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ORIGIN

When their daughter was born they named her Jacada, after nothing and nobody. The name was Michelle's pick, one she came up lying on the couch. Keith had argued against it. Jacada for a dog, maybe – maybe for a dog you could make a word up – but for a child it wasn't right. A name should be a name, a word that meant something. He wanted his child to have substance. He liked Alice, noble, and Gillian, youthful. Perfect names for a daughter.

Keith could feel the weight of his Alice between his hands as he lifted her from her baby-bed, or when he was stretched on his back in the grass, Alice giggling, balanced on the soles of his feet with the clouds behind her.

She would have little yellow dresses with puffy elastic-legged pants that went underneath, and her favorite toy would be a wooden duck, one of those ones attached to a string with rubber feet turning on wheels. Keith knew the smell of her baby-scalp – cool instead of warm – his green algae-scented girl. No pink powder babies here. Alice.

Alice, English in origin, made famous by Lewis Carroll, who was a mathematician, a logician, and maybe a pedophile, but Keith didn't really think about that. He found Carroll's photography beautiful, and had read the biography by Karoline Leach. Keith was certain Carroll was a man who enjoyed children, who befriended them, as he would befriend his own daughter, his Alice.

Jacada.

When Michelle suggested it, Keith, confused, had asked her, “Is that a black name?”

Michelle had looked hard at him, her mouth turning down at a ferocious angle as she said, “What’s that supposed to mean, ‘Is that a black name?’ Sometimes you hurt me so badly.” When she finished speaking she curled in on herself and sobbed and sobbed, only unrolling to scream, “You disgust me!” when Keith reached out and put his hand on her shoulder.

Michelle talked to her growing belly all the time, “Who do you love more, Jacada?” she would ask. “Daddy or Mummy? – Oh! Mummy! You love Mummy more,” then she would smile unkindly at Keith as she ran her hands across her stomach whispering, “I love you too, my sweet sweet baby.”

It was apparent to Keith that Michelle took great pleasure in taunting him, that she enjoyed making him uncomfortable, but what could he do? Michelle was the mother of his child. When Keith thought about the two of them, their relationship – in the brief moments when his anger or hurt overcame him and he asked himself *Why don’t I just go* – he found that the idea of leaving chilled him, made his hands shake, and sweat puddled at the base of his spine. Because he could not leave Michelle, Keith was almost certain that he loved her. She was, after all, the mother of his child.

Keith met Michelle at a party hosted by another graduate student in his department. Keith, who had never been one of the guys, but always wanted to be, had started his master’s degree program with high hopes. He was optimistic, eager to develop deep and meaningful bonds with his new peers. He was quickly disappointed. Everyone talked about movies he had never seen, or were tangled together in a mess of praise over ones he had seen, but disliked; it was all bands he did not listen to, and books he had not read. They argued political points that seemed pointless,

always accusing, ever angry with one another and slamming out the student lounge in disgust. Keith was terrified to speak, certain he would accidentally cause someone mortal offense and be unable to retract or, or worse, not want to retract but, but feel compelled to, and have his apology rejected. Among them there was aggressive competition for favor and popularity – both with the other students, and with their professors, and even with the department secretaries who assigned classrooms, kept the keys to the photocopy room, and accepted the summer grant money applications. After the first semester when the cliques had solidified Keith wasn't in one, but he'd read all over that networking was essential; it was important to make an attempt to attend the department's social functions.

The party host was two years ahead of Keith in the program, a man with a long beard who wore knee socks every day and was pursuing a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. He took a ridiculous pleasure in what he believed to be his superior intelligence and deeper understanding of the underpinnings of the world, and possessed an incorrectly defined concept of irony as a comedic trope – so the party was themed, eighties-dance-and-dress-up. When Keith walked in the lights were off and people were thronged together in polka dots and leg warmers grinding to *Alone*. Keith instantly felt terribly alone, and was ashamed. Surveying the crowded room he was overwhelmed by the careless contact of bodies, by the music, and the flashes of light thrown across the walls by a tiny turning disco-ball. It flooded into Keith's mind – he had never borne the weight of a great secret love, and he wished he did, right then, so he could plot the moment of exposing it.

Keith got drunk off Wild Turkey, danced to Michael Jackson on a table, knocked over a pillar candle, set a roll of paper towels on fire,

then went home with a girl— Michelle—and they must have had sex, because five weeks later she was two weeks late for her period.

“I’m super regular,” she had told him, then that she studied Bastardy—the study of bastards—particularly in France.

Keith didn’t know her last name. But he thought of the new cells forming inside Michelle, his future child, and found that he felt very protective of her. He decided to learn about French Bastards and prenatal care. Keith believed he wanted to make Michelle happy.

Still, he resisted Jacada. Not for himself even, but for his daughter. Keith’s mother’s name was Gayle, gaiety, and his grandmother’s name was Cadie, flowing sounds, an alternate spelling of which, C-A-D-D-Y, was the name of major character in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury*. Noble, youthful, gaiety, flowing sounds. Names a child could flourish under, a child could grow into, names with fascinating history.

Keith tried twenty different baby name sites on the internet and Jacada wasn’t on any of them. It wasn’t even an alternate spelling of anything. There was a company though, marketing, or technology, with that name.

He told Michelle and she said, “See—it is *something*. So it’s not *nothing*. It’s a *company*.”

Keith said, “Michelle.”

Michelle answered, “French in origin. Who is like God? God-like. Goddess.” She flicked her finger at him like he was a cat she was trying to scare off a counter-top. “I’m like *God*, Keith.”

Michelle was more than nine months pregnant. Back before it was safe to tell anyone about the baby, during the weeks when it was possible the cells that would make their eventual daughter would trickle out of Michelle as strings of blood, Keith had given her a book of baby names. He wanted to be supportive. He wanted Michelle to know he meant it when he said he would marry her. She had been angry with him.

“It’s too soon,” she said. “This whole deal could still be off.”

When Michelle was three months pregnant, the deal was officially on. They were married, and there were sonograms, and shopping for pink blankets, and tiny hair bows, and a rental house, and then the baby was past due, and they had still not agreed on a name for her. Keith thought – not really – but pretended to think, it was the name dispute that was holding his little girl up. She was waiting until he and Michelle were ready. She would allow herself be born only when she knew her name was waiting for her. She too, in Keith's fantasy, found Jacada unacceptable.

But if the baby wasn't born soon the doctor was going to induce Michelle to make her deliver. It had to be settled.

Keith said, "Michelle."

Michelle said, "I can't believe you don't know your own daughter's name. How can you not know her name? She has a name. I *know*. I can *feel* it. You can't change a child's name, Keith. Keith. Warrior of the woodlands or whatever. Half the time it's Gaelic then it's Scottish. All those people all killed one another and raped everybody's wives and had that first night rule where the English Lord came in and had a lords and squires gangbang with the bridal party. So don't give me, 'of English origin.' This is our fucking daughter, not some hound dog named Blue that you want to call Chester. So fuck off, Keith. Keith. Keith. Keith. Her name is Jacada. Your own daughter, Keith, and you have no idea who she *is*. Sometimes at night I dream that you die and then we live happily ever after."

Michelle and Alice, happily ever after, without him.

So when Keith's daughter was born, lifted free from a slit cut into Michelle's uterus, she was named Jacada.

More than ten years ago, because Jacada was ten years old on the Wednesday of that week, and on Saturday had a party in a rented theater with all her little girlfriends, and on Sunday it was going to be a family day, just Keith, Michelle, and their daughter.

For her birthday Jacada wanted her ears to be pierced. Michelle suggested it. As Keith was watching the light on the waffle iron, waiting for it to go green, Michelle said, "We should have a girls' day."

But the plan had been a family day. "Hey," Keith said, "What about old Dad over here?"

Michelle ignored him. "We should go to mall and get your ears pierced at the booth," she said to Jacada.

Keith wanted to sit down at the table, but he didn't want to risk Jacada's waffle burning. He said, "I don't know about that," speaking to Michelle. He didn't think Jacada should have her ears pierced so young, but if it was going to happen, he wanted it done by her pediatrician, not under a tent in the mall.

"Man the waffle iron, Keith," Michelle said. Then to Jacada, "You can get little gold stars."

The light switched to green and Keith gently shimmied the waffle iron open with the end of a wooden spoon. The handle had gotten far too hot to touch. Both Michelle and Jacada were on second helpings and Keith was pleased by that. He had planned in advance to make special birthday waffles for Jacada. He made a special trip to the store for sparkling water so they would be puffy and crisp, the way Jacada liked them best, and he had bought strawberries and whipped cream and rainbow sprinkles for them.

"What about silver stars?" Jacada asked. "Or pearls?"

"We can see," Michelle said. "They probably don't have real pearls, but they'll have something."

"Jay Gatsby is double digits," Keith said. He wanted to distract her from ear piercing and a girls' day. "The big ten. Jay Gatsby is a newly inducted member of the double digits club."

Jay Gatsby was Keith's name for Jacada. When she was still a little baby he had tried calling her Jack – diminutive of John, English in origin, God is gracious – but it upset Michelle, and he hated to argue with her in front of the baby. He could get away with Jay

Gatsby, because Michelle thought it cute—she didn't guess that it had a meaning any deeper than pop-culture reference—J. Crew had a whole *The Great Gatsby*-themed summer catalogue—but sometimes Michelle called Jacada Hot Gun Gatz, and Keith could hardly stand it.

For Keith it was the first part—Jay—that was important. Jay, taken from Latin, meaning a bird, a member of the crow family. They had jays at the feeder outside the kitchen window, and they were beautiful, blue and powder white, with black tipped wings and black eyes. They didn't sing, but they were feisty birds, screaming and twisting, swirling blue. They controlled the feeder. Even if it was a boy's name, a man's name, the jays were beautiful birds. They were *something*.

They were on the edge of an argument, but Keith didn't want to fight. "A ten year old," he said, "doesn't need pierced ears." He had decided he wasn't giving in on this. It wasn't *right*, and they were going to finish breakfast, and they were going to have a family day.

Michelle took Jacada's hand across the table, "We aren't talking *needs*."

"Please," Keith said. He didn't want to fight. He thought it would be so terrible to fight. It was his daughter's day, but he thought it would be so terrible for her to spend it getting holes punched through her tiny ears, and at the mall, and without him.

"But what if I did need it?" Jacada asked.

"Jay Gatsby—" Keith said.

At the same time Michelle answered, "Don't worry, Sweetie."

Keith saw she and Jacada were holding hands across the table. Jacada was petting Michelle's knuckles and staring at Keith with an angry little face. "What if there was some decree across the land that all ten-year-olds had to have ears pierced or else get executed like Anne Boleyn?" she said. "Would you let me get my ears pierced then, or would you just let me die?"

"Jay," Keith said.

“Would you let someone chop my head off and orphan my poor baby?”

Jacada’s voice was rising and Michelle held her hand, smirking, “Would you?”

“Would you let me die?” Jacada demanded.

Keith loved her, his daughter, he loved her so much. “Now,” he said, “let’s not. Let’s not fight. Let’s not do that.” He could feel the day crumbling — all his happy plans.

With the hand her mother was not holding, Jacada thumped her breakfast plate away. There was a half moon of uneaten waffle on it. “You *would* let me die,” she accused. “You wouldn’t even order me a special head-chopper from France.” Jacada’s voice continued to rise, “You’d get my head hacked off, then you’d just get another kid and when she turned ten you’d let them chop off her head too.”

Michelle did nothing. She sat in her chair with a kind of smirk on her face playing with Jacada’s fingers while Keith put plastic wrap over the bowl of waffle batter. There wasn’t going to be thirds, he could tell.

He said, “Nobody is chopping any heads off.”

Jacada shoved away from the table with enough force to tip her chair over backward. It clattered on the floor and Keith flinched.

Jacada screamed, “I didn’t say anybody was! I said what if somebody was going to *unless!*” Then there was only the echo of her stomping retreated up the stairs and the sharp clap of her slamming door.

The settling stillness was hard to breathe in. Keith thought of science class in elementary school, when the teacher would whack a tuning fork against the desktop then walk around the room, holding it to each student’s ear. The air hummed. Keith hated the feeling. His teeth felt rattled like he’d been punched, and though he had never been punched, he thought *It would feel like this* to be punched, without warning, a fist in the teeth.

He put the bowl of batter into the fridge, then righted the chair and pushed it back into its place the table. Michelle was still sitting,

still with that look on her face, shaking her head just a little, “You handled that like gangbusters. Way to go.” She pumped a fist in the air then shot her arm straight out with her index finger pointing, “Super Dad!”

Keith doesn’t decide to kill Michelle. He just does.

Later Keith is made to understand he has burned his hands quite severely. There will be permanent damage. He is surprised at the extent of injury – at that moment when Michelle’s finger was pointing toward him, and the vibrations of his daughter’s rage were clawing up the air, as he picked up the waffle iron and swung it into Michelle’s face, then ripped the plug free from the outlet, stepped forward and swung it again, then straddling he toppled body swung it a third time – he had not been aware of any physical pain.

But in the sliver of time between the waffle iron impacting and all the bones in Michelle’s face collapsing in, something strange did happen. Time stretched. It pulled itself taunt and thin, until it became enough time for Keith to think, *This is what they mean: Moment of insanity!* – because he was insane, driven to an act of terrible violence, and he was able, in that moment, to see himself standing before the judge, and the jury, and Michelle’s crying family. He saw himself shackled with his head down trying to explain, how it was like being told you’d won a prize. You’ve won! You’ve won! And then they bring you up on a stage and tell you, You’re the guy! You’re the winner! You’ve won! You’ve won!

The prize is right there, but it’s behind glass, and it’s yours, you’re there to claim it – you’re the winner, you’ve won, but you can’t touch what’s yours. Your prize, and you can’t have it. You’ve won, but they won’t let you have it.