicks with people getting killed in creative ways, how in the world could they just take it? In this one movie, *I Spit on Your Grave*, which Jackson had made her watch when they were first dating (a concession to his handsomeness), the rapist dies after his penis is cut off in a hot bath. Recalling that, she watched *The Walking Dead*, flinching and covering her eyes the whole time.

Frida was done, just *done*, after she uncovered her eyes long enough to see a zombie in tattered rags take a bite out of someone's face, tendon—or something—stretched out between the zombie's face and the newly dead person, the sound effects making her understand, even if she couldn't see, that the zombie was munching on bone and teeth and everything that was left of that human. "Nope," Frida said, getting up. "Give me points for trying." When she turned around she saw Dakota standing with her dinosaur blanket wrapped around her little body, transfixed on the television. "Monkey, what are you doing up? Don't watch this," Frida said. To Jackson, she said, "Turn it off!" He pointed the remote at the television like a magic wand, erasing all the unpleasantness. But Dakota didn't seem afraid. She stood, facing the now black TV, and pointed to it. "Those people look like the people on the street."

"What, Bubs?" Jackson had gone to her and picked her up. "What people?"

"The people," she said. She stuck her thumb in her mouth but kept talking. "The people outside. The ones that look inside the trash. That don't got nice clothes."

"No, Bubs," Jackson had said. "Those people on television are not the same as the people on the street. Those people on the TV were zombies. Zombies are kind of dead. They just walk around," he paused, forgetting, Frida saw, that he was talking to a six-year-old. "They get to be zombies through contagion. They don't see or feel or care about anything except—"

"Are you insane?" She said quietly. "She doesn't need to know or understand anything about—"

"I was just explaining the difference." He crossed his arms, a gesture that she hated. It meant, End of Conversation. "She should not be comparing homeless people to zombies. Not cool."

"If you weren't a 40 year old still riding a skateboard, collecting *comics*, you'd know not to talk to a six-year-old about zombies."

"And if you weren't a 35 year-old afraid of her own damn shadow," Jackson said. Because Frida and Jackson rarely, if ever, let Dakota see them fight, Dakota started crying, and saying that she didn't want to be a zombie, like the people outside. "Am I going to get contajeen?"

"I told you," Jackson said. He pushed Dakota's head into the crook between his head and shoulder and pulled on the springy curls of her wild hair. He rocked her back and forth. "I told you she needs to know the difference. She needs to know things."

Kara was always the passionately cheerful younger sister—and annoyingly so—with all her activism and enlightenment. She volunteered at a homeless shelter in Toluca Lake, where they both were born and raised. She tutored in a literacy project and was a student at Cal State Northridge. Frida agreed with all of Kara's arguments. Yes, downtown was being rebuilt. In fact, that was pretty much a done deal. It was built. Yes, the architecture was gorgeous. Yes, it was great for walking, with the Disney Hall and the Museum of Contemporary Art a hop, skip, and a jump away. And the Central Library was world class. Six million

volumes. Who wouldn't want to raise their child around music and museums and libraries? But Frida tried to explain. There was living downtown, as close to skid row as to the library *in theory*, and then there were the practical aspects of raising a tiny human being in a city that had the highest homeless population in the country, a fact which she had not known, of which her sister had self-righteously informed her. It wasn't that there were no homeless people in the Valley or most anywhere else. Everybody sees the man or woman at the off-ramp with their homemade signs, sometimes clever ones about cutting the shit and just wanting to get a beer. And there was always someone pushing a cart looking like a little condo on wheels.

"But I think it's good for us to see hard things like that," her sister had said. "Nobody *likes* to see suffering, but it makes us more empathetic." She drained her coffee, tilting her head back with the cup to her lips. Frida watched her as she actually tapped the bottom of the cup to get the last drop. Her sister and she looked so much alike, and Frida wanted to grab hold of one of her sister's long, blonde dreadlocks and yank it out. What did *she* know?

You could see and then push those images out of your brain almost immediately because those images were few and far between. But the horror, the terror, at seeing people suffer things that no human being should have to suffer alone, so visible and invisible at the same time? In, like, herds. That's what they called them on that show that Jackson liked so much.

Of course, Jackson did the thing she hated, decided something without her, decided that enough was enough with this not going outside business, that Frida was babying their daughter too much, that no kid of his was going to become some weirdo, recluse, agoraphobic wackadoo. He'd come home from work and had wanted to enjoy a nice balmy walk around town. It was summer, and the sky was purple, and there was the scent of some sweet flower in the air. The dying sun bounced off the glass in high rises in the distance. "It's a beautiful night," he said, crouching down to Dakota's level. "Bubs, you need to be a big girl about this."

He convinced her to let him carry her out on his shoulders, high above the ground, high above everything. He promised her ice cream. It seemed to Frida

that Dakota looked around with big, gray eyes so stricken with fear, it was as if she knew the worst thing in the world was about to happen, and her parents, as old as they were, were too stupid to realize it. Nobody could save her. Frida and Jackson stopped when they saw a neighbor, a couple from the 7th floor, Jeremy and Frank, owners of a white English bulldog that Dakota had made her own. "Papa," Dakota said. "Let me down. I wanna see Barney." Frida looked at Jackson, and he had that satisfied look on his face, the one she thought was so sexy when they first met, his lips turned up in one corner. One eyebrow raised. And when he let her down, Barney and Dakota stood in the middle of the grown people, as if in a cell constructed of humans.

"You're outside," Jeremy said, stroking Dakota's head and tugging on one of her curls. He pushed his Buddy Holly glasses back up on his nose and Frida noticed the fine gray hair on his young face, the kind of hair you can only see in the right sunlight. Practically the whole building had heard about the little girl on the 12th floor who had epic meltdowns whenever she had to leave the building, and Jeremy, Frida supposed, was being some kind of a cheerleader. Jackson shook his head and made throat-cutting motions with his hands. *Don't remind her.* And Frank bumped Jeremy with a beefy arm, straining against a blue, short-sleeved t-shirt. *What's the matter with you?* his eyes said. Dakota kissed Barney on the lips and Frida wanted so badly to tell her not to do that, but she was so grateful that Dakota wasn't screaming as though she was getting knifed in the back. She let it go.

"Let's go, Bubbarino," Jackson said, and Dakota hugged Barney as if it would be the very last time she'd see him. She clutched her father's hand, and Frida walked on the other side of her daughter, a reassuring hand on the back of her soft little neck. It was one of those days, where the sun was bright and glinty as a knife blade, the breeze gently kissing both of their faces. Almost at the library, on the corner of Grand and 6th, there was a man with a handsome face reminiscent of a young Robert De Niro, hair cut military close, squatting, pants down around his ankles, shitting all over himself. Jackson kept walking, but Frida stopped. Stood stock still, forgetting Dakota for a minute, until Dakota tugged on Frida's hand and asked, "Mama, is he going to the bathroom?" At that moment, Frida decided to die, just a little. Turn everything off. She did it for Dakota. She didn't want to scare her. She made her eyes dead, so they looked at nothing. She stopped breathing, so she smelled nothing. Her ears heard nothing. She picked up Dakota in this altered state and walked past the man wiping

himself with his hand, thinking: I hope he is crazy, because if he is crazy, he's not here. He's somewhere else. And everyone around her, so many people, the people going to lunch, to work, for coffee, for drinks, had the same look of death in their eyes, looking straight ahead, everyone catching the same thought as they walked past the man. Keep walking. Just keep walking.

"My pistachio is waiting for me," Jackson called out to them. "Don't you want your strawberry?" Frida walked with Dakota as quickly as she could, past the man, talking the whole time about ice cream flavors.

A block up, in the ice cream shop, Jackson held Dakota up so she could survey all the flavors. She seemed more interested in the ice cream than in the man. While she looked, Dakota shook her hand, the hand that had been held by Frida. "Why are you shaking your hand like that, Bubs?" Jackson took her little hand and massaged it, working on the little dimpled knuckles.

"Mama squeezed my hand too hard," Dakota said.

They were almost home. One more block and it looked like Dakota would be cured. But there was another man in the distance, lying on the sidewalk. All the people in front of them walked and parted mysteriously, and if you didn't know there was a man in on the sidewalk, Frida thought, everyone would seem crazy for suddenly changing course like that, identically, almost at the last minute.

As they got closer to the man, Dakota took Frida's hand and squeezed it. There was a lot of power in that little hand. Her other hand held her ice cream cone, which she was concentrating on fiercely. The ice cream was organic, which Dakota had complained tasted funny at first. But the more she ate it throughout the months, the more she got used to it. They got closer to the man, lying right in the middle of the sidewalk, arms and legs spread as if he had been making snow angels on the hot concrete. When they passed him, Frida looked at her daughter and saw her big, gray eyes get small and determined. She licked her ice cream cone. "Is he dead, Mama?"

"No. He's not dead," Frida said, though she didn't know if this was true or not. She told herself that if the man were dead, people wouldn't be walking around him.

"Are you sure he's not dead?" Dakota looked back again.

"If he's dead, there's nothing we can do," Jackson said. He took a napkin and wiped some of the ice cream running down Dakota's hand. "And if he were dead, he wouldn't be just lying in the middle of the sidewalk. So he's probably not. Look. We're almost home."

"But if he's not dead," Dakota said, turning her head again, turning her whole body. "Can't we do something, Papa? If he's not dead, then we should help him."

Jackson stopped. He kneeled in front of his daughter.

"Don't," Frida said, and Jackson held up his hand. *Wait a minute.*

"If he's not dead," Jackson said, "then it's harder."

"Why? Can't we help him and take him somewhere?"

"That's hard, Bubs. Say he goes to the hospital and they fix him, but when he gets out, he doesn't have anywhere to go. Maybe there's something wrong with his brain, and he needs help."

"Well." Dakota looked up at Frida. "Can't we take him to where you get the help?"

"Well." Frida knelt down too. "You can't do that for everybody, baby."

"No," Dakota said. She stomped her foot. She did this whenever she got frustrated. It was her way of saying, Everybody and everything is so stupid. "I'm talking about just *him*."

"That's hard to do, Honey." Both Frida and Jackson stood up.

"Why?" Dakota said. She pleaded. She really wanted to know. Her little shoulders slumped. They did this whenever she was tired. Jackson picked up Dakota to put her on his shoulders again because he knew the signs for Dakota being tired, but she kicked. "I want to stay *down*." Jackson threw Frida his satisfied look. A look that said, Hell yeah, my kid wants to walk down the street like a normal person. What'd I tell you?

When they got inside their building, they let Dakota push the button to her floor, like always, and inside their loft, Jackson raised his hand for a high five, but Frida left him hanging. "Rock star!" Jackson said. He gave Dakota two extra high fives. Frida hugged her daughter as long as she could before Dakota pulled away from her, suddenly interested in a coloring book she'd left in the middle of the floor. At dinner, they talked about all the things that Dakota liked. She was turning into a girly girl, which Frida didn't want, but it was happening anyway. They didn't know how it happened, but no matter how many Legos and dinosaurs and trucks they tried to get her to play with, she automatically

went to all things glittery and pink and, therefore, barfy in Frida's opinion. So, even though it was summer, she was talking about all the things she wanted for Christmas, mostly Barbie related.

But in the middle of detailing all the "bestest" things about Barbie's glamour camper, Dakota said, "I think the man on the sidewalk is dead. I think he's dead," she said again and again until finally, Jackson asked why. "Yeah," Frida asked. "Why, honey?"

"I think he's dead," Dakota said, "because that's just easier."