

DEFIANCE

The morning sun shone through the front-door window into Pete's eyes, and he couldn't see the zipper ends on Beth's coat. With the coat crammed on over her sweatshirt, zipping it was like tying the legs of a stuffed turkey. Once he got the zipper started, he turned and tied Karen's boots; now he saw black spots that also impeded his view. It had been so long since he had seen the sun that Pete didn't mind. He could tell it was going to be a cheery day.

"I'm going to make sure Mommy's okay. Don't walk on the carpet." His younger sisters nodded gravely.

Pete wound his way through the girls' toys, down the hall, past the girls' room and the bathroom, until he slipped into the darkness of Mom's room. Here, it was still so dark that the sun might not have risen. Pete kissed her cheek. Her skin was cool, her light-brown hair flat against her head. She stirred and mumbled something. Pete checked and saw that her water glass was mostly full. So was her pill bottle, orange with a white cap and laden with ugly capsules.

Mom's eyes opened. They were green, like Pete's.

"Do I have water?"

"Yes, Mommy."

"Can you make me a piece of toast?"

"Sure." From the bedside table he took the plate that had held her piece of toast from last night's dinner and trotted to the kitchen. He made the toast, buttered it and felt his way back down the hall.

"Here it is."

"Thanks. Are the girls ready to go to Pat's?"

"Yes. Do you want me to bring you a second glass of water?"

"I'll get one if I need it. Did you feed your fish?"

"Mike got his breakfast. Do you need me to call Dr. Mason today?"

"I have an appointment with her tomorrow. You have a good day."

"I will. Thanks. I love you."

Mom was asleep. Pete went to the door and looked back. Her clothes lay strung in heaps on the floor and near the closet, and there were a couple of books on the dresser next to the tiny ceramic horses she had on display. The clock with the cross-stitch face ticked slowly, as if time were different in this room. Pete closed the door and hurried back to his sisters.

Karen was clomping in tight circles on the plastic runner by the door.

“I’m hot,” she whispered.

“Let’s go,” Pete said. “We’ll cool off outside.”

After Karen and Beth stepped out, Pete closed the door to the house and made sure the screen door shut tightly. The girls let him lead the way down the sidewalk, which was rough with graying December snow. Since Dad left for work before dawn, he didn’t usually shovel. Over the last couple of days, the weather had been warm enough to melt off some of the snow, even with no sun. Now the snow would disappear fast. That was okay, even though it was Christmas break and they could have gone sledding.

Pete led the girls down the gravel drive. He stopped at the street to look both ways, though they lived on a quiet street and no one was about. It was a good idea to show the girls how to look for cars. Beth, at seven, was impetuous at the best of times, and Karen was not yet in school.

Once they crossed the street, they walked up the clean, dry concrete driveway of the house across from theirs. Mr. Daimler had a snow blower. Pete knocked on the door, and Mrs. Daimler opened it just a second later.

“Good morning, kids,” she said. “Oh, it’s not so cold today. Maybe you’ll be able to play outside.”

Pete and his sisters stepped in, sat and removed their boots. Pete’s left shoe and sock got stuck in the boot, and Beth giggled. So did Pete. The ceramic tile by the front door was cold on his bare foot. Finally he got his sock back, but he left the shoe inside his boot. He wouldn’t need it until five o’clock.

“Did you eat already?” Mrs. Daimler asked. She looked really tall from where Pete was sitting. He was four

foot two, and she was at least a foot taller than he was even when he was standing.

“I made oatmeal for us.”

“Good, Pete. I’ll make you some toast if you want it.”

“Sure, thanks.” He beckoned to Beth and Karen. “Come on.”

They sat at the dining-room table, where the two Daimler girls, Mary and Nancy, were having toast and chocolate milk. They didn’t stir the chocolate powder into their milk; they spooned it off the top and then drank the milk white. Mrs. Daimler always gave Pete and his sisters just white milk. Pete tried not to stare at the chocolate powder as it disappeared into the Daimler girls’ mouths.

Mrs. Daimler leaned over the table to serve the toast. It always smelled good, but Pete liked more butter on his. He used his finger to smear the three melting pats farther out.

“Maybe about ten o’clock you kids can go play,” Mrs. Daimler said. “It’s supposed to hit 45 today.”

Beth clapped her hands. *Two hours*, Pete thought. It would feel good to be out in the sun. He could already feel the warmth on his face as he chewed his toast.

He had brought a book with him, so he pulled Saki out of his coat pocket and sat on the couch to read. A couple of stories later, Mrs. Daimler sat next to him.

“It looks pretty nice out. Do you want to go for a walk with the girls?”

Pete smiled and nodded. He set down the book and joined the four girls, who were in various stages of readiness to go. Pete stuck his foot into his boot and managed to get his shoe on without having to dig it out of the boot. Very efficient. When he had all of his winter gear on, he zipped Karen’s coat and tied her hood. She smiled at him.

“This will be fun,” she said.

“Yep.”

They all stepped outside. The sun glinted off the melting snow, and already green patches showed through. The air had added a hint of moist earth to its sterile winter

scent. Pete stretched his mittened hands to the sky and jumped in the air. The girls chattered among themselves.

“How about we go to Jerry’s for some candy?” Mary suggested. She was ten, a year older than Pete, so Pete didn’t know why she was asking him. He smiled.

“Sounds good. Let’s go!” He started across the yard.

“Don’t run ahead of us, Pete!” Mary called.

Beth spoke up. “Yeah, don’t run, fatso!” She punctuated each syllable by pounding Pete on the back. He felt electric jolts run through his body. He turned and pushed her arms away.

“Cut it out!”

Beth reeled backward and landed on the snow. She jumped to her feet, her blue eyes blazing.

“I’m telling.”

“So am I.”

Beth opened the door. “Mrs. Daimler, my butt’s wet because Pete pushed me down.”

Mrs. Daimler’s mouth dropped open. “Pete! Did you push her?”

Pete sighed. “Yeah. She hit me on the back, really hard. So I pushed her away and she fell.”

She turned to Beth. “Beth, did you hit Pete?”

“No.”

Pete gasped. “Yes, you did.”

“No, Mrs. Daimler, I didn’t hit him.” Beth didn’t look at Pete.

“You said, ‘Don’t run, fatso’ and pounded on my back. Four times.”

Mrs. Daimler shook her head. “Why would she call you ‘fatso’ when you’re so skinny? All right, Pete, you come inside. Girls, you can go on and play.”

Pete nodded and went in the house. “She hit me. It’s not fair.”

“You shouldn’t push her anyway.”

“But she should be inside too.”

“She says she didn’t hit you. Now, sit down, and you can read your book.”

Pete took off his boots. This time, both shoes came out. He got the book and sat in the corner of the living room on the floor.

“Aren’t you going to take off your coat?” Mrs. Daimler asked.

“It seems cold in here to me,” Pete mumbled. Mrs. Daimler went to the kitchen.

He read, frowning, for a few minutes until he decided he couldn’t keep his mind on the story. He got up and went to the door. He was pulling on his shoes when Mrs. Daimler came out of the kitchen.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m going over to tell my mom about this.”

Mrs. Daimler sighed. “Pete, you can’t do that. Your mother is sick. She needs to sleep.” Pete started tying his left shoe.

“You are *not* going over there.” Pete finished tying his left shoe and started on the right one.

“Take off your shoes, Pete. *Now.*” Pete looked up and saw anger on a face that was always so pleasant to him. He stared at her as he slowly untied his shoe. He took them off and walked back to the corner, where he sat by an end table.

“It’s not fair.”

Mrs. Daimler went back into the kitchen. A moment later, Pete heard her on the phone. She returned to the living room.

“Pete, I called your mother. She says that if you go over there she will take a belt to your face.”

“No, she won’t.” Pete didn’t look up from his book.

“You can tell her about this later. Just please don’t bother her.” Pete stared at his book and shrugged his shoulders just a bit.

He had read a couple of sentences over and over for close to an hour and was just starting to absorb the words again when the girls returned, rosy-cheeked and exuding cold. Beth came over to him.

“We had fun.” Pete ignored her, but he lost the thread of the story again. He stared at the cover of the paperback, and he felt his face set in defiance. The girls were wandering around the dining room, waiting for sandwiches. Pete walked quietly to the door and started to gather his shoes.

“Bye, Pete,” Karen said. She waved.

“*Pete!*” Mrs. Daimler came around the corner from the kitchen. Pete dropped his shoes, opened the door and ran out in his stocking feet. He heard angry words behind him as he ran across the yard, dodging snow and jumping from one soggy green patch to the next. He was winded when he got to his own front porch, and he took a deep breath before he opened the door.

He hadn’t been at home during the day for more than a week. He missed the sculpted beige carpet, the maple coffee table, the oak dining-room table, the Zenith console TV. He removed his socks and sat to warm his feet by tucking them under his legs on the sofa.

He heard slow, heavy footsteps in the hall. His mother, clad in a sleeveless nightgown that hung to mid-thigh, stopped before entering the living room and leaned on the wall. She glared at him. No one was looking happily at him today.

“Hi, Mommy,” he said. He swallowed hard. Her hair hung in her face, and Pete had not seen her look so old. She had always been slender, but now she looked bony. She hadn’t looked this bad last summer when he had helped her, when she had started staying in bed.

“I told Mrs. Daimler you were not to come over here.”

“But Beth hit me, and I got in trouble for—”

“I know all that,” she snapped. “And she told you what I would do if you came here.” She wobbled across the living room, and Pete saw that she was holding a belt.

“Sit still,” she said. She raised her hand. Pete looked at her. The belt whizzed toward his face, and he watched the strip of leather approach his mouth. He couldn’t stop thinking that his mother was different. The belt was the brown one Dad wore with his jeans.

It caught him in the lips, and his head recoiled from the impact. His mother followed up with a backhand swing at his mouth, then she dropped the belt.

“Now, get back over there.” She pointed to the door. She swayed before him, her arms crossed, until Pete stood and walked silently out of the house. He closed the door as softly as he could. He walked across the grass

again, since his socks were already wet. His toes grew numb, then the soles of his feet.

He walked under the tall yellow birch in his yard, and he looked over at the four elm trees that followed the property line. His mother used to panic when Pete climbed the elms. Now she didn't know when he was climbing a tree and when he was reading in his room.

He crossed the street without looking, because there weren't any cars. The asphalt was warmer than the grass, but the stones in the street felt like dull points against his nerveless skin. He walked up the Daimler lawn, around the weeping willow and onto the porch. Mrs. Daimler opened the door.

He stepped inside and began to shiver. The four girls stood looking at him. He felt his lips. They were swollen. He pulled his hand away and saw blood on it.

Mrs. Daimler looked down at him. "Pete, Beth told me she hit you hard. I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

Pete felt a heaviness leave his chest. "Yeah. Well, my mom really did hit me in the face with a belt. My lips are all puffy."

Beth hugged him, squeezing him tightly enough to make him grunt.

"Can you wear some of Mary's socks?" Mrs. Daimler asked. "Your feet must be freezing."

"Sure."

"Sit on the couch. Mary, get Pete a towel and some white socks." Mrs. Daimler disappeared and returned with a washcloth. It was cool on his lips as she dabbed at them, and when she handed him the cloth, he realized there was an ice cube wrapped up in it.

"The girls just had lunch. Do you want a sandwich?" she asked, her hands on her knees as she leaned toward him.

"Sure."

"Ham?"

"Yes, please." Pete picked up his book again. Beth sat next to him and asked him to read, so he started reading "Sredni Vashtar" aloud until his sandwich came.

He started to eat gingerly, chewing slowly. After he had had a couple of bites, Mrs. Daimler brought him a

glass of milk and a spoon. Floating on top of the milk was a mound of brown powder. He thought for a minute, then he spooned one small lump of chocolate into his mouth and stirred the rest into the milk.