

Daddy Thief by Petra Hůlová

Translated by Alex Zucker

2019 | Torst

Usually all you read about shared custody is the good parts. My dad's shown me the websites, and whenever there's an article in some paper magazine he shoves it in my face. He gives it to me cause I'm the one who reads the most and fights the most. For all of us. My dad says it's a "philosophy," which means "a way of thinking," and I'm interested in thoughts, but that doesn't mean I agree. Cause thoughts can be "ideological," and you can't agree with that. Our teacher Mrs. Roubalka told us about "communist" ideology. Which is a bad way of thinking, since under communism you weren't allowed to think differently, and it's the same with shared custody.

Instead of going to Sunday school and drinking real coffee after the sermon, which Mrs. Blechová, who's almost blind, pours out of a thermos, we're driving to a festival for "new families." Dad made the announcement about it to all of us this morning and said there'd be "no debate." He said we were going to meet people in a "similar situation," and when he added that it would give us a chance to see the whole thing from a "different perspective" he was mainly looking at me.

"I call front seat!" Franta shouts. He couldn't care less where we're going.

"I call next to you!" Vojta says, then starts stuffing his backpack with the comics I gave him so he wouldn't tell on me for playing games that afternoon while he and Franta were planting apricot pits in Marta's plastic dish after pulling them out of the trash, so they could sell jam at the street fair next year. Unlike the snail glue, it was a totally idiotic idea, since Marta started looking around for the dish right away, and as soon as I want something from her, I'll tell her where it is: on the cupboard, full of dirt.

"I'm sitting with you guys," Marta squeals. She acts like she's packed and ready to go, waiting in her favorite spot, in the doorway between the hallway and the living room, with a plastic bag of stuffed animals, still dressed in her slobbery pajamas.

"Go get dressed, hurry," I tell her. "I'm sitting up front with Tonda and Vojta." I give her a kick, but just a little one. She stumbles, laughs, then starts crying that she can't find her underpants.

"There isn't enough room in back, plus Marta and Franta and Vojta are the smallest ones," I tell my dad, explaining why I won't sit on the fold-down seats in back. As usual we're stopping to drop off our sorted waste along the way, and I'm not going to sit there smelling the stink from the tubs of tofu in the trunk.

"Me and Bojta sat in back last time," says Franta.

"Go blow your nose."

Franta wipes his nose on his sleeve.

Our stepmom sighs and I can tell from my dad's face he's teed off, but he doesn't say anything since Franta isn't his.

Marta comes running up in her swimsuit, with her mom's bead necklace around her neck. Bleep-bleep sends her back to change and tells Tonda to clear the table, even though everyone's supposed to clean up after themselves and I don't remember Franta picking up his bowl after breakfast.

Tonda bangs the mugs around. He's teed off but keeps his mouth shut.

"Tonda and Miky will sit in front, since they're the biggest," Dad decides. He's packing our drinks and I guess he didn't hear us, since we already agreed we would take turns up front. He's looking for Vojta's socks after Vojta walked out of his room wearing socks with holes in them and announced at the top of his lungs: "These are my favorite ones and Mom says I can wear them." He's all mad cause he got dressed by himself and Dad didn't praise him. Franta keeps repeating: "Me and Vojta sat in back last time," until finally bleep-bleep yells at him to do what my dad says, and Franta says, "We agreed we'd take turns," and I say, "Bullshit," cause I have a hard time squeezing my legs into the backseat and Tonda doesn't fit at all, so it's mainly because of him, and when Dad points the beeper out the window and opens the car, all five of us make a mad dash to get the seat in front. At the first poke from Franta, Marta falls out of the car on the ground, cheering for Tonda, who she's got a crush on. Tonda gives up on it for a while, even though he's the strongest, and helps Marta pack her stuffed animals back into the plastic bag, since they fell out on the ground, too. Me and Franta and Vojta go on fighting, cause none of us wants to sit in the middle.

The way it ends up, nobody sits where they wanted, so that's fair.

"I don't think that's good parenting, Jakub," our stepmom says when my dad starts handing out the Aronia berry bars as soon as we get on the highway, even though they were supposed to be for our snack later on, but Vojta jabs Marta and Marta screams, cause she forgot her bag of stuffed animals on the sidewalk next to the car, and our stepmom says, "We don't have time to go back. The animals will wait for you," and I say, "Someone'll probably steal them," and as soon as I say it, my dad stomps on the gas and tells bleep-bleep to give us the "goddamn bars" already, and she digs them out of her bag and passes them out to us with a stupid smile on her face.

Luckily I've got my phone. I take turns gaming with Tonda, so I won't be the only one blamed for it, and meanwhile I'm thinking about the underground, about Pavlína, and about Džoudy and Jirkal, how they don't have to go to the festival for new families, and I can see my favorite Ikea out the window, and my dad asks, "Is everyone buckled up?" and me and Tonda are the only ones who are and Dad praises us for it.

"It used to be kids would see their dads only once a month or so," my dad says as we turn off the highway. "Kids stayed with their moms, and the dads were sad and lonely." And our stepmom says, "That wasn't fair or good parenting."

I can see her massaging the back of my dad's neck with that octopus hand of hers, and for the hundredth time I wonder what it is he sees in her, and I think about what my mom told my dad over the phone, "You're really going to regret this whole thing someday," and playing Silverbones helps me not to think about it so much, but I've still got sobs in my throat anyway.

I text my mom: "Mom, I miss you," then close my eyes, lean back, and picture my mom sitting on the couch sewing up my pants, which I tore at the Museum of the Prague Underground, and even though my dad said once, way back when, "Bleep-bleep is taking care of you the

best that she knows how," she never sewed up anything for us, and even Marta and Franta get their stuff sewn up by their grandma. So she's lazy, too, and my dad was also lying then.

I can feel the sobs crawling up out of my throat.

"Dads have the same right to their kids, don't you think?" I hear my dad's cheery voice from up front.

"They didn't even think about the fact that kids need their dads just as much as they need their moms. It's awful. I'll never understand how it took so long for men to speak up about it."

Our stepmom's hand slips away from my dad's neck like a snake, but soon it creeps right back. The sobs are out, tears burning my cheeks.

Everybody is taking turns playing Silverbones, even Franta. Everybody except Marta, who just keeps rattling on.

"Are Tonda, Miky and Vojta my brothers?" she asks.

"What do you care?" says Vojta, giving her a shove.

"Of course they are, kitten," our stepmom says.

"But only stepbrothers," Tonda chimes in.

"Not even," says Vojta.

Dad turns to our stepmom and whispers something to her. She shrugs.

"Franta and Marta's dad isn't ours either," I object.

"Yes he is. Our dad is yours too," Marta squeals.

"I wish our dad could also come to the cottage with us sometimes," Franta says.

My dad and my stepmom give each other a look.

"I don't think he'd want to," says bleep-bleep.

"Why not? He loves us."

The car is dead quiet.

"I already asked Dad about it," says Franta. "He said you were the one who wouldn't want him to come. I'll tell him you do. That you want him to come with us to the cottage, OK, Mom?"

"Stop kicking me!"

Marta's got Tonda on edge.

For the fifth time that day, Marta bursts into tears.

"I want to see Daddy. I want to go visit him."

"Me too," says Franta, without looking up from his game.

"You'll both be with Daddy next week," the octopus lady says.

I can't wait. Does anybody hear me crying? Hello?

I'm crying loud enough to hear. But the whole car is quiet.

Then my dad doesn't yield the right of way and we come this close to having an accident.

I text my mom: "We almost got in a crash," and about ten seconds later I hear my dad's phone ring.

There was all kinds of free stuff at the festival for new families, which was held in a garden and a big building that looked like one of Prince Rohan's smaller castles, and there was a sign at the entrance listing all the stuff you could do and all the stuff you couldn't do, like a sign at a playground or Kids World, and for a while it was fun imagining that we were there, and that everything around us was just preparatory maneuvers for the battle with the evil empire on the second floor. Or that it was a fetish ball for creatures from around the galaxy, since "new families," as my dad called us in the car, came in "all different types," and at first I almost ran into a trio of guys holding hands, and the one in the middle was carrying a little baby girl, and since I guess I kind of bumped into them, two ladies walking behind them smiled at me, and behind each of them was a girl with a boy, and behind them was a lady with four kids, holding hands in a line like a model train, and she was by herself. I wanted to tell my dad and ask a million questions, but he was still talking with somebody else, so I just blew it off.

Vojta and Franta right away got in line for cotton candy and I decided to follow them, but then Tonda pulled me aside to say his corset was too tight and asked if maybe I took his by accident again, and he wanted me to take mine off and check if it was the one with the red dot. So I bolted and went wandering around the garden.

The grownups were all chatting, and I guess us kids were supposed to be talking together too, or at least that's how my dad had explained it before, since we had similar experiences, but are you supposed to just walk up to some total stranger and ask about their experiences? I mean you can, but it would be really embarrassing. Besides, I wasn't interested in other kids, and I noticed the kids who were bigger were sabotaging it from the start.

I stayed a step behind my dad, maybe two, even when he was standing in line for beer or filling out the registration that said what kind of new family we were.

"None, this isn't a family," I whispered to him.

He talked about us to the other grownups as if we were little kids and couldn't see how different he was with them, and our stepmom was even more different, and both of them were laughing. Luckily, except for Franta and Marta, bleep-bleep only touched Tonda and Vojta, patting them on the back like our gym teacher Vízner did with the soccer team. Except for Marta, who headed straight for the swings, the rest of us formed a fighter crew, tailing Dad and bleep-bleep, and I could tell it was getting on their nerves, so we kept on doing it, following them at every turn, so they had to introduce us to everyone.

"Tonda, Miky, Vojta, Franta and Marta—that's her over there, you see?"

"The one in the little blue cap."

"How sweet."

Our stepmom is talking with the mother of three children.

"My name isn't Miky."

"Miky's always got something up his sleeve, don't you, Miky?"

The other lady looks like a blackboard washed clean.

“My name isn’t Miki.”

“Is that your nickname?” asks the other lady. Her boy winks at me. He gets what’s going on.

“No, Miki’s name is Miki, isn’t it, Miki?”

My stepmom’s mouth is smiling, but her eyes look scared.

“So what’s your name, honey, can you tell us?” says the man with the lady. I feel a poke in my back from my dad, right in the callus from my corset. I clench my teeth.

“I don’t have any name in hell.”

My dad pokes me even harder as the grownups around us chuckle.

“You’re a comedian, huh?” another man laughs. “Which hell would that be?” he asks.

“Her place.” I point to my stepmom. “She stole my dad from our mom. She ruined our whole family. There’s a black square in front of her building and that marks the entrance to hell.”

The man goes to get a beer and the lady turns around and starts straightening the corsets under her kids’ T-shirts. Another man gives my stepmom a harsh stare. I brush her hand off my head, and as it flies away I imagine it like a movie in slow motion.

“What do you mean, Miki? Somebody drew a black square?” asks the man who gave my stepmom the harsh look, my ally.

“They wrote the truth. My mom. My mom wrote there that . . .”

My dad shoves me as hard as he can, then, crushing my shoulders in his grip, he steers me away. He’s pushing me from behind so I can’t see him, just the looks of the other people as he maneuvers me away, and I hear my stepmom say: “It isn’t always easy with stepchildren. I suppose you know what I’m talking about . . . but other than that it’s really great.”

Somebody laughs again, but everyone else is quiet.

“So you’ve got five altogether?” the man asks.

My dad probably thought I was too far away to hear, but I wasn’t. Even if he said it softly, I could see bleep-bleep, I’m not blind, stroking her belly.

“Five plus one,” said my dad under his breath. Somebody applauded like an idiot, and my head began to spin like an airplane just before it crashes, when the luggage is falling out, raining down on the passengers’ heads, and the people are being tossed down the aisle like rag dolls.

Then me and my dad are in a corner of Rohan’s garden, under a cherry tree, and the maneuvers before the battle against the evil empire are in full swing, and I’ve got a sour taste in my mouth from all the cherries I just crammed in there. I count the cherry pits in the grass with my eyes, then look at my dad and my dad looks at me. I’ve heard it all before. He’s told me the same things a thousand times. And over in another corner of the garden my stepmom is wiping her trembling chin with a handkerchief.

“You almost killed us, Daddy.”

My dad is flabbergasted. His eyes bulge. Bet you weren’t expecting that one, huh, dad?

While he had his troops ready and waiting in the gorge, mine paddled in on the river from below.

“What?”

“We almost got in a crash on the way here. Don’t you remember?” My voice gave way.

“When you screw up, Miky, I don’t call Mom, unlike you.”

“I didn’t call.”

“Or text her.”

“You don’t text your mom?”

“Don’t play stupid.”

“I’m not you, Dad.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t think that you’re stupid.”

I yelp as my dad raises his hand. He was going to hit me, cause he thought I was trying to say he was stupid, but . . .

“You still haven’t got it through your head how someone of your age and status ought to behave.”

“What status?”

“You’re my son.”

I keep it to myself that I’m not so sure, since the only ones who get pregnant are moms. My dad has his troops gathered by the river. Mine choppered in.

“You could’ve killed her too.” I point to bleep-bleep.

My dad just looks at me.

“You would’ve been sorry then, right?”

I pray to God my dad doesn’t pull his handkerchief out of his pocket and hand it to me, or my sobs will break free and it’ll all come flying out.

I shut my eyes. I know my dad will end it by making me promise him something.

But instead the way it turns out is, wow, he promises me a new electric scooter. Instead of that one that’s parked by the river, where me and Pavlína got in the rowboat. I’m sure by now it’s all covered in duck poop anyway, and besides I don’t really remember where it was. I want the off-road model with the little tires and I promise my dad whatever he wants. Like I always do.