

DADDY'S DEAD

by

Karen MacLeish

“This place is giving me the creeps.” Officer Durkin gave a little shudder.

“We’re not even close yet. What d’ya mean?” Officer McCarthy asked as they approached the steps leading to the front door.

“I used to have a dog that didn’t bark when it sensed a threat. He’d just growl and the hair on his neck and back would stand up. Mine is doing that now.” He rang the doorbell.

They waited, checked their watches – 1: 15 p.m. “Dispatch said a young kid called,” Officer Durkin said. “Said its daddy is dead.”

“Its? Its daddy?”

“Well, could’ve been a young woman or a younger boy. The caller didn’t say.”

The door opened slightly and a timid face peered around it.

“Police,” Officer McCarthy said shifting his body so his badge would be visible.

The face just stared.

“Somebody called to say that Daddy is dead. We’re here to help.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. Better come in then.”

The door opened wider and the officers entered, trying not to stare at the grossly misshapen dwarf figure, very young-looking and obviously pregnant. She stared up at the officers as they lost their battle with Politically-Correct-Behavior-Training and stared down at her.

“Will you take us to Daddy?” Officer McCarthy said, recovering his poise.

“Oh, yeah. I’d better.” She continued to stare. This time she stared not at their faces, but at their utility belts holding holster, nightstick, radio, handcuffs, taser and container of mace.

The officers automatically put hands to weapons which were strapped within the holsters.

“You look different,” the girl said. “What are you?”

“We’re police officers, Ma,am.”

“Is a police officer a, a man?” The girl stumbled on the words, ‘police officer’ as if she had never uttered them before.

“Yes, Ma,am. A police officer is a man,” Officer McCarthy said.

“Some offi. . .,” Officer Durkin began, but his partner nudged him.

“Please show us to your Daddy.”

“O.K.” she said. She whirled around and started to skip toward the back of the house.

“Oof,” she said. “It’s hard to skip with this heavy tummy here. And it hurts some.” She cradled her pregnancy in her two arms and waddled toward a bedroom.

On the bed lay a grizzled old man, stark naked, loose skin sagging.

“This is Daddy?” Officer McCarthy said. He approached the man and placed two fingers on the man’s carotid. He noticed a trace of blood on the sheets and on the man’s thigh. The man’s eyes were wide and staring. He had a startled expression on his face. “Do you know what your Daddy was doing when he died?” Officer McCarthy asked. “There is blood here on the sheet.”

“Oh!” the girl said, eyes wide. She swiped a hand between her legs, then inspected it. “I guess it’s my blood.” She wiped her hand on the sheet. “Daddy was poking me.” She reached out and lifted the dead man’s flaccid penis. “It doesn’t get hard much anymore, but when it does he wants to poke.” She let it drop, wiped her hand on the sheet again and stepped back. “He was poking me and then he shouted and then he stopped poking. It was good that he stopped. It hurts a lot now that my tummy is big. Like there isn’t enough room inside me. Daddy didn’t move anymore, didn’t talk or say anything even when I pinched him.” She reached over and pinched the man’s flabby skin. “I thought he must be dead.”

“He’s dead, all right.” Officer McCarthy lifted his radio and ordered an ambulance, coroner and detectives.

Officer Durkin’s eyes were almost as wide and staring as those of the man on the bed. “Poking?” he mimed

“Oh, what’s that?” the girl asked, pointing. “Your box is talking.”

“Don’t be afraid,” Officer McCarthy said softly. “This is a two-way radio. Police officers use radios to talk with other police officers who are not here yet. We are going to wait with you until the others get here. Will you talk with us while we wait?”

“I, I guess I can,” she said timidly. “Oh yes! Daddy can’t stop me.” She grinned. “Can’t stop me now!”

“What is your name?” Officer McCarthy asked.

“My name is Echo,” she said proudly.

“Where is your Mommy?”

“She’s at work.”

“Do you know where she works?”

“I think she works in a, a res’ rant. She went to work when I was little. I don’t see her anymore. Daddy says she’s really busy at work and I’m asleep when she gets home.”

“What is your Mommy’s name? What does Daddy call her?”

“He calls her Delta and . . .” Echo giggled, then suddenly looked frightened. She clapped her hand over her mouth and looked quickly at the bed. “I’m not supposed to talk... Ohh, yesss”, she breathed, “it’s O.K. Daddy can’t get mad anymore.”

“Daddy doesn’t like you to talk with strangers? Even police officers?”

“I never see many people, mostly just Daddy. He gets mad when I talk. Even when I talk to him. Sometimes Daddy’s not nice.” She went to the window, hearing car doors slam. “Oh... there’s a lot of people coming in. I got to hide!” She waddled towards the door, arms cradling her pregnancy.

Officer Durkin moved to block her way.

“Don’t be frightened, Echo,” Officer McCarthy said. There is a doctor and more police officers. These officers aren’t wearing big belts like ours. And you will see. They are even nicer than we are.” He smiled

Echo was still agitated. “This p-p- police officer isn’t nice. He’s in my way.”

“Officer Durkin knows that you are a very important person and he wants these new officers and the doctor to meet you. It was you, wasn’t it, who called 9-1-1 on the telephone? That makes you very special. Did your Daddy teach you to dial 9-1-1?”

“Nine, One, One,” she said looking at her hands, her fingers spread, slightly bouncing first the left hand five times, then the right, four times, folding her right thumb in. “Nine,” she said, then slapped each elbow in turn. “One, one. Nine, One, One., she said proudly. “I watch Sesame Street on T.V. when my Daddy is gone to the store.” She grinned with pride. “When I’m in bed, Daddy watches T.V. I can’t see it, but I heard it say ‘He’s dead. Find the phone and call 9-1-1.’” Echo had made her voice low and growly. “So when Daddy got dead, I called 9-1-1 on the phone.”

Detective Reese pushed Durkin aside and entered the room.

Before he could speak, Officer McCarthy approached him and said quietly, “This child is mentally challenged. Try not to frighten her. She trusts us so far.

The detective looked pointedly at the girl’s pregnancy then raised his eyebrows in question to McCarthy.

“I’ll explain when we’re free here. Durkin and I will leave you to it and take the girl to the living room.”

Echo stood with her thumb in her mouth, wide-eyed.

“Echo,” Officer McCarthy said. “Will you show us where we can get a drink of water?”

“I can make tea,” she said proudly. “Would you like tea?”

“That would be really nice,” McCarthy said, thinking the girl would feel more relaxed if she were doing something more than just waiting. He watched her carefully. As she waited for the water to boil, McCarthy pulled his notepad from a pocket and wrote, ‘Don’t drink any of the tea!’

Echo carefully handed each officer a cup of tea.

“You’re not having tea with us?” McCarthy asked.

“Oh, no. I don’t drink tea, just milk. Daddy taught me to make tea for, for, um, for, um, oh yeah, for, for guests.” She giggled. “I almost forgot the word. You are guests, aren’t you? We don’t have many guests.”

“I believe we are,” McCarthy said, smiling.

Durkin blew gently on his tea and walked toward the door. Opening it, he stood looking out. “Looks like rain,” he said. Then glancing back to make sure Echo wasn’t looking his way, he tossed his tea on the grass. He stayed in the doorway pretending to drink.

“Do you know how to play the game, Cat’s Cradle?” McCarthy asked Echo.

“Nooo,” she said, looking puzzled.

McCarthy went to the kitchen and set his tea on the counter. He picked up a ball of twine. “Is it O.K. if I cut off some of this twine?” he asked.

“I guess. Daddy uses it to tie garbage bags shut.”

McCarthy cut a length of twine and tied the two ends together. “I’ll show you,” he said wrapping the twine around his two hands. O.K. Echo. Crook your little fingers like my partner will show you. Hook one so. . .and the other so. . . and pull this way. . . and that way, careful, not too fast. Then stick your thumbs and first fingers into the little opening, like so. . .and carefully open the cradle. Good job.” McCarthy scooped his hand into the cradle to make it clear for Echo. “See, kitty goes here – cat’s cradle. Now watch.” He pinched into the cradle, taking the two Xs and lifted them over the cradle’s edge. “See there. I have another design.

Two ambulance attendants hurried past with a folded stretcher. Startled by their presence, Echo jerked backwards.

“They’re going to help the doctor with your Daddy,” McCarthy said. “Oops. Don’t lose your finger grip. Whew. There we go.” The two officers carefully walked Echo through all the moves of Cat’s Cradle until they were back at the first design.

“Ahh, ha, ha,” Echo said, giggling. This is where we started.”

“Yes, and we can keep doing this until somebody giggles too much and the cradle falls.”

“I won’t giggle. I won’t,” Echo said, giggling.

Minutes later the coroner walked past with the attendants behind him, wheeling the covered body on the stretcher. Detective Reese said, “We’re done here for now. Will she be alright alone?”

“Not for long, I think, Sir,” McCarthy said. “Echo, we have to leave now. Will you be O.K. here alone for a little while without your Daddy with you? Can you watch television like you do when your daddy is shopping?”

“Ohhh,” she said, alarm in her face. “I guess. Will, will you come back again? Before, before dark?”

Officer McCarthy glanced at the Detective. “Sure. O.K., Echo. I will stop by way before it gets dark. See you in a little while.”

The ambulance pulled away.

“I’ll ride back in the Squad, Mark,” the detective said to the officer who had been standing by the door. Stay here and keep an eye on the place. Don’t let the child leave and call if she needs help. Don’t go inside.”

“Say, Mac, you’re pretty good with the kid,” Officer Durkin said. “I couldn’t do that.”

“Had a little brother with extensive Downs Syndrome and other complications,” Officer McCarthy said. “He didn’t make it to teen-age. It’s a whole different world they live in, a beautiful world. And they’re so pleased to learn something new. I loved that little guy.”

“O.K., give it to me,” the detective said to McCarthy as they pulled away. “Echo. Strange name.”

“Echo says her Mom’s name is Delta. So there must’ve been more before Echo – four more I’d guess. Dollars to donuts, he’d name the new baby Foxtrot. My guess is that they are all the old man’s daughters. And, I hate to say it, but judging by Echo’s appearance, daughters of daughters.”

“Jesus,” the detective muttered.

“You’d think the old goat would turn out a son now and then,” Officer Durkin said. “And what’s with the note saying not to drink the tea?”

“The girl put poison in with the tea. Apparently Daddy didn’t want guests hanging around.”

“Makes me think we maybe should bring the cadaver dogs and do the back yard,” Detective Reese said. “Probably any sons wound up there. Guests as well, if they ever had any. When you come back to Echo before dark, bring a female officer with you, whoever is available, and someone from Social Services. We’ll be back with the dogs.”

“I’m thinking Echo’s Mom won’t be coming home,” Officer McCarthy said. “I’m thinking that as soon as each daughter gets big enough to poke, Mommy winds up in the back

yard too. She'd be too old for that S.O.B. by the time he no longer needed her to care for the baby – all of fourteen or fifteen. Sixteen or seventeen, maybe, if she'd had a boy child first."

Officer McCarthy rang the doorbell shortly before four o'clock, several hours before dark. "Echo, I'm back. It's Officer McCarthy," he called as he opened the door. "I'll wait here by the door until you come to see me again." They waited at least five minutes before Echo appeared, bent over, cradling her pregnancy.

The social worker gasped.

"Are you hurting, Echo?" Officer McCarthy asked.

Echo nodded, tears running down her face.

"I brought someone who can help you with that too-big tummy. Her name is Miss Fields and this is Officer Anderson."

"Hello," Echo said. "I can't make tea. I hurt so much."

"It's okay, Echo," McCarthy said. "We already had our tea."

Officer Anderson quietly left the room and began her search of the house.

Ms. Fields said, "We need to get her to a hospital. Now."

"Miss Fields will help you make the pain go away, Echo," McCarthy said. "She will be your friend."

Echo held her stomach and screamed.

"We're going," Ms. Fields said. "Come along, Echo, we're going where we can take care of you and get rid of the pain."

"No, no," Echo screamed. "I can't go outside. Never, never. Daddy will . . ."

"It's O.K., Echo," Officer McCarthy said gently. "Daddy can't stop you now. You can go with Ms. Fields. Please go with her. She will help so you don't hurt anymore."

Echo gulped back a sob. "Will you come too?" she asked.

"I will follow in my own car. I have some work to do here with Officer Anderson. We won't be very long. Go ahead now."

Detective Reese came to the door. "I thought they'd never get going," he said. "The dogs say it's a veritable Death Valley back there. We'll get the diggers out here in the morning."

"Bunch of papers here," Officer Anderson said. "Some really old militia survival kind of magazines. Look at the dates on these. Some more recent newspaper articles about anti-abortion and legal-person-at-conception kind of stuff." She flipped through the papers. "Oh my . . . Here's a pamphlet encouraging like-minded men to explore the pleasures of child sex. 'It's better with your daughters. They love you already.' Eeeesh. I wonder how many like this there are out there."

"Sick bastard," Detective Reese said. "Thank God he's dead."

"He has a computer in his bedroom too," Officer Anderson said. "I unplugged it and stacked it if you want to carry it out, McCarthy. I'll bet there's a mine of child porn on that."

"We'll go through that stuff with a fine-tooth comb," Detective Reese said. "If we find anything local, we'll pay them a visit."

"Look at these photos of children," Officer Anderson said. "Almost worn out from handling. Names on back." She turned them over and fanned the photos like a hand in poker. "There's a Delta, Charlie, Bravo and Alpha. You said Delta was what Echo called her mom?" She flipped them back and studied Delta.

“Damn,” Detective Reese muttered.

Officer McCarthy picked up the computer as they all walked out.

“No sense leaving a guard now,” Detective Reese said, locking the door.

“I’ll go to the hospital if it’s O.K. with you, Sir,” McCarthy said.

He waited at the hospital all night and half the next day, looking in on Echo now and then so she wouldn’t be frightened among so many strangers in a strange place.

At mid-day, Ms. Fields and a nurse came to him. “Lots of trauma there,” the nurse said.

“And Doctor says she’s definitely a child of incest. Serial incest.”

“Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta and Echo,” Officer McCarthy said.

“With her pain medication, she talked a little more,” Ms. Fields said. “Daddy had always ‘poked’ her, she told me. When she was really little, it hurt a lot, but Daddy would be so happy afterwards and he’d cuddle with her. It’s a wonder any of them were able to conceive. You’d think they’d be torn apart inside if he started when they were babies.”

“My guess,” McCarthy said, “is that when he first started, if he’d killed any in his excitement, he learned to go easy until they were big enough to take the whole thing. The sick bastard.”

“Echo’s baby was born dead,” the nurse said. “Grossly misshapen, heart outside the body.”

“A blessing,” Ms. Fields said. “We’ll find a home for Echo. She keeps asking for you, Sir. And the cat’s cradle. What does she mean?”

“A game we played back at her house. She is very eager to learn.” McCarthy handed over a retail paper bag. There are card games in here called Go Fish and Old Maid and a book with the alphabet and numbers, also a jigsaw puzzle with large pieces. Will you have time to play with her and encourage others also, so she will learn that she can relate to many people and will not be too attached to me?”

“Good idea. She is such a cheerful child considering her life. Ah!” Ms. Fields exclaimed, looking through the bag. “There’s a Teddy Bear in here too. And a, a, oh, yes, Elmo, from Sesame Street. Oh, and a beautiful nightgown. You are a good man, Officer.”

“Every child needs Elmo for a friend,” McCarthy said, grinning. “I’ll go in and see her now and let her know that when she is settled and happy in a new home I will visit again.”

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