

The Report

by Judith Horth

Fear seems to exist only in our imagination – but it can be as tangible and real as a living creature. It freezes the air, stills all movement and creates a silence so loud that the thudding of your heart, the whoosh of blood in your veins and the rush of air into your nostrils must surely be audible for miles. Fear concentrates and intensifies, prickles your skin and grips you in a tight embrace. I know fear, believe me. I grew up in its presence: Mother birthed it and nurtured it. It was my constant companion, the sibling I never had.

I remember coming home from school at the end of one summer term. It was a blazing day and all the other children ran out to greet their parents, excited at the prospect of the long holiday ahead. Mother was not there to meet me and I dreaded the weeks without the sanctuary of school. I set off home, dragging my feet on the hot tarmac, the strap of my brown leather satchel carving into my shoulder and the shame of the letter dragging me down. Each step was an effort, as in one of those dreams where you are desperately trying to flee from some unknown menace but are unable to move except in extreme slow motion.

Mother would be waiting for me, poised and ready in the spick and span, neat-as-a-pin sitting room. She would be watching the clock, drumming her sharp red nails on the plastic cover of the sofa, which was always removed for guests, and would, I knew, be ready to pounce.

I fumbled with the key in the lock and the door flew open. She wrenched me over the threshold, slamming shut the door. I staggered, reaching out to the hallstand for support. “Well?” Her voice was sharp, her arms folded and the toe of one pointed shoe tapped rapidly on the parquet.

“I...” I couldn’t speak. My mouth was parched.

“Speak up, girl! Cat got your tongue?” she snapped. “Where’s your report?”

Still no words came. I took the report from my satchel.

She snatched it, sliced it open with one finger and read. The grandfather clock tutted loudly, the sun poked glaring fingers of light through the lace curtain and a bead of sweat prickled its way down my face. I dared not wipe it away.

Suddenly she erupted. “You stupid, stupid girl! Fifth in your class! Fifth?” She seized my wrist, her nails digging into my skin, dragged me to her and landed a series of stinging slaps on my face.

“No! Please, Mother!” I sobbed, but still the blows came. I twisted, and as she cast about her for something, anything, with which to beat me, she momentarily loosened her grip. I ducked under her flailing arms and raced for the stairs. If I could reach my room I could wedge the door with a chair and I would be safe. But she was too quick for me. I got only halfway before she had me in her grasp. There was a searing pain in my scalp as she grabbed my long hair, pulling me backwards. I lost my footing and the world spun crazily as I crashed to the ground, hitting elbows, knees and my head on the banisters, stairs and hallway floor.

Tears scalded my eyes and it hurt to breathe. I tried to speak but my throat was raw and the iron taste of blood was in my mouth. Before I could utter a coherent sound Mother seized my wrist and began dragging me along the parquet towards the understairs cupboard. “Get up!” she hissed, finally.

I staggered to my feet. My head was spinning.

“You do it on purpose!” she hissed, stabbing my chest with her scarlet nails as she spoke. “To make a fool of me.” I felt her warm breath on my face, and a drop of spittle landed on my cheek.

“No, Mummy!”

Another slap, this time stinging my bare leg. “Don’t call me that! I’ve told you before, it’s common! And stop that hullabaloo at once. The neighbours will hear.”

“But I didn’t...”

“Enough!” She tore open the door to the cupboard and hurled me into the darkness. I landed heavily, banging my head on something sharp as she slammed and locked the door. “I’m going out. I can’t bear to be in the same house as you, you stupid, lazy girl!”