

Ashes by Susan Beth Pfeffer

That winter, it felt like every time I saw my father, the sun cast off just a little more warmth than it had the day before. I don't remember a gray day when I saw him. Once it had snowed the night before, and getting to his apartment took longer than normal, as the buses inched their way past snowbanks and awkwardly parked cars. But the sun made everything glisten, and the snow still had a pure look to it, which I knew would be gone by the following morning.

I saw him Tuesdays. I'd been seeing him Tuesdays for almost two years at that point. Before then, it had been Tuesdays and alternate weekends, but my life got busier, weekends got harder, and Dad didn't complain when we fell instead into a Tuesday evening ritual. Mom, who was still working on completing her degree, took Tuesday and Thursday evening classes, so I'd go straight to Dad's from school, wait for him to show, and then we'd have supper together and talk. It helped that he didn't live a hundred miles away. Just the other end of town, a two-bus-trip ride.

Dad drove me home Tuesday nights, and the moon always shone brightly as the sun had and the winter stars looked joyful and beckoning. When I was little, Dad used to promise me the stars for a necklace, but like most of his promises, that one never quite happened.

"I'm a dreamer," he said to me more than once, which really wasn't all that different from what Mom said. "He's an irresponsible bum," was her way of wording it. I knew he was both, but I also knew that winter that the sun and moon dreamed with him.

Sometimes when I haven't seen Dad for a few days, on a Saturday or a Sunday, I'll try to figure out why Mom even married him. She's the most practical person I know, always putting aside for a rainy day. With Mom, there are a lot of rainy days and she takes grim pleasure in being ready for them. The flashlight with working batteries for a blackout. The extra quarters when the laundry isn't quite dry.

Dad gets on a grin and a willingness to help. He's always there if you need him. Well, not always. He's unexpectedly there, like a warm day in January. He's a rescuer. "I saw a woman stranded on a road," he'd say. "So I changed her tire for her." Or he took the box of kittens to the Humane Society, or he found the wallet with the ID intact, and returned it in person to its owner (and of course, turned down a reward). He helps blind people cross the street and lost people find their way.

"I go to bed and ask myself, 'Is the world a better place because I exist?'" he told me once. "If I've done one thing, no matter how small, that made the world a better place, I'm satisfied."

Of course no one ever got rich helping blind people cross the street. The world might be a better place, but child support checks don't always show up on time, and I never did get that necklace made of stars.

Both Mom and Dad see to it I know his limitations.

"All I can give you is dreams, Ashes," He said to me once. "But one good dream is worth a thousand flashlight batteries."

Ashes. I can still hear the fight. It was just a couple of months before the final breakup. I was in bed, allegedly asleep, when they went at it.

"Her name is Ashleigh!" Mom shouted. "A name you insisted on. So why do you call her Ashes?"

"That's just my nickname for her," Dad replied. He was always harder to hear when they fought. The angrier Mom got, the lower his voice dropped. For some reason, that made her shout even louder.

"But ashes are cold, gray, dead things," Mom yelled. "You're calling your daughter something dead!"

"It's just a nickname," Dad repeated, a little quieter.

"You call her that just to annoy me!" Mom yelled, but Dad's reply was so soft, I could no longer hear him.

A couple of days later, when Dad forgot to pick me up at school, or didn't have money for the class trip, or got all his favorite kinds of Chinese and none of Mom's and mine, I thought maybe Mom was right, and Dad did call me Ashes just to annoy her. I made a list that evening of all the words that rhymed with ashes-smashes and crashes, trashes, and bashes, clashes and mashes-and it didn't seem quite so nice anymore, having a special nickname. But then Dad gave me roses or sang a song he'd written for me. Or maybe he moved two buses away. And I realized he still called me Ashes, where Mom couldn't hear him to be annoyed. And that made me feel special all over again. Mom might never be caught without batteries or tissues, but she just called me Ashleigh-a name she didn't even like- and never promised me anything.

What could Dad have promised her to get her to love him? And what could Mom have offered to make Dad love her back? Whatever it was, it was dying by the time I was born, and dead before I turned six. Dad could make everyone in the world smile, except Mom. And Mom was always prepared, except for what Dad did to her.

It was toward the end of February that winter, and the sun was shining and the air was crisp and clean. I sat waiting for Dad, who I knew would show up eventually.

When he got in, he was full of smiles and kisses.

"Ashes!" he cried, as though it had been years since we'd last seen each other. "Have you ever seen such a day!"

I had, seven days before. But I smiled at Dad, who always seemed to discover the weather each time we visited.

"You look radiant," he said. "You get more and more beautiful." I was wearing jeans and a bulky brown sweater Mom had given me for Christmas.

"You have flair, Ashes. Style. You do something like that, you're sure to make your mark." Last week he told me to be an astronaut. The week before that, the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation. And the week before that, he'd been stunned by my spirituality.

"Oh, Ashes," he said, taking off his winter coat and dropping it on the sofa bed. "I wish I deserved you."

"I wouldn't have any other dad," I told him. "My friends' fathers, they just tell my friends to study more. They never tell them they have flair or style."

"Maybe they don't," Dad said. "You're the special one, Ashes. You're the one-in-a-million girl." "Am I really?" I asked, not needing the reassurance. I knew I wasn't a one-in-a-million girl, no matter how often Dad told me I was. But no matter how often he told me, I still loved hearing him say it.

"One in a million," he said. "And don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise, Ashes. They will you know. They'll try to tear you down. They'll laugh at your dreams. Even your mother-and she's a saint to have put up with me all those years- even she will discourage you from being all you can be. I hate to speak against her, but she's not a dreamer, Ashes. She's the most level-headed woman I know. As straight as a yardstick. But I was the only dream she ever believed in and once I failed her, she never let herself dream again."

We were both silent as we pondered Mom. "She'd never let you go hungry," he said. "What do you want for supper, Ashes? I can offer you pizza, Chinese, or fast." He clapped his hands. "I remember. There's a new diner opened right around the block. Let's treat ourselves, Ashes, and go out on the town."

"Can you afford it?" I asked.

"For a special date with my daughter?" he replied. "Of course I can afford it. Besides, I have something to celebrate."

"What?" I asked.

"I have a chance at something really big," he said. "All I need to do is put together a little financing, and I'll be set for life."

"For life?" I said, and I must have sounded like Mom because he stopped smiling."

"All right, not for life," he said. "But it'll be the start of something really big, Ashes. I can feel it. Just a couple hundred bucks, and then all the pieces will fall into place."

I had no idea where Dad had thought he could get two hundred dollars. But he looked so happy I had to smile too.

"Then diner it is," I said, and I got my coat. Dad picked up his coat from the sofa and put it back on. "Rice pudding for dessert," he said as we walked out the door. "You can always tell the quality of a diner by its rice pudding."

The diner might have been brand new, but already it had a shabby run-down quality that made it fit right in with the neighborhood. It was two-thirds empty when we got there, and we had our choice of booths. Dad took one that faced the door, and sat in the seat where he could check who was coming in. He hadn't done that with me in a long time, and my stomach hurt in an old familiar way.

"Waiting for someone?" I asked him. I stared at the menu, so I wouldn't have to look at him not looking at me.

"Of course not," he said. "Not when I'm with you. Take you pick Ashes. Hamburger, triple-decker, chicken salad platter. Whatever you want."

I ordered the burger and fries, hoping that by the time it came I'd feel like eating. Dad and ordered coffee.

"You'll share my fries," I said to him.

"I'll even eat your pickle," he said. But then he looked back at the door.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"It's nothing," he said. "Oh hell, Ashes, you can always see right through me."

He was the one who'd been looking right through me toward the door, but I didn't say anything.

"That money," he said. "Two hundred dollars?"

I nodded.

"Well it isn't so much for a deal as to help pay off one I already made," Dad said. "But I've got to tell you, honey, once that money is paid, I'm on my way to easy street. Just a little set back. But you know how those guys are. They get itchy when you owe them money. And it's not always comfortable to be where they can scratch you."

"You owe them two hundred dollars?" I asked, trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

"Give or take," Dad said. "But don't worry about it honey. I'll work it out. I always do."

My burger and fries came then. Dad took a long sip of his coffee, while I poured ketchup on my plate and twirled a fry in it. "Can I help?" I asked.

Dad smiled like I'd offered him the key to the mint. "I love you so much," he said. "You're ten thousand times better than I deserve, Ashes."

"Have a fry," I said, pushing my plate toward him. Dad took one. He seemed to have more of an appetite than I did.

"I had a thought," he said as he reached for my pickle. "Your mother keeps a couple hundred in cash at her place."

I didn't think either of us was supposed to know that.

"In that pretty teapot her mother gave her," Dad said. "Unless she's changed her hiding place as well." Sometimes, when Mom wasn't home, I'd take the lid off the teapot and stare into it, imagining what I could do with two hundred dollars. I looked at Dad and realized he'd had those same fantasies. Well, why not. I was his daughter, after all.

"The money's still in the teapot," I said. "What do you want to do Dad?" I asked. "Come into the apartment with me and take the money?"

"Oh no," he said and he looked really shocked. "I would never steal from your mother. I've caused her pain enough." He added casually. "No, I just thought maybe you could borrow the money," he said. "Just for a day or two, until I straighten out all my finances. Your mother would never know the difference. Unless there's an earthquake or the Martians invade. I think we can gamble neither of those things will happen before Friday."

"You'll be able to pay her back by Friday?" I asked.

"You," Dad said. "I'd be borrowing money from you. And I swear to you Ashes, I'd have the money in your hands by Friday at the latest." He wiped his hand on his napkin and offered it to me as though to shake on the deal.

"Dad I don't know," I said. "That's a lot of money. What if Mom finds out?"

"It's me she'd be angry at," Dad said. "Which is why she'll never find out. I wouldn't jeopardize our time together, honey. You let me have the money tonight, I'll straighten out my little difficulty, and Thursday night, when your mom is out, I'll give you back what I owe you. No earthquakes, no Martians, no problem."

I looked at the clock on the wall behind Dad. "Mom'll be home soon," I said.

"You all through?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Let's go then," he said, the rice pudding test long forgotten. We went back to his place so I could pick up my books. Then we walked down to his car. "Why don't you sell your car?" I asked him.

"You're your mother's daughter," he said. "Good head on your shoulders. Problem is, I'd never be able to find another car this cheap to replace it. No Ashes, the teapot's the way to go."

We drove back to Mom's in silence. For a moment, a cloud drifted past the moon and the sky turned greenish gray.

"Snow tomorrow," Dad said. "Maybe you'll get a snow day."

"Maybe," I said.

Dad parked the car a block away from Mom's. "Just in case she gets home early," he said. "I don't want her to see me waiting. You go up to the apartment," he said. "Take the money, and come right down. Then I'll drop you off in front of her place, like always, and she'll never know the difference."

"What do I do is Mom's there?" I asked.

"Just stay where you are," he said. "If you're not back here in ten minutes, I'll go home."

"All right," I said and reached to unlock the door.

"You're one in a million," he said to me. "The best daughter a man could dream of."

I got out of the car and ran over to the apartment. I took the elevator to the tenth floor and unlocked the door. The apartment was quiet. It always felt colder when Mom wasn't there. Even with the lights on, it seemed a little darker.

I walked into the kitchen and turned on the light. The teapot was right where it belonged. I lifted its lid and stared at her emergency money. I lifted its lid and stared at the money. Mom's emergency money. Her earthquake money. Her Martian money. What should I do?

I looked out the window and saw only ash gray sky. In the cold stillness of the night, I could hear my father's car keening in the distance. "You're one in a million," it cried.