

Winter 2019

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Recommended Citation

Hayward, William (2019) "A Mother's Love," *Emerald City*. Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/emeraldcitylitmag/vol1/iss1/2>

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A MOTHER'S LOVE

by **william hayward**

They lived on a farm just outside of a city they didn't care enough to name. For the most part, they existed outside of that hectic life. They couldn't even see the tops of the tallest buildings on most days, as fog usually hung in the air. But in the summer, when the air was calm and the nights warm, they could see the city lights hanging like lanterns in the blackness. It was only the mother and the son now. The father had disappeared when the crops started dying and the money stopped coming in. He had just vanished one morning. When the son asked about him, the mother turned away. What money that had remained had finally ran out two weeks after he left, and they were starving. Sometimes she would catch herself staring at the son. Seven years old and plump. For someone who hadn't eaten in six days, he was unusually large. The only part of his body that had thinned out were his cheeks, giving his body a humorous lack of proportion. He tottered around, his large body supporting his thinning head. She would watch, but the rumble of her stomach was the only sound she heard.

It was true that she missed the father. She missed the way he held her, the way he told her everything would be fine. She missed the way he played with their son like they were buddies. She missed his smell. Always like the outside. Like the smell of the wind blowing through a forest. But mostly she missed the scraps of food he brought home from the bar. For the last few weeks before he left, when things had started to get really bad, he had started going to the city. He tramped the five miles through the thick forest that surrounded their farm to the bus stop, which took him the remaining ten miles. He asked around in the shops about any jobs that might be going, but nothing ever came of it. He used pennies he found on the floor to call food banks. They would answer and gently tell him they might have something for him in a few weeks. And as the weeks passed he felt as if he was losing his mind. As if time wasn't moving for him at all. Sometimes when they answered he wouldn't even let them speak. He begged and cried until the tears fell into the receiver itself. Sometimes he just swore at them until they hung up.

He'd told her what he'd had to do: At the end of the day, he would enter a bar, any bar, to beg and plead the drunken patrons for any scrap of food or change. For a while he made headway, stuffing half-eaten sandwiches in his pockets and bits of meat from customers' plates, but most nights the men at the bar would catch him on the way to the bus stop and proceed to beat and rob him until blood flowed freely and all that he had left in his possession were a few half slices of meat and some bloodstained sandwich scraps. Those nights were the bad ones. When he would throw what little he had on the kitchen table and beat the mother and the son until their cries broke the hardness in him and he stopped. Sometimes, after he finished, he would hold them and cry for a while and whisper, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." But most of the time he simply went to bed.

He left after one of the bad nights. He had been beaten worse than usual. His nose was broken and one of his eyes had swollen shut. Long after his wife and son had gone to bed he sat at the kitchen table. He didn't even clean the cuts, just watched the blood as it fell and congealed on the wood. The son saw him walk away from the house in the early hours of the morning. He had not been able to sleep because of the pain in his right eye where the father had punched him so, hearing a noise, he left his room and walked to the front door. He could see his father's shape walk through the night and a large bag draped across his beaten shoulders. He called out to him, but the shape didn't falter. In the morning, he followed the small drops of blood that had fallen from his father's face into the woods until they stopped. He walked to that spot and stood there every day now, though the blood had long since faded.

The mother cried for three nights when she realized he wasn't coming back, and it had rained for six. There was canned food left in the pantry at the start and some scraps that the father had left on the kitchen table as a gift. But it was gone now. She sometimes considered the long trip to the city that the father had often made, but she was too tired now. Too weak. Even before he had left, her body had been losing strength. Losing what made it a body. Even walking from one side of the house to the next left her breathless. Now her body just felt dead. The clothes that had once clung so comfortably to her now lay loose over her flesh. Her hair had started coming out in small tufts whenever she would have a wash, so she stopped. She looked at herself in the mirror and tried to remember what she used to look like. But she couldn't. Her reflection became who she was. She wondered where the father was sometimes, and she pictured him in some bar with a whore on his arm. He had always been handsome, and somehow starvation had made that stand out even more. He would have no problem getting the necessities in life without them. She didn't understand why he had gone. She knew she didn't look like much anymore, but she had always loved him, and the son was here.

Somewhere. Every morning he would leave the house and go walking through the forest. She didn't know why. She felt like she was going mad. She would wake up in the night and her stomach hurt so much that she would pray for God to kill her. She kept hoping that she would go to sleep and never wake up. But she always did, though how long that would last was impossible to say. How much longer could she go without food? A week? Two? She found life easier as the starvation twisted her mind. She cared less and less about things. Sometimes she caught herself staring at the son. His chubby little body did something to her stomach, the air taking on a shining hue, and for moments it seemed like the world was beautiful. But it would vanish before long, and she would call out that she loved him. But she didn't really anymore. She wanted him to die with her. She wanted the world to end.

It was Tuesday morning now. The seventh day without food. A strong wind blew against the windows, rattling them and waking the mother up. Her stomach felt like burning metal. As she did every morning, she began to cry. She heard the son moving around in the kitchen, probably licking the inside of the empty tins of food. She put one foot outside of the bed and almost collapsed. Her body was falling apart.

She dragged herself up and called to the kitchen. "Son, what are you doing?"

He appeared before her. His face was like that of a child seen in a charity advertisement, cheekbones protruding from the sides, body beginning to give way. A little bit of the fat had leaked away in the night. With her trembling hands, she reached out for him and pulled herself up on his shoulders. "Mamma, I'm hungry." They walked towards the kitchen, his red-rimmed eyes looking up at her.

"I know baby," she whispered. "I am, too"

Even walking almost killed her now. When they got to the kitchen she collapsed in one of the wooden chairs by the kitchen table. The son stood looking at her. His tiny, gaunt head breathing hard. She gestured at the floor and he sat down between her legs. They used to do this all the time when the days were good. She would comb his hair with her fingers while the breakfast was cooking, and they would sing together. Old war songs that her father had sung to her when she was young. They would sing and then when the father came down the stairs he would sing with them, his deep voice echoing off the small kitchen's walls. He didn't beat them then. He was a kind man. They would all eat breakfast together until he rushed off to get the farm work done, and she would rush off to get the son to school. She thought about that for a while, while absently playing with the son's hair, but her mind kept going back to the breakfasts that they once ate. Looking down over the son's head, she could see his little bloated belly hanging over his trousers, his fat little legs spread out. Her stomach groaned and a tear hit his head. She was just so hungry.

"Whats wrong Mamma?" he asked, feeling the tears on his head and trying to stand up.

"Nothing, nothing. I'll be okay," she said, pushing him back on the floor. But her mind was completely blank, and she felt her hands moving from his hair and down onto his cheeks.

"You're hurting me," he said, trying to get away as one her hands grabbed his nose.

"Shh, baby, it's okay. Mamma's here." Her other hand closed over his mouth.

They wrestled like that for a while. His little body moved on the floor, trying to get away, but her hands remained strong. She imagined it as a game they were playing, and she sang one of the old war songs they used to sing together as his movement became less frantic.

*It's a long way to Tipperary
It's a long way to go
It's a long way to Tipperary
To the sweetest gal I know
Farewell to Piccadilly
So long Leister Square
It's a long way to Tipperary
But my heart lies there*

As she sang the last line, she felt his body jerk once, twice, before it settled and stopped. In the distance a bird was singing. Her mind felt hazy, but she knew what she had done. She wanted to cry, but in her heart she felt nothing. She removed her hands from his mouth and nose and touched his hair again. It was so soft, like the rain that had started hitting the kitchen window. The rain reminded her that the father was gone, as it always did, and looking down she realized her son was gone, too. His body was there, but he was gone.

"I want the world to end," she murmured to herself. Her stomach rumbled as she looked down again at her dead child and for the first time in a week, she knew that soon she wouldn't be hungry.

william hayward

William Hayward was born in 1999 in Birmingham, England. He has been writing for five years, ever since he first read the author Leonard Michaels and fell in love with short fiction.



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