

## WE LEARN TO KEEP OUR DIGNITY

Rose Lambert-Sluder

No one who knows Tipton could say he's a bad man.

He grows kumquat trees and gives kumquat jelly to school fundraisers. He does our ironing, which soothes him, even irons my grandmother's cutwork napkins. He eats lemon slices whole and flashes that snazzy smile. He got a degree from Georgia State on scholarship, and on clear nights he'll tell you stories about the constellations.

That smile, those dimples. Five years ago, on our second date, he took me swing dancing at the Vets Club, but all night he danced with the older ladies, the ones who go alone wearing chandelier clip-ons, so I barely snagged two songs. He's a gentle person.

We happened fast.

After seven months we moved me into his split-level. Oh, love! Reminded me of those Swiffer ads where the girl dances the Swiffer around the room and it catches all the lint, the dog food, the old hair, so easy. So smooth. When I met Tipton the pieces of my life were tidied and shined. I can't explain it.

He told me, "Veara, you make me feel like I have the moon in my hands, and at any moment I could take a bite."

And him and his daughter? Tipton and Millie? They used to curl on the couch together with a box of Better Cheddars, him on his iPad, her with her potholder loom. Girl has got an eye for color, patterning—she could sell those potholders on Etsy. Nights like that she'd doze off holding his arm and he wouldn't move until she woke up.

He loves Millie so much it hurts. Hard to see a man like that in pain.

Millie won first-place Stellar Learner at the Math Journeys competition last year. The only prize-winning girl in Macon, and she won a scholarship for books and a pewter ruler to hang on the wall above her vanity. I told her, huzzah, honey, Miss Math Geek. I was proud.

That's how she earned Facebook privileges.

We monitored her page at first, but you forget the password and you forget to check, and after a while you let it go, and besides I felt a little scummy, a little odd, checking her private messages. Those girls talking about their teachers, Mr. Hilman and how firm his forearms are. Not bad things. Mostly innocent.

It was the school administrator who alerted us to the photo last Thursday. The photo is like this: simply Millie in little shorts and a sports bra that I bought her. Millie with nothing on top but the sports bra. Does she need it? Does it matter? But she is growing; I have her drink soymilk shakes and she's growing from the nutrients.

I was the one to see the email and I was the one to show Tipton.

Millie is looking up at the cellphone eye. Her head is tilted in that way girls tilt their heads, coy. That long hair is ironed straight. You have to wonder how a twelve-year-old girl learns to make a face like that.

I love her like she is my own. Imagine how Tipton felt, seeing the photo posted on the page of some eleventh-grade boy.

He was quiet when he saw it. He took a microfiber cloth and cleaned his Dell, then found the Windex and wiped down the vent and counters and the edge where the sink gets gummy, black.

I said, "Tipton? Tip?" I followed him. He was so calm.

We do have salon scissors. I cut my own bangs, since I only trust myself with my bangs. But Tipton used the poultry shears I pull out when we make jerky. Possibly he didn't know about the good scissors.

He didn't hurt her when he cut it off, didn't jerk her too hard, didn't force her down. She was so surprised. On the garage floor her hair looked like pine needles, only longer, so much longer. Pine needle silk scarves. Millie only ever got it trimmed. Dark, almost black, with pieces streaked with pink, bright pink, which I helped her do. She loves pink, says it holds the passion and power of red and the purity of white—something like that. She's the dotty kind of girl who has got a reason for everything. Precocious.

He left one long strip, one long black strip down to her elbow, and I can't figure why he did that. A reminder?

A while back Tipton went on Amazon.com and one-clicked himself a manual stainless-steel milk frother. Some nights after

work, first thing he does is pull it out. I say, don't you want some decaf in that? A cappuccino? Or I heard you can add Nutella; it just dissolves. And he loves Nutella.

But he says nothing and heats a saucepan of milk and froths it and pours it in a mug the shape of a cowboy boot with spurs. He drinks it with a stack of Famous Amos. Dirties three dishes meantime. To each his own.

I make no excuses for anybody, but you can tell how stressed he's been.

One evening last winter he started frothing while I reheated chili in a pan.

I asked Tipton about work. He's business director for the Macon-Bibb Industrial Authority, which means he was smack in the middle of that debate about the textile mill with the Chinese owners. He helped recruit the company—three hundred jobs they brought. Now they may open another plant, which you'd think would make Tip happy.

"The factory spinning machines have these screens," he said, "that give worker efficiency scores. You wouldn't believe. From one to a hundred. It's insulting to the workers. And our workers are always below the Chinese mark."

"What do our workers score?" I asked.

"They average ninety-three. But the Chinese, the Chinese average ninety-seven."

I added some water to the chili and said at least he knows it's a fair assessment.

"Fair." He made that face he knows I hate.

He did a good thing, bringing the company here, or helping to. I told him this.

"A glorified travel agent," he said. "That's what I am. I plan the executives' trips. Ms. Guan, Mr. Li. I have to give a presentation of housing options. It's insulting."

Tip gets like this. He gets keyed up.

"It's all a part of the greater good. It was a jolt to the economy. They're going to help pay for that new softball field."

"You always see the sunny side, don't you?"

He leaned over his milk frother, pumping and pumping. Sometimes it won't work. It's like a little exercise machine without purpose. Pump pump pump pump pump.

He said, “That chili is too weak,” and pulled something from the spice rack, dumped a red anthill into the pot: cayenne. It was nearly too spicy to stomach.

I worked on him. I tried to make him take the video down.

Five thousand views is where I saw it. He posted it to his Facebook page, then he posted it to Millie’s page. It was up a single night and day. But it wasn’t me who convinced Tipton to take it down; it was the school.

Only thirteen seconds, no more. He took the video afterward. You see Millie. You see the floor. That’s all.

He says, you lost all that beautiful hair. That’s the consequence of doing something ugly. Was it worth it?

She says no.

She says it quiet. She is not prone to mumbling, but she mumbles here. Her eyes, though, those big, dark eyes, look straight at the camera lens. Straight at you.

He goes, say bye, Facebook. Say bye, Facebook.

She says nothing, and for that I’m very glad.

Not once has Tipton discouraged my independence. He is levels of heaven better than my ex, whose last name was Onstott, so sometimes I call him my Exxon. My Exxon was another animal. He monitored my car mileage, kept a log. He would have never let me be a saleswoman. Once we were going to his buddy’s house to watch the Firefighter World Cup, but we had to wait for my nails to dry—I just hadn’t timed things right—and he poured my nail lacquer into our gallon of milk, slowly and patiently, and shook the jug. A deep red, the Thrill of Brazil. “Have a bowl of cereal,” he said. “Go on.”

I left that. It took me time, but I left. You have to know when to leave.

I’m older than Tipton by five years, and it does take a man of maturity and strength to date an older woman. When I told Tipton I wanted to quit my job, a good job with the March of Dimes, and sell nail wraps professionally, he said, “Trout lily, you know I’m not here to get in the way of your dreams.”

He calls me that sometimes, trout lily. It’s a beautiful little flower, and complicated.

So Tip supports my entrepreneurial resolve. Now I'm an independent consultant for HeartNettle Nails, the company at the forefront of the nail art movement. Two years ago I discovered HeartNettle and fell in love, just love. I remember the design, Cleopatra Clementine, and it moved me, orange and gold lines so intricate, Southern softness and Egyptian glamour. They come on a sheet like stickers. Take a nail file, a hair dryer, twenty minutes and shazam.

And I said, I want women to know about these.

Part-time I'm a staff accountant, since we still need the income. But always I'm expanding my client base, always growing.

Tipton never once told me to stop spending money on my nails. And if I had a dime for every time you heard that complaint from a woman about her man.

Millie is a peculiar little princess. I've known her since she was seven. She always hated raisins, hates them still, and every time she has a bran muffin or bran cereal or brown bread from a can, she washes the raisins and saves them in a Brasso tin tucked inside her dresser. A big hairy wad of black raisins like a grisly egg sac. I almost expect a mess of leggy insects to hatch. She has done that for years, does it to this day. She thinks I don't know, and I don't say a word.

We all deserve our secrets.

She was vain about her hair. She'd buy avocados with her allowance and mash them into her scalp, and I'd say, you going to make a turkey club sandwich with all that avocado?

She and I have had our moments. She used to kick me under the table, a devilish thing. But now I give her a HeartNettle mani and we talk, we laugh, she asks me about my life before meeting her dad. That's impressive, a preteen asking questions.

There is a lot to tell. Six years I spent between Tipton and my ex. I lived in Denver, Montana, Idaho. I got my accounting degree. I camped in the parks. I told Millie about the mud pots in Wyoming, those deep, mean cauldrons that could scald you to death. I learned about their geology: thermal water heats the acid, and the acid turns volcanic rock into clay until it becomes a thick, juicy slurry that you almost want to taste, or maybe dip your toe into.

“Do they really gargle?”

“Oh sure,” I told her. “They gargle and bubble and belch.”

“It wouldn’t actually swallow you, though,” Millie said.

“Sure it would. It’d burn off a layer of skin and then get you stuck. An excruciating death. Makes you respect how dangerous it is, all that action under the earth.”

“What about people who fall off the boardwalk?”

“Well, why would anyone be careless enough to fall?” But it would be a terrible punishment, to be pushed in.

She’s never gone farther than Tallahassee. Even with the internet it’s like Millie thinks Macon is the world.

Tipton did build Millie a nice childhood here after the divorce. She made pinch pots in the yard with red clay, and she’d come inside grubby, get mud on her Nintendo.

That red Georgia clay. It tasted like baking chocolate.

Shelby Chatham booked a HeartNettle Nail party Saturday afternoon, two days after the incident. Even in times of struggle, we have to honor plans.

So I picked up hors d’oeuvres from Piggly Wiggly, Cubanito sandwiches and lite pimento cheese. In Shelby’s house everything looked Pledged and carried a scent of vinegar. Her living room had a wall of souvenir plates, all Georgia: plantations in Georgia, Georgia pines, wild horses galloping across Georgia beaches.

As I set up on the Chathams’ dining table, Shelby said, “I read that photos launched into the internet get fifty thousand shots on average.”

“Hits,” Miss Fiona, who had come early, corrected her. They were both older and wore creased slacks.

“A lot of power for a little girl,” Shelby said. “Letting her show a photo to anyone on the globe.”

“Don’t they have locks for that? Safety locks, like on cabinets?” Miss Fiona dipped a Cubanito into the mayo bowl. Maybe they do.

The guests trickled in, and I followed the plan: nibbles first, a little talk. I asked a question of every woman, gave compliments.

Then I started. Let me tell you my story: I am not a HeartNettle Nails girl. I am a woman. I love HeartNettle, I saw the potential

in it. Nail wraps are not a reflection of who you are, but who you might be. Charisma, Noble Notions, Gone Dancing.

After my demo I showed my nails to each lady. Some need to grab your hand and inspect you close and feel your cuticles and rub the seams of your nail wrap. That's okay. I let them. You have to let them. As a consultant, you're a leader and a teacher and you've got to be patient.

Walking through the circle, I said to one of the young ones, "What you've got there is festive for late summer. Ferris Wheel Whimsy. It complements almost any color and fabric, long as it's bright."

"Beautiful design." She held the sample against her stiff pink capris. "I saw about your daughter's hair. Men. Men act rashly, but still. Medieval, sort of. I can't imagine."

I picked up a flap of fallen ham from the ground. "Well, nobody's getting stretched on the rack."

"Although I heard you're not her mother." And she was right.

"I got her an emergency cut and style at the Arc de Triomphe Salon." The ham was tucked inside my fist, wet. "Now she looks like a doll with a bob, so cute." I paid \$68 for that haircut, plus gratuity, and let her skip school the whole day. Maybe she didn't look like a doll, but she did look better.

The woman said, "Poor thing, I just kept thinking. That poor girl. As if middle school isn't terrible enough already."

"Millie's a strong person," I said. "You don't need to worry about Millie."

She sighed and looked at her own fingertips. "To be honest, I'm a gel fan. With gels I don't get stress cracks." Her nails were a straightforward cherry, and what she'd call classic, I'd call conventional. I put the ham on the edge of someone's half-filled plate on the coffee table. No one was looking.

I told her this opens up new possibilities. Gels have limits, but HeartNettle expresses individuality.

"I like my trusty methods," she said. That lady. She's the kind who thinks she has nails all figured out, thinks there's only one solution. "I wondered, what did he do with the hair? My cousin donates hers to make wigs for people with cancer. But I figure your husband threw it out?"

“He’s not my husband,” I told her. “We live in sin.”  
And he didn’t sweep up the hair or throw it out. I did.

Sometimes a finicky client comments on my Facebook page.  
*Vance thinks Fountain of Youth looks cheap.*

I write them back. *Good thing Vance didn’t wrap his own nails in Fountain of Youth.*

Nails are not for the sake of men. Men don’t care about nails; they hardly even see nails. Not everything is for them. HeartNettle Nails are for you, and even when you get compliments—how precious, how unique, so gorgeous, so you—they are for you and you only, only.

My mother worked sometimes, though she never finished her degree. She worked for the census bureau one year in Macon, walking from house to house in a tweed pencil skirt and blazer, impractical, carrying a paper fan.

Some days when we were very little she’d meet my brother and me at the bus stop and tell us the house was full of spiders. The exterminator, she said, would bring a hose of poison gas.

The house is full of spiders. Years later I knew what that meant. My dad wasn’t an easy man.

I pictured spiders in the pie safe, getting into the Dixie Crystals, spiders in the pillowcases, and later when that movie *Arachnophobia* came out, it was exactly what I imagined—spiders bubbling out of the sink drain.

On those afternoons she made us walk down to the Sticky Pig Open Pit, which is now a Liberty Loans, and my brother and I would be grouchy, all that walking and with no sidewalks, but she never went soft on us—bought us fried chicken but no dessert. She kept us busy until the third shift, my dad’s shift at the mill.

At supper she made us do our times tables, calling out numbers, whatever she thought of—five times eleven. Seven times three. Twelve times twelve. And whoever got the answer first won nothing, actually, but maybe a little pride.

At all times I know where each person is in the house. Of course, we are only three. But I know who is in the bathroom and for how long. I know who is staring into the freezer, deciding.

I reckon I’ve always had this sort of spooky sense. Maybe we



all do? But I didn't notice before.

And so I could tell on Sunday when Tipton wasn't inside. I did my mental check: where is Millie? When did I hear her last? In her room. She had been opening drawers, trying clothes on maybe. I could hear scraping.

I found Tipton on the back patio kneeling at one of the potted kumquat trees like it was a dog, rubbing his thumb over the thin trunk. He's rounding out, has been each year, which doesn't matter to me—we accept each other.

"I'd like to put in a pond here," he said, standing up. "Maybe with a few koi fish."

"That's a nice idea," I said. He needs a project, something to accomplish, even though koi fish would just die.

He shook hands with the kumquat leaves and looked so defeated, standing there in the dusk. "She thinks it's my fault. I want to protect her because I know. I know what men are like. And it could have been any man, not a boy. Does she think the internet is a safe playground for her?"

"You know that wasn't the way to teach her." I turned toward the house. On the dryer vent outside, tufts of gray lint had built up like ash.

"Now she knows better."

I told him he needed to talk with her.

"Not this, Veara," he said, and then he was irritated, fed up, ready to tear up the conversation and toss the shreds.

"Then good luck," I said. "Good luck."

"Weren't you ever embarrassed as a girl? It's part of the pain in growing up. Now she thinks the sky is falling, but she'll push through and be stronger, even if she hates me now. I did a thing I didn't want to do, so she'll be stronger."

And what, I asked, made him so certain about that outcome?

But he didn't say anything, only bit a finger joint, folding into himself like a wet coffee filter.

I was worried.

I bought her butterfly clips. I bought her volumizing spray with wheat germ complex. I even offered to buy her highlights. All weekend, I tried to be positive. Millie, you look like a glinting nickel on a wet sidewalk. Millie, you are beautiful.

The school held a special assembly Monday with a Powerpoint on the dangers of cellphones and sexual exchange. Principal Hensley sent an email to the parent listserv.

The whole student body has seen the video, I'm sure. When Tip took it down, someone had already put a copy on YouTube. I reported and reported that, but do they care? Plus someone took a video of the video, so who can tell how many Millies are out there?

That evening, when Tip finally tried to talk to her, she just sat at the table dissecting an oatmeal raisin cookie with a steak knife, not eating it, until he took the knife away. That's what he told me. So he gave up.

"What'd she do with the raisins?" I asked.

"What do you mean, what'd she do? I threw it all away."

Later that night, I knocked on her door to bring her some books she had left in the foyer.

She looked awful, sitting on the floor in a lumpy sweatshirt. She'd picked off her nail wraps one by one instead of soaking them in warm coconut oil, and, leaning forward, she was scraping those nails across the laminate hardwood, scrape scrape.

She looked up at me. "Don't make me go back."

I set her books down and sat at her desk, which she never uses, below her wall of cat posters and old-fashioned pennants from colleges I haven't heard of.

"Your hair looks so good," I told her. "Trendy. You look older." And she did, maybe too much older.

"What my hair looks like doesn't matter. I don't want to see anyone. And I don't want to talk to *him*," she said, nodding to the door. She rubbed her nose, and I could see flakes of dry stuff fall from her nostrils.

"Dad cares about you. He just—" I cracked my knuckles and looked for the words. "He just doesn't know how. I mean, how to show it."

I noticed then, on the floor near the desk, the nest of colored string. I asked what it was.

"Nothing." Just like her father, how she avoids.

Then I made sense of it: some fun rainbow socks I gave her, unraveled into a shaggy pile, with just an ankle intact. A pair of tweezers next to them.

“What happened to these socks?”

She glared at me, but it was not the mean black glare she had before, the glare all girls have at her age. It was different, like there wasn't anger in there, but emptiness.

“I don't have to explain anything. Not to you.”

I breathed in for patience. “I'm just down the hall, if you need me.”

I was walking out when she said, “Please let me stay home, please. I would do anything, I would teach myself from books, just please, Veara. I can't go back. I'm ruined.”

Always startles me, when she calls me Veara. Used to be Vee-Vee.

In bed that night, in the dark, the only sound was his breath. It seemed to grate against something: chains dragging across a cattle guard. That's what made me go downstairs and turn on the Dell, and I damned my melatonin by staring into that blue light.

It's always easy to find. I just search *Dad Punish Haircut Girl*.

Tuesday morning I told Millie, “We are going to do this: you will go to school and it will be a normal day.”

I put my cellphone right next to her ear with the chirpy alarm loud, and I laid clothes out on the bed. She pushed the shirt I chose, a sweet one with rosettes around the neck, to the floor.

“How old are you, Millie? What kind of fit do you want to throw?”

She was stiff like a dead cat and wailed when I tugged her.

“No ma'am.” No ma'am. None of that. I laid out her mascara, her eyeshadow, her lotion, her butterfly clips, her body splash scented something stupid: Melon Lace. She was asking for trouble if she stalled, and she was well aware of that.

“Put it all on,” I said.

We have to learn to keep our dignity.

I walked her downstairs, and I put cinnamon Lil' Griddles in the toaster oven and a cup of soymilk on the table. Her dad was awake, taking off his underpants, and I could hear him running the shower upstairs, the pipes grunting. I told her to wipe her nose and pack her lunch.

“There's nothing in all things imaginable,” Millie said, “that I would want to eat.”

She picked up a dirty glass from the sink and filled it with water. She drank a little, then traced her finger over the Looney Tunes design, like she had all the time in the world to stare at a water glass before school, like she had all the time to sip her self-pity, like hardship was some fancy pomegranate juice and she was the only one who could afford to enjoy it. No ma'am.

I took out a knife and I took out the Jif and I said, "Choosy moms choose Jif," and I took out the jelly jars and I asked her, "You want elderberry or you want grape?" I decided for her: grape. I came up from behind her and I put the knife in her hand and I moved her wrist from the jars to the country white. She was going to eat that goddamn sandwich.

It was like an animal, the way she whimpered.

Choosy moms choose Jif.

On the way to school, the rain came fast out of nowhere. We turned back to get her polka-dot rain boots, speeding through yellow lights to get to school on time. It's terrible to have heavy wet socks, and it's terrible to walk in late to a class of thirty hateful kids all facing the door to pledge allegiance.

But everything was just fine.

That button, that replay button on YouTube. The video loops and loops and loops and loops.

If only videos could break on their own. Like those Cuisinart stick blenders—they burn out and start to smoke and smell like a tiny auto accident. I dream of this.

That night he asked to have a word with her. She said, What? What?

I followed them to the garage. He told her, be still a second. He told her, steady. She was standing up, stiff, and with her hair in his fist it took two snips.

Steady, steady.

In the video you never see Tip, of course. You see Millie, the floor, her hair. She rubs her arm. She touches her neck. You can see the nail wraps I gave her, Garden Party Glam.

I don't know what to do. I love him. I love him without measure.

I watch it and watch it. Floor, arm, neck, Millie. Kumquat Millie. That's what he sometimes calls her at night. Kumquat marma-lady, he says, sour and sweet.