

DADDY LOVE

A NOVEL



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CAROL
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LOVE

JOYCE CAROL OATS



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For Warren Frazier, and for Moses Cardona

I

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1

YPSILANTI, MICHIGAN

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Take my hand, she said.

He did. Lifted his small hand to Mommy's hand. This was maybe five minutes before the abduction.

Did he see their car? she asked him. Did he remember where they'd parked?

It was a kind of game she'd played with him. He was responsible for remembering where they'd parked the car at the mall which was to teach the child to look closely, and to remember.

The car was Daddy's Nissan. A silvery gray-green that didn't stand out amid other parked vehicles.

He was an alert child most of the time, except when tired or distracted as he was now.

Remember? Which store we parked in front of? Was it Home Depot or Kresge Paints?

Mommy narrowed the stores to two, for Robbie's benefit. The mall was too much for his five-year-old brain.

He was staring ahead, straining to see. He took his responsibility for the car seriously.

Mommy began to worry: she'd made too much of the silly game and now her son was becoming anxious.

For he was fretting, Is the car lost, Mommy? How will we get home if the car is lost, Mommy?

Mommy said, with a little laugh, Don't be impatient, sweetie! I promise, the car is not *lost*.

She would remember: the lot that was often a sea of glittering vehicles was now only about one-third filled. For it was nearing dusk of a weekday. She would remember that the arc lights high overhead on tall poles hadn't yet come on.

The harsh bright arc lights of Libertyville Mall. Not yet on.

It was in a row of vehicles facing the entrance to Kresge Paints that she'd parked the Nissan. Five or six cars back. The paint store advertised itself with a festive rainbow painted across the stucco facade of the building.

The Libertyville Mall was a welcoming sort of place. As you approached the entrances, a percolating sort of pop-music emerged out of the very air.

Didn't trust her spatial memory in these massive parking lots and so Dinah never walked away from her car without fixing a landmark in her memory. A visual cue rather than trying to remember the signs: letters and numerals were too easy to forget.

Unless she jotted down the location of the parked car on a scrap of paper, which she had not done.

Searching for the car Robbie was becoming increasingly fretful. Tugging at Mommy's hand in nervous little twitches. And his little face twitched, like a rabbit's.

She assured him: I'm sure the car is just over there. Next row. Behind that big SUV. Perpendicular to the paint store.

Robbie was straining to see. Robbie seemed convinced, the car was *lost*.

And how would they get home, if Daddy's car was *lost*?

Mommy asked Robbie if he knew what *perpendicular* meant but he scarcely listened. Ordinarily new and exotic words were fascinating to Robbie but now he was distracted.

Mommy what if . . . Lost?

Damn she regretted the silly parking-lot game! Maybe it was a good idea sometimes but not now, evidently. Too much excitement in the mall and Robbie hadn't had a nap and now he was fretting and on the verge of tears and she felt a wave of protective love for him, a powerful wish to shield him, to clutch him close and assure him that he was safe, and she was safe, and the car was only a few yards away, and not *lost*. And they were not *lost*.

Except: when she came upon the row of vehicles in which she was sure she'd parked the Nissan, it wasn't there.

Which meant: she'd parked in the next row. That was all.

It's right here, Robbie. Next row.

You must hide from your child your own foolish uncertainties.

You must hide from your child your own sudden sharp-as-a-razor self-loathing.

Dinah was thinking more positively—(a good mother is one who insists upon thinking “more positively”)—what a good thing it is, that a child's fears can be so quickly dispelled. Robbie's anxiety would begin to fade as soon as they sighted the car and would have been totally forgotten by the time they arrived home and Daddy came home for supper.

And Daddy would ask Robbie what they'd done that day and Robbie would tell him about the mall—the items they'd bought, the stores they'd gone into, the plump white pink-nosed Easter bunnies in an enclosure in the atrium at the center of the mall and how he'd petted them through the bars for it was allowed for visitors to pet the bunnies as long as they did not feed them, or frighten them.

PET ME PLEASE DON'T PINCH ME.

And Robbie would climb onto Daddy's lap and ask, as he'd asked Mommy, Could they have an Easter bunny? And Daddy would say as Mommy had said, Not this year but maybe next year at Easter.

And to Mommy in an undertone, Jugged hare, maybe. With red wine.

Pulling Robbie through a maze of parked vehicles and certain now that she saw the Nissan, parked exactly where she'd left it, Dinah was prepared to say in relief and triumph: See, honey? Just where we left it.

2

“Please take my hand, Robbie.”

He did. He lifted his pudgy hand to Mommy’s hand, and she squeezed his fingers. Between Mommy and the five-year-old passed a shivery sort of happiness.

Apophatic came to her mind. That which is *beyond words*.

So much in motherhood she was discovering is *beyond words*.

“Do you see our car? Daddy’s car? Remember where we parked?”

The car was Daddy’s 2001 Nissan sedan. Cool green-gray of the hue of weathered stone.

On their outings together, Mommy used such opportunities to instruct Robbie. It was Mommy’s intention that their son would not be a passive child like so many in this electronic-media era but a child actively involved in whatever Mommy was doing that had some reasonable learning-purpose to it.

And Robbie definitely helped Mommy locate stores on the mall-map, for his five-year-old brain was quick to coordinate colors, and quick to match names and numerals with patches of color, as in a board game.

Robbie had been “responsible” for remembering the location of the car when Mommy parked, since the age of three.

He was a quick bright sweetly docile boy most of the time—given to happy chattering. A nonstop barrage of questions for Mommy and Daddy—*Why? Why? Why?*

The flood of speech had begun when he’d been two. In three years, Robbie’s vocabulary and *way with words* had developed considerably.

And it was a task, to get such an active-minded child to sleep through the night. Often waking at 3:30 A.M. and coming to their bed claiming he was *all slept-out, so it must be morning*.

Mommy was asking gently: “Remember? Which store we parked behind? Was it Home Depot or Kresge Paints?”

She’d narrowed the stores down to two, for Robbie’s benefit. The mall was somewhat overwhelming to him and shopping here left him both excited and fatigued.

“Home Depot or—Kresge Paints?”

Robbie stared, strained to see. Robbie was taking his responsibility for the car seriously.

This was a game and yet not entirely a game. Now Dinah began to worry that she'd made too much of it and if Robbie couldn't locate the car he'd be disappointed in himself, and upset.

The downside of an active-minded child is that he sets high standards for himself, if but unconsciously. And it should not be a five-year-old's self-judgment that he might *fail*.

Shopping with Mommy Robbie was like a little bird fluttering its wings—so much energy! And so much to look at, and question! *Mommy what's this? Mommy what's this?* A display of plump white pink-nosed Easter bunnies in the mall had thrown him into an ecstasy of excitement. He'd tugged at Mommy so hard that her arm was aching. She'd joked to friends, as to Whit, that she was becoming asymmetrical—a slight stoop to her right shoulder, from leaning down to their little boy.

He was a happy child. He was not a fretful, whimpering or whining child. Yet, sometimes when he was frustrated, particularly by a task he'd presumably learned to do, or by some accident having to do with the toilet, Robbie burst into tears of disappointment, hurt, rage. The *woundedness* in a five-year-old's face! It would require a Rembrandt to render such exquisite subtlety, such pain. At such times Dinah was in awe of the child.

For at such times he seemed to her not *her child*, but *the child*.

Robbie was saying in a worried voice that their car wasn't where it was supposed to be—was it? The car was “lost”—was it?

And Mommy said no, the car was definitely not lost—“Just wait a minute. Maybe we'll see it in a minute.”

Robbie was asking how they would get home, if the car was “lost”?

“Sweetie, don't be so impatient. I promise, the car is not *lost*.”

Recalling how, as a child, she'd been subject to little spells of anxiety about being *lost*.

All children must feel this anxiety in some way. *Lostness* as a condition of which no one can speak clearly for it is a mystery—the *lostness* deep within the soul.

Dinah would remember that the lot, often a sea of glittering vehicles, was only about one-third filled at this time, nearing dusk of a weekday. She would remember that the lights high overhead on tall poles hadn't yet come on. There'd been a *mistiness* to the air that made her vision seem blurred and her senses less alert than usual. And yes, she was tired.

Tired was what she'd never admit to her husband, let alone her son. *Tired* was her secret shame, alarm, disappointment in herself for she believed that *tired* was just ordinary weakness. *If you are happy in your life and living a good life you are not ever tired but suffused with the strength of happiness.*

She wasn't a religious person. Yet, in the deepest region of her soul she would say *Yes I believe*.

Whit would laugh at her. Whit laughed at such clichés. Whit laughed at weakness not his own.

It was facing the entrance to Kresge Paints she'd parked the car. Five or six rows back. The paint store advertised itself with a rainbow painted across the stucco facade of the building.

Didn't trust her spatial memory in these big lots and so she never left her car without fixing a landmark in her memory. She preferred a visual cue rather than trying to remember the signs: letters and numerals were too easy to forget unless she wrote them down.

Though she did remember, the car was in Lot C.

Robbie, over-excited by the mall, each window display having drawn his attention, and some of the displays (electronics, toys, sports gear) having stimulated a barrage of questions to put to Mommy, seemed to have forgotten Kresge Paints though, when they'd left the car, Mommy had pointed to the gala rainbow facade. Too much had intervened, evidently. Too much to look at. Robbie was tugging at Mommy's hand in nervous little twitches. And his little face twitched, like a rabbit's. She wanted to kiss him, he was looking so perplexed; at the same time so *responsible*.

At such a juncture a cruel parent might have said *It was your responsibility to remember where the car was parked. If you can't find the car we are lost and have no way of getting back home*. But she was not a cruel parent and she would never have said such a thing.

Though her own mother might have said such a thing to her when she'd been Robbie's age.

Not seriously of course but as a joke. Dinah's mother liked such jokes.

Don't go there! Back up.

"Honey, the car is over there, I think. Behind that SUV. We can't see it just yet but—it's perpendicular to the paint-store entrance. OK?"

Robbie was uncertain. Robbie was straining to see.

"The paint store? With all the colors? The car is there."

Robbie shook his head—his forehead crinkled in worry—the car *was not there*.

"Robbie, wait. Stop pulling at me, please! The car *is there*."

Dinah had to smile. Though a child is small, a child is *strong*.

But the fact is, an adult must always be aware: a child is *small*.

It was easy to forget this simple fact sometimes. When she and Robbie were together for an uninterrupted period of time—in the car, or at home; watching videos, reading a storybook ("reading" what was Robbie believed he was doing though Mommy knew

he'd memorized the words to his favorite stories from having them read to him many times); when he was sitting with her, and they were almost of a height; or Robbie was sitting on her lap, which made him seem taller. Or Robbie was chattering and she was laughing and half-listening and thinking, as the child's father had observed, that there was something about their son's personality that made you think he was your size, essentially.

And quick, and smart. Fascinated by words.

“‘Perpendicular.’ D’you know what that means, sweetie?”

Impatiently Robbie shook his head *no*.

“It means, like, an *L*”—Mommy made a shape with her hands, to indicate perpendicularity—“one thing is going this way, and the other is going this way. See?”

Robbie nodded uncertainly. He was looking anxiously about for the car—where was the car? *Why couldn't he see the car yet?*

Firmly Mommy gripped the pudgy little hand and walked forward in the direction of the car she'd parked only an hour before, making her way between parked cars, waiting for a lone vehicle to pass with headlights shining faintly, gripping the anxious child's hand and just slightly annoyed now, not so much with Robbie but with herself, for encouraging this silly game as a way of strengthening the child's memory, or his sense of responsibility, which she was thinking now hadn't been a good idea maybe; or, if a good idea originally, not so great an idea now. It frightened her, sometimes seeing young mothers lose control and scream at their small children in the mall, or in the vast parking lot; there was something about the anonymity of the mall that seemed to encourage such outbursts; and sometimes the young mother shook her child, and you could only stare in horror, you could not look away from such private, devastating moments; but you must shield your child from seeing, and so you did—you hurried away—no backward glance . . .

The good thing was, of course Robbie's anxiety would vanish in another few seconds, when they found the car (which wasn't exactly where Dinah had thought it was, after all; must be the next row, and not this row) and Robbie would soon know, and a few minutes later Robbie would have totally forgotten his anxiety for in a five-year-old emotions rise and fall like gusts of wind. She would say, in triumph: “See, honey? Right where we left it.”

But she was stammering. Words like bits of concrete or chalk in her mouth. Trying to say *I can't remember*.

I guess—I can't remember.

We were almost at our car when something hit me—the back of my head—it seemed to fall from the sky like a large bird—like a swan—it was just above me and beating me with its wing—but the wing was sharp like a sword . . . Then I was gone.

I was gone, and Robbie was taken from me. I felt his fingers wrenched from my hand

. . .

I was gone and could not scream for help but it was like I'd been pushed into the water, and came up again, to the surface, and somehow I was on my feet—I don't know how I managed to get up but I was on my feet—I guess I was running after them—him?—I was screaming and I was running after the SUV—I think it was—or a van—he'd gotten Robbie from me and into the van—it happened so fast—they said it was a concussion from the first blow—when I was on my feet—now I could scream and I was screaming at them—at him—I was stumbling after the van—we were at the end of a row of parked cars, the lot was emptying out—nobody seemed to see us—I was running after the van screaming and then somehow it happened, I couldn't see for the blood running into my eyes, the van was turned around—the driver had turned it around—he was going to run me down—I could see his face—I could see his grinning teeth—his whiskers—some kind of a hat, a baseball cap maybe, pulled down low over his forehead, and he was wearing glasses—dark glasses—his eyes were hidden behind those dark reflector glasses like motorcyclists wear—and I guess—I wasn't going to step aside—I was screaming for Robbie and that was all I was thinking about—the van wasn't going fast yet and I thought—must have thought—that I could grab the door handle or pound on the windshield with my fist—I could get Robbie back, I thought—and—I guess—he aimed right at me, he ran me down . . . She wouldn't remember being dragged beneath the van fifty feet in the parking lot and the van lurching and skidding to shake her off until finally her body fell loose and was flung aside like a sack of laundry and when the first witnesses arrived she was lying seemingly lifeless on the pavement—in utter astonishment having seen a woman struck down by a van and dragged beneath it across the pavement for fifty feet and her body finally released. And the van left the lot, sped up and left the lot, we'd just come out of Home Depot and were too far away to see who was driving the van or what color it was or the license plate, we ran to the poor woman lying there broken-looking we were sure had to be dead.

3

“Take my hand. Please, Robbie!”

He did. He took her hand.

In the mall he’d become over-excited and hadn’t always obeyed Mommy unless she raised her voice but now in the confusion of the parking lot the five-year-old was subdued, apprehensive.

She would think *The first of the mistakes*.

“Are you tired, sweetie? We’ll be home in a half hour. Help Mommy find our car, OK?”

It was his responsibility. This was the game. Robbie loved games because (usually) Robbie was good at games.

“See it yet? It’s somewhere up ahead.”

The game was to allow Robbie to lead *her*. Tugging at her hand to hurry *her*.

But Robbie wasn’t sure where the car was. Too much had happened in the mall to intrigue him and dazzle him and he’d wakened early that morning and naturally he was tired, and inclined to be fretful and anxious. And she could hardly say in exasperation to a bright energetic five-year-old *Didn’t I tell you, you’ll be sorry if you don’t take a nap?*

It was hard for Dinah to scold her son. Hard for Dinah to scold anyone.

Even when, at Story Hour at the local public library, it was her dear son Robbie who sometimes chattered and jostled other children, he was so *enthusiastic*.

Or when, feverish with excitement, Robbie slipped his hand out of hers inside the mall and ran on his short stubby legs to the Easter bunny enclosure paying no heed to Mommy calling after him with exasperated laughter.

The mall was a favorite place for mothers with young children. There was a children’s play area and there were numerous “outdoor” restaurants serving inexpensive food. Each season had its appropriate decorations—Christmas had lasted a long time at the mall; and now with the approach of Easter, fluffy white bunnies were displayed amid pots of bloodred tulips and vivid-yellow daffodils. Some of the mothers seemed to be herding as many as three—four?—young children and these women Dinah regarded with awe. How could they manage, with more than one child! Robbie was as much as she could handle, or could imagine wishing to handle. All of her volcanic Mommy-love was invested in this single child. What was possibly less

obsessed with parenthood than Dinah, but not by much less.

Imagine, if Robbie was twins! a friend had said and Whit had said wittily *You mean he isn't?*

“This way, honey. I think we want to go in this direction.”

Robbie had been tugging impatiently at her hand. He must have forgotten Kresge Paints though Mommy had pointed out the garish rainbow facade as a landmark for locating the car.

With a fraction of her (distracted) consciousness she'd been aware of the vehicle, a van, that passed her and Robbie slowly as if the driver was looking for a place to park as close to Home Depot as possible. She'd gripped Robbie's hand to allow the van to pass before they stepped out from between two parked vehicles and in that instant her awareness of the van was no more distinct than her awareness of any other vehicle, stationary or moving, within her range of vision. She did not see who was driving the van, or whether there was someone sitting in the passenger's seat. She might have been aware that the van wasn't a new shiny model but a not-new slightly battered model of the indefinable hue of last fall's leaves trapped in gutters and ravines. She was certainly not aware of the van's license plates either front or rear.

“Watch out, sweetie *Do not ever* step out from between parked cars without looking *left and right.*”

In the mall she'd allowed her little boy to become over-stimulated. It was the indulgence of a young mother intoxicated with motherhood as with an exotic drug.

She'd shared in his excitement. It was a giddy experience to see the world through a child's eyes. For she could not remember ever having been *so young*.

Before bringing Robbie to the mall, initially in his stroller, she'd never quite realized how fascinating the displays were in many of the store windows and in the mall's three-storey atrium, beside the escalators. (And the escalators were like amusement park rides, thrilling to the very young, and seemingly very safe.) So much in this consumer paradise was gaily colored and in motion to catch the eye's attention and to hold it.

She understood: the mall was designed to draw in shoppers, consumers. The children's displays were designed to draw in children whose parents might be prevailed upon to buy them what they begged for. She and Whit did not “believe” in impulsive buying, certainly not at the whim of a five-year-old. Nor could they afford to spend money on perishable toys or things that Robbie would quickly outgrow.

Yet there was an undeniable romance to the mall. Ridiculous, the glamour of new-model auto vehicles positioned on revolving platforms, that quite dazzled the eye. The very names were seductive—*Forester, Wrangler, Optima, Cavalier, Echo, Lancer, Sunfire*. Whit complained of the Nissan he'd had for years. It was time to buy a new

car, maybe a SUV. They might look ahead to driving their kid with other kids to—soccer games? Little League softball? (Whit was one who'd long scorned suburban life yet each year was sinking a little more into it as if into, as he liked to say, a spongy AstroTurf.) They'd need a vehicle larger than a sedan. But not probably new: "pre-owned."

Yes. There was something undeniably thrilling in children's faces at the mall as they tugged at their mother's restraining hands.

Mom-my! Mom-my! MOM-MY!

Robbie could be headstrong and even defiant, in an environment that was both disorienting and enchanting. The glittery Libertyville Mall was an environment distinctly *other*, set beside which the household in which he lived with Mommy and Daddy was altogether ordinary.

Whit had read to Dinah a passage from one of his psych texts: at age two the average *Homo sapiens* is as "wantonly destructive" as he/she will ever be.

They'd laughed together. Grateful that their son was a special child who hadn't been "wantonly destructive" or even, in fact, unusually difficult, as a toddler; and, by age three, had already begun to show signs of child-maturity—allowing other children to go first in line, curbing his instinct to interrupt, expressing embarrassment for his mistakes. Especially, Robbie was inclined to be deeply embarrassed if he spilled or fumbled something. But when he was tired, or in an edgy mood, Robbie reverted to his younger toddler-self, a tight-wired little creature on the verge of a tantrum.

The Libertyville Mall was just too large. It must have been miles they'd walked—drawn irresistibly forward by something glittery and promising in the near distance. Dinah had known exactly what she'd wanted to buy and in which (probable) stores and yet, once at the mall, you were captivated by the bright buoyant welcoming Muzak and forgot your resolutions. And the boy was fatigued, and not thinking clearly.

In the parking lot Mommy was thinking *In another minute he'll see the damned car! Then, all will be happy again.*

She was thinking of how, aged two, Robbie had had a bronchial infection; his skin was flaming-hot, his temperature was a stunning 102.2°F. In a panic she and Whit had driven him to the ER in Ann Arbor—Whit hadn't wanted to wait for an ambulance—he'd driven the 1991 Nissan sedan so fast it began vibrating and shaking as if it had been about to disintegrate into pieces and Dinah had clutched at their small limp feverish son vowing *If You will save him, dear God, I will never doubt You again. Please God help us, Robbie is so little and we are so helpless.*

In the ER, emergency medical workers had started an IV line in his arm. And how small Robbie's arm, and how small the "butterfly needle" used to draw blood! The

chief resident had said *Your son has a bronchial infection and is severely dehydrated* and she hadn't wanted to think that he had spoken to her and to Whit with an air of reproach or disgust. *Dehydrated? What was that, exactly? Not enough water? But how do you make a two-year-old drink water if he doesn't want to?*

Later she'd clutched Robbie's hand. When Robbie was in intensive care. The bronchial infection had invaded both lungs. The child was so very small in the (child-sized) hospital bed. Family members had come but weren't allowed to stay because the room was too small. Dinah's mother had come and stood in the hall wringing her hands. A hag's face like something hacked out of stone. Yet she'd seemed genuinely stricken, and sorry for what she'd said about Dinah's marriage to the "mulatto disc jockey" who was Perry "Whit" Whitcomb whom Dinah adored.

Someone has to be to blame, if a two-year-old is critically ill. Such an illness as a severe bronchial infection doesn't just happen. Dinah's instinct was to say *It was my fault. I didn't realize he wasn't drinking enough liquids.* She had known that Robbie's skin was hot, that he was running a fever, but her pediatrician had told her repeatedly that babies run fevers, babies snuffle, snuffle and fret and cry, she must resist the impulse to fly into a panic at every snuffle. Yet she'd stammered to anyone who would listen *It was my fault. My fault.* As if her confession might mitigate the child's condition. As if God might decide not to punish the child, but the (bad) mother. It had been gallant of Whit to object saying *It's my fault just as much, Dinah. It's both our faults. And it happened fast—overnight.*

Gallant of Whit to say *We're amateurs at this. We're trying to learn. But Robbie is going to get well. And Robbie will never remember a minute of it.*

Dinah wondered if this could be so: Robbie wouldn't remember the eight-day vigil in the University of Michigan Medical School Hospital in the children's wing.

Young children remember very little. Unless the corollary was more likely: young children forget very much.

Lacking a concept of *death, extinction* they are not able to attach emotions to such possibilities.

Robbie had recovered. Of course, Robbie had recovered.

He was susceptible to lung infections, severe colds. But he'd recovered and they were sure he didn't remember and he'd never known that his parents had been desperate with fear that he might die; that they'd sat on either side of his narrow little bed and clutched at his small perfect hands and wept together and laughed and reminisced *When he was conceived? That night? I'm sure it was that night—you know—at that terrible "motor hotel" in Bozeman—in the morning a swarm of blackflies rushed at us—ugh!—in our hair, eyes, mouths . . .*

In such ways you are bonded with another. The connection with the man was so