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After School
by Tyler Bliss

It had been a long day for Lauren. School did not seem to go by as quickly as usual. She was happy finally to step off the bus. The kids had been picked up a little bit late so she had to hurry and get home before Margaret began to wonder where she was. Even thought it was not her fault that the bus was late she knew Margaret would think she dawdled. She quickly said good-bye to Sarah, who usually sat next to her on the bus and also got off at her stop, and started to run home. Lauren lived only two houses away. She took the short cut by running across the neighbors’ yards and headed straight for the side door. She arrived out of breath, the frown on her face told Lauren that she was angry, probably because she was late. Lauren had come to know this look. Margaret had two different expressions. The constant frown she wore as she watched the television and the smile she gave Lauren’s smother when she arrived home. But even her smile seemed unhappy. Margaret was only forty-two, three years younger than Lauren’s smother, but she looked much older. She seemed worn out and tired by the way she carried herself. She leaned hard when she walked and did not pick up her feet all the way. Lauren could hear her shuffling through the door. Lauren reached for her things on the porch chair and hoped she could dodge whatever confrontation Margaret was determined to give her. Lauren never understood why she had to come straight home after school. She was just told that Margaret had things to do other than worrying about where she was. Lauren’s mother also had told her that a ten-year-old girl has no business wandering around the neighborhood after school is out. There was always plenty of time on Saturdays to play with friends. But Lauren couldn’t remember the last time she had been allowed to have friends over, and Margaret had always been quick to remind all concerned that watching tow girls was not in her contract. Nor was Lauren allowed to go over to a friend’s house. Worst of all, her parents were at home less and less. Lately, they had been going away on the weekends.

The door unlocked and Margaret opened the door slowly. She stood there looking down at Lauren, who was still standing just outside the door, as if she needed permission to enter. It was obvious Margaret was angry, but just how angry was not clear.

"Where have you been?" she asked sharply.
"The bus was late in picking us up and there..." Lauren continued to walk down the hall. Margaret ran up behind her as she got home, and she would handle it. And even then, Lauren couldn’t recall a time when her mother had ever laid a hand on her. Lauren now felt that she had control of the situation.

"I said, I hate you," repeated Lauren, calmly and defiantly. She looked right at Margaret.

"That’s enough! Now get up to your room and do your homework!" Margaret commanded.

Lauren stood there a moment and stared at Margaret who had walked back over to the table and taken her seat again. She could not understand what it was that she had done to Margaret to make her so upset. Why couldn’t she just come home and do what she wanted without having Margaret get mad at her for something? It angered Lauren that she could never get Margaret to listen. Every day there was something that upset Margaret and there was no way of knowing how to act.

"Why are you just standing there?" Margaret shouted.

Tears began to build up in Lauren’s eyes, and she dropped her backpack.

“You never listen to me!“ she cried.

'Your mother’s not paying me to listen, she’s paying me to watch. Now go to your room!" demanded Margaret.

Lauren wiped her eyes with her hand and grabbed her backpack off the ground and started walking toward the hall. She set her lunch box on the table as she walked by Margaret, who was now focused on the television.

As Lauren reached the door to the hall she slowed up and muttered, “I hate you.”

Margaret jumped to her feet

"What did you just say?"

Lauren continued to walk down the hall. Margaret ran up behind her and grabbed her by the arm, spinning her around.

"What did you just say to me?" Margaret shook her. Lauren knew that Margaret would not spank her. That was one thing that she knew her mother had instructed Margaret not to do. If Margaret were to have any trouble she was to tell Lauren’s mother about it when she got home, and she would handle it. And even then, Lauren couldn’t recall a time when her mother had ever laid a hand on her. Lauren now felt that she had control of the situation.

"I said, I hate you," repeated Lauren, calmly and defiantly. She looked right at Margaret.

"You’ve got some nerve, little lady. You just wait until your mother gets home."

"Fine," Lauren said with a smile on her face. She shook her arm out of Margaret’s hand and continued toward the stairs. She could feel Margaret staring at her as she walked down the hall. She knew she had won this little battle.

"I’m going to make sure your mother knows exactly what you said and, I can only imagine what she’ll do to punish you.” Margaret was yelling as Lauren reached the stairs.

"Go right ahead. I don’t care.” Lauren yelled right back, and she really didn’t care. She meant what she said and maybe for once her mother would ask her what she felt. No one ever asked her what she thought about Margaret. When her mother hired Margaret, she was at school and did not get to meet her until the following day when she got home from school. Lauren’s mother simply told her that Margaret was fine for the job and that they should get along. And that was it. Nothing more was said and Lauren was left alone every day with Margaret.

Lauren reached the top of the stairs and glanced behind her to see if Margaret was still watching her. She was, and Lauren gave her the best bratty smile she could offer. Margaret groaned and threw her arms up in the air and stomped back into the kitchen.

"You can just stay up there until your mother gets home!” Margaret shouted. Lauren didn’t bother responding because that’s what she had in mind anyway. It made her laugh to think that all the power Margaret had left was to yell at her from the kitchen.

Lauren proceeded down the long, dark hallway toward her room. She had chosen the room at the end of the hall when they first moved into this house five years ago. Even though there were five other bedrooms along the way, she liked the one at the end best—because of its closet. The closet was located directly underneath the attic stairs and the ceiling in the closet gradually slanted all the way down to the floor as it followed the steps above it. This gave her closet an extra ten feet or so and she
had turned this area into a small fortress, just for her—just for Lauren—and her dolls. Her parents were uneasy about her room being so far away from theirs because she was so young at the time, but Lauren persisted and they finally decided it was all right.

She opened the door to her room and tossed her backpack onto her bed. She shut the door quietly and hoped that Margaret would not hear her. In the past when she had been sent to her room, she had slammed her door shut just to make Margaret angry, but not this time. By not slamming the door she would make Margaret wonder if she had actually gone to her room and she would have to come and check. Lauren also didn't want Margaret to think she was mad. She was in control and did not want to do anything that might give Margaret a chance to get the upper hand. Instead, Lauren slipped into her room and began to think about what she was going to say to her mother when she came home.

Lauren climbed onto her bed and pulled some paper out of her bag. She figured that this would finally be her big chance to tell her mother everything she'd been feeling. Margaret was acting so upset that Lauren knew her mother would come upstairs and ask why. And she also knew her mother would tell her to apologize to Margaret the next day. Lauren decided to write down everything she wanted to say to her mother to make sure she didn't forget a thing. The first thing she would be asked is why she would say that she hated her—just for Lauren—and her dolls. Her parents more.

For as long as she could remember, she had spent the time after school with a babysitter, and before that it was day care. No one had ever asked her how she felt, and she wanted to say that she felt left out, and that she wanted to be with her parents more.

Lauren stopped to tred over what she had written. She smiled as she looked at it. This is what she had always wanted to say.

First, there was the situation with Margaret. Lauren wrote that she did not understand why she had to come straight home every afternoon and why she could not spend more time with her friends. She had always received good grades. Spending more time with her friends would not take away from her studying. And if Margaret knew where she was after school, there would be no reason for her to worry. Lauren also wrote that she did not think Margaret understood her nor was willing to try. She never let her finish saying what she wanted to say, she spent most of the time watching T.V., and rarely did she spend any time with her. Lauren was sad that she was left alone with this lady who didn't care about her—Lauren also wanted her mother to know that she wished to spend more time with her and her father. She wrote that the only time she got to see them was in the evening when they got home from work, and shortly after that she would get sent to bed. The weekends were another thing. It made her sad to see her parents leave every other weekend for their little trips (or "getaways" as her father had put it), not because they left her with Margaret, but because she wanted to go with them. Finally Lauren wrote that she never felt that she had been given a chance to get to know her parents. For as long as she could remember, she had spent the time after school with a babysitter, and before that it was day care. No one had ever asked her how she felt, and she wanted to say that she felt left out, and that she wanted to be with her parents more.

Lauren sat there in silence. She looked at her written list, and it became apparent that she'd never really deliver it. A new expression came upon her face.

"Maybe," she thought, "the problem is me." She slowly and nearly began to tear up the list. "Maybe I shouldn't care about my parents so much." She looked up as if relieved and, with her lower lip extended, puffed out some air that made her bangs briefly flutter. Things would be better now.

She looked up as the door swung open and watched in shock as Margaret walked into the room.

"Your mother said you can stay up here the whole night and to forget about dinner." Margaret was smiling and her eyes sparkled in a devilish way.

"I thought she was home. Where did she go?"

Lauren asked timidly.

"She's going to meet your father for dinner and then they're going out to see a movie. I'm to put you to bed as soon as your homework is done, and she wanted me to tell you to watch your mouth too." With that, Margaret turned abruptly and left.

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