

His Daughter

by Meryl Trussler

Lila's feet are barely touching the ground in this mad dash up the road. Her father is almost sprinting, and his lungs are so much larger and stronger than hers are. Her heart beats like a rat's; it's all too fast.

She just ate soap, but she doesn't want to go to the hospital again.

Mainly, she thinks, because she doesn't feel sick except for a sort of dull burn. It had been liquid soap and smelt like strawberries, things clearly meant for eating.

They stand, dripping, under the glowing red man at the traffic light. Matthew's thoughts draw through his head unendingly like earthworms over and into soil. Poisoned? Does he say she's been poisoned, or will that intimate something deliberate, some kind of abuse? He bought the soap from the chemist's earlier that day, drove home with it rattling in the passenger seat, and placed it on Lila's new duvet. It was heart shaped and plastic and matched the bedclothes' colour perfectly.

But another reason Lila doesn't want to go is it's raining and just from the house to here her little 97% rayon top has been soaked through and it feels like it's made of dog tongue. Dad gives a tug and they dash past impatient cars with headlights that shine right through to the back of Lila's skull.

Matthew had switched off the lights in Lila's room that afternoon, smiling. This gift ticked boxes. It promoted hygiene at an early age; it was without event or merit, to reinforce her concept of unconditional love; furthermore, it showed he knew his target market. It was pink, and glittered, and these were qualities eight-year-old girls enjoyed, he supposed.

Lila's fringe lies in wet blonde veins over her forehead. Her shoulders are freezing and she's close to tears - there's something about drenched skin that gives you drenched eyeballs. She can think of a million reasons why she doesn't want to go. Because her ankles are chafed by these knee-high socks. Because she's worrying Dad's hair will melt down his face again, a sort of blue-black drool like last time it rained, and it was scary and embarrassing all at the same time. And because, as she blinks away water, she can see the waiting room in her head.

It's full of worn gossip mags, itchy seats and old men coughing themselves inside out. Always, a baby yells.

They tread up the pavement at a pained but determined speed, both of them breathless. Matthew looks down at his daughter. He should carry her.

"Do you want me to carry you?" he asks her, bending to her level.

He should carry her. Worse, he knows Sandra would've taken the girl in her people-carrier no matter how short the distance. Sandra would probably have intercepted the entire soap-swallowing incident in the first place, her maternal senses ever-tingling.

Worse still, Lila just shakes her head and doesn't say anything. So they keep walking.

Though Mummy never outright says it, Lila knows she's not meant to touch Dad. It's something to do with the whole not-talking-to-strangers business, she guesses, why Mummy's eyes flash whenever Dad goes to hug their daughter. Maybe she should have said yes, just this once.

Her feet hurt, and she has that awful feeling of sleep being snatched from under her. The bedroom at Dad's house is too cold, and she misses her toys most times - but anything is better than walking in the rain, two hours past her bedtime, on the first Sunday of the school holidays.

As they trudge, just a dozen metres now from Accident and Emergency, Matthew hopes his kid is just polite. He prays she's just a selfless polite kid who doesn't want to burden her daddy.

Does she still call him Daddy? Would Sandra have gouged out that tradition by now?

The pavement under them grows brighter in the light from the hospital lobby, and Matthew's mind is suddenly darkening. Does she even call him Dad?

That's not the point, he tells himself. The point is his daughter has soap in her stomach, and every soap label he's ever read has something along the lines of If Ingested Seek Medical Attention Immediately.

"Come up to the desk, sweetheart," Matthew says, as calmly as he can. "We'll tell them what's wrong and they'll tell me - they'll tell Daddy what to do. We'll be out of here in no time."

"Okay," Lila replies. Her voice is barely there.

As Matthew unfolds the tale to the nurse, with her matte red lipstick and a scowl that would derail trains, he knows he is instantly a blundering fool. He feels his voice turn shrill and the nurse's concentration turn sour. Yet another hapless Sunday father. One seventh of a dad.

"So I'd appreciate it if you'd let my daughter in now," he is saying. He says My Daughter frequently. "I don't think it's good to wait. Can you see her now?"

"I can see her now," the nurse says dryly, poring over a pink form. "I don't know about the doctor."

The nurse turns her face from Matthew to see the washed out waif beside him and immediately is all smiles. She opens her mouth to speak but Matthew jumps in.

"I have the label to show him if he needs it," he breathes. "It says non-toxic but I don't know - I've never really known what that fully means. I wanted to be safe."

Lila is trying not to look at the nurse. She feels like a brat. She has probably been recognised by now as the kid with the iron stomach, the one who's always in here for swallowing something or another. She can't help that Play-Doh tastes good. She can't help that her mother always seems to catch it happening, her eyes round and furious.

And, of course, someone's baby is crying.

"If you'll just get the doctor to give me the thumbs up on the matter I'll be out of here. Just please get him," Matthew pleads.

The nurse looks stoic, but is regarding Lila with some degree of empathy.

She breaks. "I'll go and get Doctor Eames."

"Thanks," Matthew says, with a wary look. He doesn't go overboard on the gratitude. He's not feeling too enchanted by angry-looking women today.

The nurse slips out the back of her little office and Lila and Matthew are stuck staring at the anti-smoking and triage-system posters on the wall. There's a plethora of leaflets in neutral shades, and Matthew squeezes Lila's hand as he counts the euphemistic phrases upon them. He empathises with the downtrodden little cartoon on the cover of the migraine information leaflet: the creasing eyes, the rope-veined hands clasping his head.

Sandra's only let Matthew look after Lila, on this one night in so many, because it is his birthday. Now he's messed it up, and pondering whether he could cover this little incident up with lies and evasion only makes him hate himself even more.

The window is black and glimmering with rain. The two of them should be in bed by now. Separate beds, he clarifies to himself. His wife's outrageous mistrust is even swaying Matthew now, forcing him to make these PC addenda to his every thought.

But I wouldn't do anything to this girl, he keeps thinking, feverishly. He is an honest and good man, he is a good and honest man, he is an honestly good man, he is a good man, honestly -

"Lila," comes a soft voice from nowhere. They turn. A woman has materialised beside them. She is, evidently, the doctor, a small woman with a bob that arrived a decade too late, and she's toying with Lila's left pigtail.

"Doctor Eames?" Matthew asks.

"Yes. I take it you're Lila's father?"

This is a comforting assumption. He replies in a leaden voice. "You usually see her mother, don't you?"

"Frequently," Dr Eames replies. "We have here a very cheeky little girl."

Lila is pretending to smile. She really just wants to sleep. The adults are gaping at her like idiots so she says, "I ate soap."

"Right," Dr Eames says. "Is that the label?"

Matthew's face is glowing and his mind is searching for something to say. "We're divorced."

"Excuse me?"

"Her mother and I. We're divorced. Just so you know."

Dr Eames nods and smiles. "I did gather."

Minutes pass. Lila is cross-examined briefly in Dr Eames's office. Matthew sits and waits and curses himself. He declined to follow them in case this was an invasion of privacy, but now he's afraid he appears uncaring, or too caught up in his own psychoses to care for anyone else. This will doubtless get back to Sandra in some crazed little feedback loop of gossiping women, and he will be denied rights to Lila completely, and his little one-seventh of a relationship with his offspring will be gently lifted from his life while he is sleeping, like so much uneaten aeroplane food from a flip-down table.

And he shouldn't even be thinking about that anyway. Why is he thinking about himself? Digging even deeper holes? He should be thinking of poor Lila's welfare, if she'll drop into a coma right there in the doctor's office from pink-and-glittery pathogens. Or something.

So then instead it will be his hour-a-week visits to her, passing Sandra in this hospital's hallways, then staring at his tiny comatose child, filling the room with flowers she can't see. All the while nurses watching, tutting at him, some even knowing the inside story of how this miserable man put his child in a coma.

Why won't someone shut up that baby?

Bad thoughts. Bad thoughts. Some poor woman is probably wracked with worry about her baby's persistent yowls. Some poor single mother, abandoned by men, impregnated by men, abused by men.

"Dad?"

Matthew looks up. Lila stands before him, pale-faced. Her purple shirt is dark from the rain-water.

"Yes, daughter?" Matthew's heart is in his stomach, in his throat, everywhere, boomeranging. With that torn little voice she must be about to break the news. Whatever news it is. She hates him. She's being taken into foster care by Dr Eames.

"I threw up the soap on the lady's floor. She told me I'm fine and to go home."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Matthew looks her up and down.

"Was it pink?" he asks, brightening.

"Yeah," Lila giggles.

Matthew stares for a minute, regaining his composure. His daughter has a giggle like no-one else in the world. It rings forth in a dainty melody, as if struck from a xylophone, and stuns him. It actually stuns him.

He hugs his daughter, properly, with arms that could wrap around her twice. There's no resistance and he even forgets to question himself. Instead, his mind is full of memories of hugging this same hug, with this same little girl of his, over so many years.

He thinks of how at just under four feet tall her presence is still that of some tranquil deity carved into a cliff face. How she fits here, however tall she grows. How even with the hospitals and the people-carrier and the frantic temperature-taking, trying to save what goodness Sandra and Matthew can still take from their fractured marriage - it's Lila who's been doing the saving all along.