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A Father from the Beginning by George Harrar

The school bus screeches to a halt across the street. From the window of my home office I can see the boy running full blast across the yard. It's obvious that taking a dose of Ritalin from the school nurse at lunch hasn't slowed him down.

He crashes through the front door and yells, "I'm home...Dad!"

I'm still not used to the name. Imagine that--I really am a father. He really is my son.

I had thought it would be hard for him to make the change from using our first names, so I had prepared a long speech. I said, "It doesn't make any difference that you had another father and mother until you were eleven. We're your parents now, and we want you to call us Mom and Dad." He said okay right away.

That was two weeks ago. Since then he hasn't missed a chance of working "Dad" into the conversation. Often he starts a sentence with Dad and ends with it as well...."Dad, how about we kick the soccer ball around, Dad?" Or "Let's have a dad-son night, Dad. We'll get a pizza and rent a video, okay Dad?" I know that he's just using "Dad" sometimes to get what he wants out of me, but then I realize, what's wrong with that? He's never had parents before to manipulate, as all kids do.

"Where are you?" he calls now from the hallway. There's a hint of fear in his voice that I might not be anywhere in the house. I've made sure to be home to meet him every afternoon for the year since we adopted him, but apparently that isn't reassurance enough that I won't disappear on him someday, as his first father and mother did.

"I'm here. Tonv."

I can hear the thump of his sneakers on the floor as he pries them off his feet. Then he comes running into my office and lunges at me. Instinctively I put my arms out to ward off his attack.

He stiffens in front of me. "I just wanted to say hello. What's the matter with that?" When I tilt my face to him for a kiss, he grabs me around the neck and tries to pull me to the floor. "Let's wrestle."

"Later, Tony, I still have some work to do."

"Wrestle!" he yells. "Now!" He slips his leg behind me and shoves my chest. He has just turned twelve, and he's almost big enough to take me down if I'm not careful. He pushes and pulls at me, and I just barely keep my balance weaving past the hard edges of the kitchen.

"It's dangerous in here," I tell him. "We'll wrestle later... outside."

He won't stop, no matter what I say. Each time I peel one hand off me and start to walk away, he attacks another part of me. He clings like some relentless sucking fish. He bites into my leg. He hangs onto my belt.

"Stop it!" I yell so loud that our big cat runs past us with her tail dragging the floor, hurrying for the safety of our bedroom. He still won't stop. He grabs me around the head and holds on. I have to pinch his arms to get free.

He looks at me fiercely. His manic expression has slipped away. "All I wanted was to play," he says and runs down the hallway to his room. The door rattles as he slams it behind him.

My watch says 3:13. He's been home only three minutes. Can I take the three hours until my wife comes home and helps diffuse the intensity of his need for me?

Then I wonder, as I always do after we get into these arguments. Was I too harsh? Should I have just played with him right away? But what does he learn then, that he can get whatever he wants just by demanding it?

I start down the hallway to talk to him, and he comes out of his room. "I'm not attacking you anymore," he says as he walks toward me. He put his arms lightly around my waist.

"Let's apologize," he whispers in my ear.

"You can't attack me like that, Tony I had to get you off me. You weren't listening."

"Apologize," he insists.

It would be easy to say I'm sorry, but he needs to learn that he can't have his way instantly. He needs to understand that when he does something wrong, the solution isn't for everyone to apologize. I tell him, "Tony, I didn't do anything wrong."

He hugs me harder. "Apologize for not being my father from the beginning."

The statement stuns me. Has he fantasized about this for months? Does he daydream about what his life would be like if he had grown up with parents who were always there for him when he came home? As usual in these battles, he has wounded me to the heart.

"I am sorry for that," I whisper back to him. "I wish I could have been your father from the beginning."

He pulls away, and I don't mind that he can see the tears in my eyes. He should know that my love for him can make me cry.

He punches me in the arm playfully. "Okay," he says, "let's wrestle!"

George Harrar is the author of numerous books and stories include the semi-autobiographical Parents Wanted, a novel told from an 11-year-old adopted boy's point of view. Harrar's adopted son, Anthony, is now a young adult working as a chef in Greater Boston. He also a rental agent and taking classes at a local college, but his passion is rap music. Anthony created his father's web site: georgeharrarbooks.com.