

Excerpt from Missing Pieces
By Joy Fielding

Characters: Narrator (adult Kate); Girl (Kate); Mother(Helen); Stepfather (Mike); Husband (Larry)

Narrator: A torrent of deliberately repressed memories rushed back at me. I heard the front door of my childhood open, saw my stepfather walk through.

Mother: *Hello, darling. You're late.*

Stepfather: *Are you complaining?*

Mother: *Of course not. I was just worried. Dinner was ready an hour ago.*

Stepfather: *Dinner is whenever I get home.*

Mother: *It's on the table.*

Stepfather: *It's cold.*

Mother: *I'll warm it up.*

Stepfather: *You know I hate warmed-over food. I don't work hard and pay good money for meat to have it warmed over.*

Mother: *Don't get all worked up. I'll make you something else.*

Stepfather: *You think I have all night to wait until you make something else?*

Mother: *It won't take long.*

Stepfather: *You don't think I deserve a decent meal when I get home?*

Mother: *Of course you do. That's why I try to make everything nice for you.*

Stepfather: *Then why isn't everything nice?*

Mother: *It is. It's just that you were late.*

Stepfather: *You're saying it's my fault?*

Mother: *Of course not. These things happen. I understand.*

Stepfather: *You understand shit.*

Mother: *I'm sorry, Mike. I didn't mean ...*

Stepfather: *You're always sorry. You never mean. You never think, that's your problem. Why do you do these things?*

Mother: *Please, Mike, calm down. You'll scare the children.*

Stepfather: *Fuck the children.*

Mother: *Please watch your language.*

Stepfather: *My language? Oh, that's right, isn't it? Your first husband, fuck his sainted memory, he never swore, did he? Well, what are you going to do, wash my mouth out with soap? Is that what you're going to do?*

Mother: *Please, Mike.*

Stepfather: *You know what? That's a damn good idea. That's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap. Then next time you think of getting smart with your husband, you'll think twice.*

Mother: *No, don't please don't!*

Stepfather: *What's the matter? Don't you like the taste? I bet it tastes better than that shit you were going to serve me tonight, you stupid bitch.*

Narrator: I closed my eyes, tried not to see the bruises along the side of my mother's mouth the next morning, the red marks on the side of her neck and arms, the angry scratch along her chin. On another such occasion, I demanded:

Girl: *What did you do to my mother?*

Mother: *Ssh, Kate, it's nothing.*

Stepfather: *What are you talking about? I never touched your mother. What lies have you been telling the kid, Helen?*

Mother: *I didn't tell her anything. It's okay, Kate. I tripped on the carpet. I fell against the side of the door.*

Stepfather: *Clumsy idiot.*

Girl: *She's not a clumsy idiot. You are.*

Narrator: Even now I can feel the sharp cuff of his hand as it snapped across the back of my head. I'll never do that, I vowed in that instant. I'll never hit a child of mine. I told Larry:

Narrator: "I'm no better than he was."

Husband: "Stop beating yourself up about this."

Narrator: "I'm a therapist, for God's sake."

Husband: "You're a therapist, not a saint. Kate, has anything even remotely like this ever happened before? No. It happened once. You were provoked and you lost control."

Narrator: I could hear my mother's tearful voice:

Mother: *He's not always this way. There are times when he's gentle and thoughtful and funny. It's only sometimes when he's under a lot of stress. Or I provoke him and he just loses control.*

Narrator: I told my mother then:

Girl: *It doesn't wash, mom.*

Narrator: And now I told Larry, as I had told her, "It doesn't wash." Is violence contagious? Is it passed down from one generation to the next, like some dreaded inherited disease? Is there no escape?