

Adapted from FATHERING

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CHARACTERS:

Narrator/Jason: A Vietnam war veteran

Sharon: Jason's common-law wife

Eng – Jason's daughter with a Vietnamese prostitute

Dr. Kearns – the family physician

Settings: Jason's home; the doctor's office

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NARRATOR: Eng stands just inside our bedroom door, her fidgety fist on the doorknob, which Sharon, in a sulk, polished to a gleam yesterday afternoon.

ENG: I'm starved.

NARRATOR: I know a sick little girl when I see one. I brought the twins up without much help ten years ago. Eng's got a high fever. Brownish stains stiffen the nap of her terry robe. Sour smells fill the bedroom.

SHARON: For God's sake leave us alone.

NARRATOR: (Aside to audience) Sharon turns away from me under the quilt. We bought the quilt at a garage sale in Rock Springs the Sunday two years ago when she moved in.

SHARON: Talk to her.

NARRATOR: Sharon works on this near-marriage of ours. I'll hand it to her, she really does. I knead her shoulders, and I say:

JASON: Easy, easy...

NARRATOR: ... though I really hate it when she treats Eng like a deaf mute.

JASON: My daughter speaks English, remember?

NARRATOR: Eng can outcuss any freckle-faced kid on the block. Someone in the killing fields must have taught her. Maybe her mama, the honeyest-skinned bar girl with the tiniest feet in Saigon. I was an errand boy with the Combined Military Intelligence. I did the whole war on Dexedrine. Vietnam didn't happen, and I'd put it behind me in marriage and fatherhood and teaching high school. Ten years later came the screw-ups with the marriage, the job, women, the works. Until Eng popped up in my life, I really believed it didn't happen.

JASON: Come here, sweetheart.

NARRATOR: I sidle closer to Sharon, so there'll be room under the quilt for Eng.

ENG: I'm starved.

NARRATOR: She doesn't budge. The robe and hair are smelling something fierce. She doesn't show any desire to cuddle. She must be sick. She must have thrown up all night. Sharon throws the quilt back.

SHARON: Then go raid the refrigerator like a normal kid.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time Sharon used to be a cheerful, accommodating woman. It isn't as if Eng was dumped on us out of the blue. She knew I was tracking my kid. Coming to terms with the past was Sharon's idea... She said she could handle being a stepmother – better a fresh chance with some orphan off the streets of Saigon than with my twins from Rochester. My twins are being raised in some organic-farming lesbo commune. Their mother breeds Nubian goats for a living.

JASON: Come get in bed with us, baby. Let Dad feel your forehead. You burning up with fever? (To Sharon) She isn't hungry, I think she's sick. I think she's just letting us know she hurts.

NARRATOR: I hold my arms out wide for Eng to run into. If I could, I'd suck the virus right out of her. In the jungle, VC mamas used to do that. Some nights we'd steal right up to a hootch – just a few of us intense sons of bitches on some special mission – and the women would be at their mumbo jumbo. They'd be sticking coins and amulets into napalm burns.

ENG: (Moaning) I'm hungry, Dad.

NARRATOR: It comes out as a moan. Okay, she doesn't run into my arms, but at least she's come as far in as the foot of our bed.

ENG: Dad, let's go down to the kitchen. Just you and me.

NARRATOR: I am about to let that pass, though I can feel Sharon's body go into weird little jerks and twitches when my baby adds with emphatic viciousness:

ENG: Not her, Dad. We don't want her with us in the kitchen.

JASON: She loves you.

NARRATOR: Love – not spite – makes Eng so territorial; that's what I want to explain to Sharon. She's a sick, frightened kid, for Chrissake.

JASON: Don't you, Sharon? Sharon's concerned about you.

SHARON: (Turning on her stomach and adjusting her sleep mask) You know what's wrong with you, Jase? You can't admit you're being manipulated. You can't cut through the 'frightened-foreign-kid' shit.

NARRATOR: Eng moves closer. She comes up to the side of my bed, but doesn't touch the hand I'm holding out. She's a fighter.

ENG: I feel fire-hot, Dad. My bones feel pain.

JASON: Sharon? Sharon, I'm so sorry.

NARRATOR: I want to deserve this woman. It isn't anybody's fault. You need uppers to get through peacetimes, too.

ENG: Dad. Let's go. Chop-chop.

JASON: You're too sick to keep food down, baby. Curl up in here. Just for a bit?

ENG: I'd throw up, Dad.

JASON: I'll carry you back to your room. I'll read you a story, okay?"

NARRATOR: Eng watches me real close as I pull the quilt off.

Eng: You got any scars you haven't shown me yet? My mom had a big scar on one leg. Shrapnel. Boom boom. I got scars. See? I got lots of bruises.

NARRATOR: I scoop up my poor girl and rush her, terry robe flapping, to her room which Sharon fixed up with white girlish furniture in less complicated days.

JASON: (To Sharon) Could you bring us some juice and aspirin?

SHARON: Aspirin isn't going to cure Eng. I'm going to call Dr. Kearns.

NARRATOR: Sharon calls Dr. Kearns and reports that Eng has bruises all over her arms. Dr. Kearns at first thinks Sharon is accusing Jason of child abuse. Sharon clarifies that

Eng is inflicting these injuries on herself, then puts on her coat and leaves to buy some aspirin. Eng becomes delirious and hallucinates that she is seeing her dead Grandmother, killed by American GIs. To calm her down, Jason reads Eng story about alien creatures who are taking over small towns all over the country.

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NARRATOR: Some time after two, the phone rings. Since Sharon doesn't answer it on the second ring, I know she isn't back. She carries a cordless phone everywhere around the house... Sharon will come back when she's ready. We'll make up. Things will get back to normal.

DR. KEARNS: Jason? I have Sharon here. She'll need a ride home. Can you drive over?

JASON: God! What's happened?

DR. KEARNS: Nothing to panic about. Nothing physical. She came for a consultation.

JASON: Give me a half-hour. I have to wrap Eng real warm so I can drag her out in this miserable weather.

DR. KEARNS; Take your time. This way I can take a look at Eng, too.

JASON: What's wrong with Sharon?

DR. KEARNS: She's a little exercised about a situation. I gave her a sedative. See you in a half-hour.

NARRATOR: I ease delirious Eng out of the overdecorated four-poster, prop her against my body while I wrap a blanket around her... It's a sunny winter day, and the evergreens in the front yard are glossy with frost. I press Eng against my chest as I negotiate the front steps. Where the gutter leaks, the steps feel spongy. The shrubs and bushes my ex-wife planted clog the front path. I've put twenty years into this house. The steps, the path, the house all have a right to fall apart...I'm thirty-eight. I've let a lot of people down already... The inside of the van is deadly cold. I lay the bundled-up child on the long seat behind me and wait for the engine to warm up. It feels good with the radio going and the heat coming on. I don't want the ice on the windshield to melt. Eng and I are safest in the van.

ENG: Dad, can I have a quarter?

JASON: (joking) May I, kiddo. What do you need it for, sweetheart?

NARRATOR: Eng's quick. Like the street kids in Saigon who dove for cigarettes and sticks of gum. She's loosened the blanket folds around her. I watch her tuck the quarter inside her wool mitt. She grins.

ENG: Thanks, soldier.

NARRATOR: At Dr. Kearns's, Sharon is lying unnaturally slack-bodied on the lone vinyl sofa. Her coat's neatly balled up under her neck, like a bolster. Right now she looks amiable, docile. I don't think she exactly recognizes me, although later she'll say she did. All that stuff about having to buy aspirin in the mall must have been a lie. She was planning all along to get here.

JASON: What's wrong?

DR. KEARNS: It's none of my business, Jason, but you and Sharon might try an honest-to-goodness heart-to-heart.

NARRATOR: Then Dr. Kearns makes a sign to me to lay Eng on the examining table.

DR. KEARNS: (to Eng) We don't look too bad.

NARRATOR: Dr. Kearns excuses himself and goes into a glass-walled cubicle.

SHARON: Everything was fine until she got here. Send her back, Jase. If you love me send her back.

NARRATOR: Sharon's slouched so far forward, her pointed, sweated breasts nearly touch her corduroy pants. She looks helpless, pathetic. I've brought her to this state. Guilt, not love, is what I feel. I want to comfort Sharon, but my daughter with the wild, grieving pygmy face won't let go of my hand.

ENG: She's bad, Dad. Send *her* back.

NARRATOR: Dr. Kearns comes out of the cubicle balancing a sample bottle of pills on a flattened palm. He has a boxer's tough, squarish hands.

DR. KEARNS: Miraculous stuff, this. But first we'll stick our tongue out and say *ahh*. Come on, open wide.

NARRATOR: Eng opens her mouth real wide, then brings her teeth together, hard, on Dr. Kearns' hand. She leaps erect on the examining table, tearing the disposable paper sheet with her toes. Her tiny, funny toes are doing a frantic dance.

ENG: Don't let him touch me, Grandma!

JASON: He's going to make you all better, baby.

NARRATOR: I can't pull my alien child down, I can't comfort her. The twins had diseases with easy names, diseases we knew what to do with. The thing is, I never felt for them what I feel for her.

ENG: (screaming, hopping on the table) Don't let him touch me, Grandma! Kill him, Grandma! Get me out of here, Grandma!

JASON: Baby, it's all right.

NARRATOR: But she looks through me and the country doctor as though we aren't here, as though we aren't pulling at her to make her lie down.

DR. KEARNS: (commanding) Lie down like a good girl.

NARRATOR: But Eng is listening to other voices. She pulls her mitts off with her teeth, checks the blanket, the robe, the pajamas to the floor; then naked, hysterical, she presses the quarter I gave her deep into the soft flesh of her arm. She presses and presses that coin, turning it in nasty half-circles until blood starts to pool under the skin.

DR. KEARNS: Jason, grab her at the knees. Get her back down on the table.

SHARON: See, I told you the child was crazy. She hates me. She's possessive about Jason.

NARRATOR: The doctor comes at us with his syringe. He's sedated Sharon; now he wants to knock out my kid with his cures.

ENG: (yelling) Get the hell out, you bastard! *Vamos!* Bang bang!

NARRATOR: she's pointing her arm like a semiautomatic, taking out Sharon, then the doctor. My Rambo.

ENG: Old way is good way. Money cure is good cure. When they shoot my grandma, you think pills do her any good? You Yankees, please go home.

NARRATOR: She looks straight at me.

ENG: Scram, you Yankee bastard!

NARRATOR: Dr. Kearns has Eng by the wrist now. He has flung the quarter I gave her onto the floor. Something incurable is happening to my women. Then as in fairy tales, I know what has to be done.

JASON: (To Eng) Coming, pardner. I got no end of coins.

NARRATOR: I jiggle the change in my pocket. I jerk her away from our enemies. My Saigon kid and me: we're a team. In five minutes we'll be safely away in the cold chariot of our van.