

Short Story

I will pay for it

I was only four years old when my mother decided to leave dad. "Come on", she said, "time to go". She held my little brother in her arms and, as the moving truck arrived, a strong wind and dry heat picked up, and mum tried to keep her hair back. Dad was at work when we left him. Dad never understood why. Dad didn't like to think. Mum didn't like to talk.

For temporary accommodation, we were able to stay in the house of one of mum's colleagues. They worked together in the restaurant. She was also a waitress. Her husband was bound to a wheelchair and their house was equipped with dumb-bells and facilities to hold oneself.

To be out of the way, we slept upstairs in the hallway between two rooms.

Over five years we moved six times, but we always stayed in the same town, as if our foot was bound to the pavement – keeping a secret promise.

And then after five years we moved into our first, own apartment. A place for us.

A beautiful place with a lovely, broad veranda. I could never figure out how mum managed to afford such expensive accommodation. Most of the time we were left to our own devices. My brother cried constantly and isolated himself by staying in his room. Mum didn't leave out any occasion to tell me I should be more aware of my responsibilities as the big brother and to take care of Jonathan. "After all he is your little brother!" At the time I was eleven, nearly eleven.

My mother used to tell me I was behaving like a "macho", which wasn't a compliment and that I was behaving even worse than my father. And if I continued in that way, I would surely turn out to be the same "idiot" as dad. Help! I was frustrated and felt like being a horse chased by some angry cowboy. Everything I did seemed to be wrong and bad. Why, why? Mum explained that life is a big cheat: "Don't trust anyone!" Yes, that was exactly the way I felt about life, about myself. Mum was right.

2am in the morning. Headaches and my little brother constantly beating the wall. He is exhausted but can't manage to calm down, he doesn't want to calm down, his inner conflicts and contradictions are forcing him to stay awake. Mum was out – as usual. Enough! As I screamed "Shut up Jonathan. Quiet, now!" Everything went very fast. Every day mum got older. Her eyes were watery, her focus became unclear and at the same time the way she looked at life – she judged very harshly and reacted in a way as if she was constantly defending herself by shooting with poisoned arrows.

Also, the way she applied her make-up became less important to her. She often left the house without even brushing her hair and teeth. Jonathan, my little brother – or Jonny as I used to call him in those rare moments of vague tenderness –, now he was gone. Nobody knows where. He is missing somewhere out there on this round planet. Sometimes I wish I could turn things around like a ball so everything could fall back into place. Jonny ..., yes.

I have been working as a social worker for ten years. I am currently working in a shelter for the homeless. My parents seem to have "found" one another again, at least for certain moments. Recently, as I passed the frontdesk, I recognised them as they were filling out

registration forms. We had a short exchange of looks. I stared at them and mum said: "Now what are you looking at so stupid?" and dad said "Leave him alone, he is one of the social workers, just doing his job." I slowly left, raised my hand and pulled the strand of hair behind my ear. Since giving up smoking, this has been a frequent gesture of mine when feeling insecure. Once more I turned around and told the receptionist so that my parents could hear too: "In the canteen, at the back to your left, soup will be served now. Give them a voucher I will pay for it."