

Mama Don't

Lois J. Peterson

Mama don't tell that story no more about how she came here, three days by train, got off in Sioux Lookout to buy food, three apples and a chunk of cheese, then turned back to the train to see it heading out of town without her.

Told me that story often enough. Once dragged out the pair of flared jeans she'd been sewing on that train, sewing flowers all down the sides in all colours. Chain stitch she used, she showed me how to do it, showed me how you bring up the needle through carrying the thread, loop it around, then put in a little stitch to hold it. That makes the first petal. Mama could sew those flowers so fast. Sewed them down the front of a shirt she bought me from the Sally Ann for my first school picture. Don't know what happened to that picture. Same as what happened to all the others, I expect, whatever that was.

I loved that story. The train leaving Sioux Lookout, leaving Mama behind, barefoot with only the change left over from buying those apples, that cheese.

Mama thought Sioux Lookout was in Saskatchewan till I brought home the right information from Social Studies. Sioux Lookout, Ontario, population: two thousand five hundred thirty eight. It felt good to tell her something she didn't know.

I don't know what Mama did when she saw that train leave town without her. Must have turned out OK though. She did say that when she got off at the old CN station downtown she was wearing those jeans with flowers all the way down from waist to hem. Whoever it was meeting her commented on them, took her to the beach. English Bay, she said, big tankers out on the water, some pretty sailboats looking like paper from far off. Mama sat on a log and drank coffee from a paper cup and ate warm popcorn.

How'd you like it? they asked her, whoever it was had



picked her up. How'd you like Vancouver so far?

Mama was a great one for stories, but she don't tell them much these days. Some days it's hard to get her to say anything. Years of telling me stories, explaining why I had to do this, do that, must have taken it out of her.

There's lots of stories I would tell if she'd listen, but Mama don't like to do that neither.

She made me a cake one birthday. Chocolate, with my name written in little silver balls. It turned out flat as the plate. I had three friends over, in those days I could have friends over, and they loved that flat cake. Not that it was so good but that Mama and I laughed so hard, so hard she had to leave the room so fast we figured she was about to wet her pants. Next year my friends asked if Mama was going to make me another flat cake. She said a girl would have to be pretty lucky to have more than one flat cake in a lifetime.

Back then all I could think of was all the luck I didn't get. Never got taken to Disneyland, no new clothes at the start of school like some kids. One time I got real mean and yelled at Mama that she never gave me nothing.

Those days she was smart when I pulled stunts like that. Sat me down, tore one piece of paper off the phone pad for me, another for herself. Alright, Miss, she said. Now you write a list of all the things I've never done for you. I'll do the same. You think you're the only one with grudges? she asked. I've got some too. We'll see whose list is longer.

I liked making that list. Us both bent over the paper at the kitchen table, pens going *scratch scratch*, me sucking my lip, watching her list get longer, me trying to keep up. I wrote down everything I could think of. No kids pack at White Spot. No Disneyland. No cop shows, only Eddie's Father and National Geographic Specials. Mama was big on nature shows. No store-bought cookies. Store bread only as a treat, home-baked the rest of the time. No brand new bike, only someone else's all shone up.

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I had a good long list, so I looked over to see how she was doing. She'd had to turn over the page, so I kept going.

Funny that. By the time it was done I felt good, like I'd got rid of all those grudges. When I read it back to her, Mama listened, her forehead all creased. Then I started to skip stuff so it wouldn't seem so bad. Felt like I was being too picky, so I asked her to read her list.

She said I'd never got an A in school. I'd never brought her a cup of tea after work. Told me I didn't thank her for allowance, even though she knew it wasn't much. As she went on, reading down that list, it was like she was apologizing to me for even mentioning that stuff.

After that I hardly ever told her the stuff I wished I had, but didn't, all the things I wished I could do, but couldn't. I brought her tea, sometimes, and I did get some A's. Spelling it would have been, always good at that.

I'd add this to this to the list if we had one of all the things I wish were different. Her lying there, mouth open. Spit at the corner of her mouth, hair two-coloured, darker at the top where it's growing out, pale and straggly like cereal at the bottom. Don't know when she last changed her clothes.

It was her getting laid off changed things. She had an office job for years, then it was gone. Two weeks pay and a letter offering to retrain her. Nothing came of it. She got a resume done up, took it around, made phone calls. That would have been five years ago. Yeah, I'd of been about eleven then. I'd add to the list that she lies around and cries and doesn't talk and never laughs. Not anymore.

Imagine Mama's list. If she knew, she'd probably wish I took school more seriously. They call up now and again and I go for a day or two just to get them off my back. What's the point? I wonder, if school can get you a job, but it still don't get you new clothes when you need them.

Mama don't do much, these days. Goes out when she gets the welfare check, but doesn't come back some nights.

She don't cook or clean or pick up even, these days. Lays around and watches TV. Not cable, though. That got cut off, but she can get one of her soaps without it. The news comes in fine on one channel, and she talks back to that. Mama talks to Connie Chung more than she does to me.

Mama don't ask me what I've been doing, where I've been, so I don't tell her. Pinched a whole lot of stuff from stores for a while. Small stuff from big stores was my method. Only from stores that could afford it. I don't blame the kids I ran with, though lots of parents do that. I sure got blamed often enough if the other kids got caught. Soon there was no thrill in it. I could pinch CDs, makeup, clothes even, and never get caught. But what's the point if there's no thrill and no one to tell? That's how the good stories work—they get better with telling.

I'm glad I don't have to tell Mama about the drugs, some easy to get at bus stops, in parks, at the subway station. Never had the chance to talk to Mama about boys, either, before they were all over me and me not knowing how to feel about it.

We used to talk a lot, me and Mama. Who else was there? Supper on the table and sitting across from each other, our plates all set out on nice placemats, glasses shining, clean cutlery. Mama and me telling about our day and her making me laugh with stories of people she worked with. I told her about school, and what made me shy and what made me mad, and she nodded and chewed and asked questions that made me tell her everything.

Long time since we sat at a table. Used TV trays for a while. Now she don't even use a plate. She ate cold beans from the can yesterday, then stuck it back in the fridge, almost empty. I took it out and emptied it into a bowl. Someone's got to care about things.

Mama used to. Used to like things nice. The house not ours but the rent was paid and the place was clean. No rugs on the floors, all thin lino sometimes, but always clean. Now I'm the only one doing much cleaning. Not saying I

like it, but I started to notice if things weren't nice just as Mama was starting not to care.

Mama don't notice what I've done. She don't notice if nothing gets done. She just lays there watching TV, smoking and flicking the ash in a mug, cold coffee in the bottom so it sizzles, or down the neck of an empty bottle.

She hasn't said nothing about me giving up smoking, and beer. Wasn't as hard as people make it out to be. I needed to quit, and beer and cigarettes going so well together I thought it best to quit both at once. So I did, just like that. Mama might notice that she can't bum smokes off me any more, but she don't say nothing.

She used to believe all that about second-hand smoke, so she saved it for outside, in the car with the windows rolled down. Then the car went, and it got to be cold out, and she started smoking indoors. Don't I count? I thought, thinking of that second-hand smoke. Seems not, not much she does care about, I'd say.

If I told her about this baby, would that make a difference?

I would like to tell her before I go. I'm all ready, been saving for a long time, long before I knew about the baby. I have enough to take the train, maybe, the same way Mama did all those years ago.

Mama don't know I'm leaving, don't know about the baby. Mama don't tell that story no more about taking the train, about almost getting left behind in Sioux Lookout. She used to tell me all those stories. Time was when we knew everything there was to know about each other. I'll take that train back east, the same way Mama came, only going the other way this time. Maybe I can find my Dad, a Dad for this kid back east. Maybe I can start again with him, maybe make a new family with this new baby.

The train goes through Sioux Lookout, but I won't get out. I'll just sit tight till it gets to the other end.