

GOOD ENOUGH

Beth Bennett

I am almost seven this Christmas Eve. As always, we are spending the evening at my aunt and uncle's house. Christmas morning we will sit quietly at home, just my mother and me, but The Night Before is loud and full of family.

In the dining room, the children open presents, light reflecting off glittering ribbons under a haze of drifting cigarette smoke from the adult audience. Perhaps the grown-ups, at their slight remove from the bustle, are fondly remembering their own Christmases Past, but we children are fully engaged in the now of each rip and tear. Exultation. The only Christmas Spirit of which we are truly aware yet: the joy of getting.

Keith is a stereotypical teen, vaguely dissatisfied with everything, passions and pains either nonexistent or meticulously hidden from my view. We are three—him, my husband, myself—but I occasionally still feel the pull of two-and-two. My son and me. My husband and me.

Not long after we all moved in together, he asked Richard, “Can I call you Daddy?” They have been father and son ever since, and it surprises people that they are step-family and not blood. I never knew quite why he asked. It certainly did not come from me. He was six at the time.

My father is drunk, as he always is at parties and sometimes is just because. He has two modes of drunk, depending on which bottle he's been at. Beer makes him melancholy; he plays his guitar and drips maudlin sentiment. Liquor makes him angry; he barks at his wife, smacks her. Tonight, he and beer have taken a festive trip into melancholia. He doesn't usually drink liquor at parties.

He doesn't know his father. George left... No. I kicked George out when Keith was just three. He has no memory of the compulsive liar who had to be forced off to work like a recalcitrant child. “My stomach hurts,” he would whine at me, and I would check his temperature and tell him to go anyway. Mean, mean mommy-wife. So mean that he drifted into more tolerant arms that would hold him and tell him how misused and misunderstood he was.

My father takes my hand and leads me into the living room. The smell of pine from the slowly dying tree wends its way into my nose. Through an arch blocked by a couch, I can still see my multitude of cousins, shouting and boasting about their respective hauls. In here, it is dark save for the blinking, multicolored strands on the tree and the silver sparkle of the tinsel reflecting red, yellow, green.

He is sad, holding my hand in his lightly trembling one as he sits me down. He wants to tell me something, but it's so hard to follow his beer-scented rambling.

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George has found me on Facebook. The dark underbelly of social networking is that people creep out from under long-abandoned rocks to tap on your virtual window. He starts as he always did, the kicked puppy whimpering for forgiveness even though he has absolutely no idea why you could be angry with him.

He's sad, but his subtext is accusatory. He tried so hard to find us. Truly. (If we hadn't moved to Texas, that would have been easier.) Does Keith even know about him? (Because I would certainly be evil enough to pretend he never existed.) Could they meet?

My parents never married and split when I was eighteen months old. My mother changed the locks while he was out, because I was very ill and he'd gone bar-hopping after work instead of coming home. Last straw, meet camel. That's the story my mother tells, of course, not the one he is telling me. I don't know my mother's side yet, because she has been so careful not to speak ill of him, to let me form my own relationship with him, to give him the benefit of the doubt. He could be a better person for his child.

My son is sixteen. I am certainly not going to make this decision for him. My relationship with George is more than a decade dead, but that does not mean I have the right to scuttle a bond between them. I stand in the doorway to his disaster area of a room and try to keep my hesitation under my skin and out of my eyes as I forward the invitation. Forget snips and snails and puppy dog tails. Teenage boys are made of terrified bravado or terrified ennui. Mine is the latter. Do you want to arrange a meeting with your biological father?

"Not really," he shrugs, his eyes sliding back to his computer screen.

Never did I think I would argue George's case, but here I am. People change, I say. You've only heard my side. You may deeply regret not taking this chance. He agrees to an exchange of emails, fear sliding in and out of view under his sullen moue.

In the dark, my father's eyes twinkle like Santa's, except that the twinkle in Santa's eye isn't a crocodile tear about to roll down his ruddy cheek. His voice is catching and gruff. So much sincerity that I am choking on it, matching tears coming to my eyes. He describes the terribleness of his life with us, the struggle to stay as long as he did.

"Every time I came into the room," he starts and then pauses. It's difficult for him to go on. "Every time I came into the room, you cried."

The laughter from the dining room mocks me. I don't deserve to return to it or to open any presents Christmas morning. It is clearly All My Fault.

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I give George Keith's email address. I see none of the exchanged messages, but I hear about them from Keith. The first sees the return of the abused puppy. He's such an awful father, to have disappeared into the mists. He certainly understands if he is not forgiven, unworthy sinner that he is. Keith responds with polite nothings, as one does to people like that, as his mother would.

"Tell me about yourself," George prods.

I'm a terrible child. I've crushed what would otherwise have been the fairytale romance of my parents. Of course he didn't want me, didn't want to be around me. Of course he left. I drove him away.

Keith answers. A semi-long email filled with a young man putting forth his best self for a stranger. I don't see it, but I don't need to. I know him. He loves all things purple, except for grape-flavored ones. He is learning to play guitar and ukulele, but he desperately wants a cello. His favorite toy is still his multitude of Lego bricks, though he's started to create 8-bit art now, one hobby feeding the other. He reads fantasy novels and spits out vile words when he crashes his Podracer on the Wii. When he got his first kiss, he scrawled the date on his arm, trying to pin the ephemeral joy of it under his skin with ball point ink. Underneath the requisite teen angst, he is silly and scattered and wonderful.

He waits several days. There is no response from the electronic void.

He prompts. "Did you get my last?" Still nothing.

I'm not good enough.

"I guess I'm not good enough," he thinks.