

Wolverine's Don't by D.G. Davis *{Rated PG}*

Synopsis: *Logan has a new mission. He may never be the same.*

[Written from Logan's point of view, it is now six years since "Afflicted" and he married and has fathered other children with Dr. Susan Harris.]

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Twin fireballs of youthful exuberance fly through the door, "Daddy, we're home!" Squealing and laughing, Colleen and Collin litter the floor with jackets, shoes and backpacks, then pounce on my back. It's routine when Sue's not traveling and does the after school shuttle. So's the ear splitting efforts to out-do each other describing the wonders of their day. One thing they didn't inherit is their ol' man's piss-poor outlook on life.

Mama-bear's cabooing close behind, moving slow and easy, Danny draped over her shoulder, thumb firmly stuck in his mouth. My little guy is dead to the world asleep.

Whispering, "Hey, you two," I scold the twins. "Pipe down." With cling-ons still firmly attached, I make way to my wife. "Pony ride's over," I tell them.

They slide off, complaining "no fair" as Susie passes me a not-so-light-weight sleeping two year old.

"My hero," Susie blows a kiss, then initiates more of the usual routine; that is keeping the kids in line. "All right, my crooked angels pick up your stuff."

"Want me to wake him?" I ask, not keen on letting Danny sleep too long this time of the day. He's impossible for an hour or so, but it beats havin' him wake up at ten or eleven raring to go just as Susie 'n me wanna settle in. A toddler is the world's best birth control. They got an internal detection system that NORAD'r somethin' would pay big bucks for.

Susie's expression says she's debating: peaceful, relaxing dinner preparations sans Danny the Dynamo versus reading story after story at one a.m.?

Whose turn is it to stay up? Never friggin' mind. It's always me. Cradling him, I take up station on the couch. Now comes the process of slowly prodding him awake. First, I try to ease his thumb out of his slackened, drooling lips. He resists, whining and intensifying the suction he's got on that fat little digit.

Tough to do, but I keep my voice soft and melodic. "Danny! Daniel Jason..." He grunts and nuzzles against my flannel shirt. I jostle him, "C'mon. Wake up little man."

Behind me, gathered around the kitchen table, the twins are proudly showing off their school work to Susie. I hear her ask, "What's this, Collin?"

"It's stupid, that's what it is," Collin interjects before Colleen declares in a superior tone, "You're stupid and this is for Daddy."

"Hey you two," Susie gently scolds. "We don't call one another stupid."

Neither of them says a thing, but I'll bet they're sticking their tongues out at each other.

I twist my body to glance over the back of the couch, "Whatcha got for me, Princess?"

She struts the distance between the kitchen and the lounge, carrying what looks like a red construction paper heart. Proudly, she explains, "I made it," and presents me with her latest work of art with appropriate solemnity. She's practically wiggling all over herself and the sweet scent of childish excitement surrounds her like an angels glow. "Read it, Daddy."

Yep, lopsided red construction paper heart glued onto a lace, whatchamacallit, doily and the glue's still damp. Appropriately reverent and impressed, I flip it open. Pasted inside is a smaller pink heart, its edges cut crooked. The main message looks like it's been run off a printer, but the magic marker hearts and smiley faces are pure Colleen. I read:

***"Roses are red, violets are blue
North Salem Friends Country Day School
Invites you...
To our Annual***

Father-Daughter Valentine's Tea Dance."

Father-daughter what? I read it again, not quite believing my eyes. Yep. "Tea Dance." What the heck's a "Tea Dance"? What have I done to deserve this? C'mon, I'm a good Dad. I coach pee-wee sports; been roped into my share of chaperoning Daisy Scouts and Cub Scouts cookie and pop corn selling junkets.

A sweet, sing song voice propositions, "Will you be my date, Daddy?" Her expression is precious, open, expectant.

Date? Wait a second, little girl. You ain't dating 'til your thirty. 'Sides, I'm the Wolverine. I don't do tea and I don't dance.

Four feet of doe-eyed precociousness begs, "Please."

"Uh, well..."

At that very second, my moment of supreme trial, my baby boy yowls indignantly saving my butt and my pride. I have never been more grateful for a terrible-two tantrum in my entire short life as a parent.

Taking the cowards way out, I sling a flailing and howling Danny over my shoulder and make for the upstairs playroom, "We'll talk about it in a little while," I shout to Colleen over her brother's racket.

By the time Danny's reverts back to semi-human form, supper's almost ready. Bouncing him on my shoulders, he's laughing and yanking on my hair as we join the goings-on in the kitchen.

Serious, studious Collin is stretched out on the lounge floor, reading. Kid looks like his Ma and acts like her, too. Offering a peek into the future, my daughter looks way too grown up with her ear stuck to the phone, blathering this and that as she sets the table... "And mom says we can go out tomorrow and buy a new dress."

I hear Gabriella Marquez, Vic and Electra's kid and Colleen's best friend, squeal and then apparently ask on her end, 'Mama, Colleen's getting a dress. Can I?'

"Whazzat all about?" I quiz Sue quietly.

"Preparations for your daughters first date. Looks like you get to double with Vic and Gabby."

Danny lurches and I let him go to harass his big brother for a while. Sidling next to Sue at the stove, I whisper, "We gotta talk about this."

She stirs the gravy with an expression that could melt adamantium bones. If past history is any guide, we can talk 'til I'm blue in the face, but the Daddy-Daughter Tea Dance is a done deal. About the only way I'll get out of this is a crisis of global proportions that the X-Men are commanded to vanquish. Hell, lots can happen between now and next Saturday afternoon.

I spend the better part of this perfectly good Friday evening stewing. Dropping into bed beside my wife, I'm scrounging for any possible loophole, "Susie, what am I supposed to do at this thing?"

"Dunno, Bright Eyes. I've never been to a Daddy-Daughter dance."

"Think it's really a dance? Music, all that stuff?"

She giggles, "Oh, definitely, and probably ballroom dancing."

My voice cracks, "Ballroom da---." I almost bite. She's playing me for all she can and enjoying every minute. "Ha, ha. Even I'm not that dumb. We're talking six year olds here."

"Exactly. You let her stand on your boots and move around a little bit. Unless..."

"What?" I hate that wicked grin of hers.

She giggles, then breaks into open laughter, "How's your Hokey-Pokey and Chicken Dance?"

Enough of this B.S.! I snap off the light and turn my back on her, "I'll spike the damn tea. G'night."

She feathers her fingers in my hair, "Hey, where's your sense of humor?"

"Ain't got one." I roll onto my back, "Babe, don't ya think this kind o'thing is a little over the top? She's a little girl and she oughtta stay that way for a while longer."

"You've got a valid point, but what would you have her do? Say no and make her feel singled out and different from all friends?"

"Nah, but what message are we giving by buying her a fancy new outfit. Prom ain't supposed to be 'til she's in

high school.”

“Trust me, she’s not going to wear a strapless gown and high heels.”

“Ya got that right. She ain’t even wearing a strapless gown when she’s sixteen.”

“Whatever you say, Papa bear. I’m going to buy her a nice dress perfectly appropriate for church or something like that. She needs it anyway. Kid’s growing like a weed. And--come to think of it, you could stand a trip to the men’s shop. It’s been a long time since you’ve upgraded your jacket and dress trousers.”

“Hell, no you don’t! Black jeans and a white shirt is the best anybody’s gonna get from me.”

“Not even a new leather jacket? Cut like a sport coat perhaps?”

“Got a perfectly functional leather jacket.”

“It’s beat to heck.”

“It’s broke-in and comfortable.”

“Like I said.” She kisses me and dives under the covers, “Night, yourself.”

I stick my head under the covers, grab her around the waist and pull her to me. “Might be bribed,” I suggest.

“Oh, really?” she giggles, giving me a poke in the ribs. “The things I hafta do,” then smothers my mouth with a stimulating kiss.

Mesmerized by Saturday morning cartoons on TV, my oldest boy’s slumped the couch, his bare toes burrowed into Tawny, our snoozing Golden Retrievers thick curly coat.

Ruffling his head of brown hair, I prod, “Hey buddy, yer kinda quiet this mornin’?”

He shrugs and keeps tight-lipped. Collin’s the introspective sort, but ever since the hoo-ha began over this Daddy-daughter mess he’s clammed up more than usual and I sense a fair amount of jealousy. Sue’s the one who likes to dig in and solve things by talkin’. Me, I’m an action man. I know the kid couldn’t care less about a tea dance, but it’s no leap to understand he feels put out over all the attention on his twin sis, but I think I might have an easy fix.

I grab Danny, who mercifully has managed to stay out of trouble by erecting and demolishing building block towers for a chunk of the morning, but I know the second I turn my back to do something, the peace will come to an abrupt halt. Best I let him scribble on scratch paper while I do what I gotta do in my study. Just hope he keeps to the paper and not the floor like last time.

I log into my computer and pull up the ticket finder web-site, NHL.com. Okay, who’s playing Jersey today? Oh yeah, the Edmonton Oilers! I pick up the phone and dial. It rings a couple times before it’s picked up, “Hey, Angel.”

“Hi, Dad,” Wendy sounds tired.

“How’s it goin’? How’s my grandson?”

“Don’t ask. He’s got an ear ache and I’ve been up for the past two nights.”

“Sorry to hear it.” Hmm, Susie never mentioned anything about Cody being sick. “Did ya get Sue to check him out?”

“No, but she called in a prescription. It just takes a while, ya know?”

“Sure do.” Susie and I put in our share walkin’ the floors with wailing, sick babies when the twins were tiny. Still doin’ it some, though Danny’s been healthier.

“What do ya need, Dad?”

“Nothing.” There goes that idea for a babysitter for Danny. “Just checkin’ on ya.”

“That’s sweet. Thanks.”

“No problem. Give that little guy a hug for me and Sue.”

“I will. See ya.”

The phone clicks dead.

Danny and a hockey game? I suck in a deep breath. Well, fifty-fifty on how it turns out. He’s gonna do okay or I’ll blow a couple hundred bucks and hafta leave by half time. Looking for experienced back up, I dial the phone

once more. “Buenos manana, muchacho del agua,” I say. He hates it when I call him water boy.

“Stick it up yer butt, Wolverine,” my compatriot Vic Marquez shoots back.

“What’s the wife got ya doing today?” I ask.

“Nada.”

“Great. Listen up. All I gotta do is push a little key on my computer and I got us tickets to see the Devils play the Oilers this afternoon. Up for it?”

“Heck, yeah.”

“Word of warning, though, Sue didn’t take the baby with ‘em shopping, so I got Danny duty.”

“Thought you had a nanny or a grown daughter for that?”

“Weekdays, pal, and Wendy’s busy.”

“Ah, si. Well, we have an entire school of babysitters I’m sure would love to take your money.”

“No doubt,” I laugh. “Pick you up at noon.” Hanging up, I holler at my couch-spud, “Collin, get a move on. We’re going to a hockey game with Uncle Vic!”

There’s a thunk as bare feet hit the floor and Collin’s mop-top peers around the door. “Cool!” he beams with an awkward grin that makes me wanna laugh. It’s the tongue protruding between two missing teeth, top and front, that does it. Okay, with the promise of some quality male bonding he’s got his happy-camper back on. Am I the hero or what?

I call Susie to apprise her of the latest unchangeable plan and suggest she pick Danny up when they’re through, betting that we’ll be out later than they’ll shop. She’s okay with it, but warns, “Tell whoever’s watching him not to overload the sugar.”

“No kiddin’,” I shudder, thinking about Danny and sugar overload. Picture pint sized berserker with a massive case of runny diaper!

I’ve got a darn good reputation when it comes to planning, strategy and tactics. That being said, why the heck is it nigh impossible for me to coordinate two little boys for an afternoon’s outing?

Danny doesn’t just mark up the floor with markers. Oh no, it can’t be that simple. I have no clue how he does it, since the things stink to high heaven, but he got a hold of a thick, black permanent marker and went to town on our expensive pecan flooring. I’m this close to swatting his little posterior, but I don’t. After all, he’s only two. I’m the one that oughtta be beaten for not payin’ attention.

While I’m initiating futile damage control over Danny’s disaster, Collin’s supposedly showering. Suddenly, his voice, full of panic and woe filters down from upstairs, “Dad, I think I messed up.”

Crud! I feel a twinge in my gut.

Hauling the baby like a sack of flour, I bound up the stairs to discover today’s the day my eldest son didn’t close the shower door tight enough. The bathroom floor has taken on the appearance of a child’s wading pool. It’s hard, but I resist beating my head against the wall.

I grab a stack of towels from the linen closet and dump them on the floor. Planting Danny in his crib for safekeeping gets me an ear full of enraged shrieks. If I’m lucky, I’ve got five minutes of him rattling the bars before he climbs out.

Collin is standing inside the shower, frozen from fear and chilly draft on his naked wet body. Wrapping him in a fresh, dry towel, I lift him over the puddle. “Git dressed. I’ll cover this.”

Retrieving more towels from our bathroom I’m hearing a Sue’s familiar refrain in the back of mind: you *really* should supervise just a little bit more sometimes.

We could’ve made it to the game in the nick of time, but the final kicker was Danny turning into a cling-on just as I’m trying to settle him in with good ol’ Uncle Kurt and Aunt ‘Ro. Any other time, the kid is willing and happy to hang out with anybody around here. Not today. The little guy’s laying it on heavy and thick. Anything to make dear old Dad feel like the world’s biggest dirt-bag of a parent. Tears stream down his cheeks and the snots bubbling out of his nose, “Daa-dee! Me wahn go. Pweeese.”

He tries wiggling out of Ro’s arms yowling and hiccupping, “No, no, no Wahn my Daa-dee.”

“Get going, Logan,” Ro shouts over my boy’s ruckus. “He’ll settle down once you’ve gone.”

I know she’s right, but it don’t make it easier. “Thanks, darlin’,” I say tussling Danny’s hair.

Beating a reluctant exit, I get part way out and hear Danny sobs escalate. Ah, crap! I know what’s coming, but if I don’t keep moving it won’t be just the first quarter we miss. He gets himself into such a state that he makes himself sick. Mentally, I tick off what’s in his diaper bag. Yep, there’s a spare set of clothes. I’ll call Ro when we get to the arena.

Sure enough, we miss the first part of the game and apparently the only time my home team scores. Yeah, well, that’s predictable. Edmonton’s really not that great of a hockey team, but half a dozen beers kills the pain.

Bringing up the father-daughter thing with Vic turns out to be a great big bust. He thinks it’s a great idea and proceeds to nauseate me telling how he’s gonna get her a corsage and went in with a couple other Dads to rent a limo.

A freakin’ limousine! No sense in trying to talk sense into him, especially when it comes to Gabriella. He and Electra worship that kid and somehow she ain’t a spoiled thorn in the butt. But considering the pain and grief they went through to bring her into the world, I can’t fault him too much.

When we get back, it’s obvious Susie’s been home awhile, cooking up a storm ‘cuz the house smells like an Italian restaurant.

Oh joy, I smell a bribe! Just how much did she spend?

Collin doesn’t get three feet inside the front door before Colleen gets a good look at her twin brother sporting a brand new New Jersey Devils hockey tunic.

“Where did you get that?” she grills.

“Uncle Vic got it for me at the game.”

“What game?”

“Duh! The hockey game.”

“Oh! No fair. I want one.” She turns on me, “Daddy, why didn’t you take me?”

Over Collins loud rebuttal, Colleen doesn’t hear me reply, “‘Cuz you were doing stupid girly stuff with Mom.”

Aiming at her brother, she snakes out her tongue between missing front teeth. Then, adjusting her attitude, she bats lush eyelashes at me, “Can we go to one tomorrow?”

I swear to god, that eyelash thing in women’s gotta be genetic. “No,” I dead pan. Oh, here we go with big ol’ tears pooling in her eyes.

“Why?”

“There’s no game tomorrow.”

She looks mystified. “Oh.” Then, with tightly pursed lips, stomps her foot and states, “That’s stupid!” She recovers quick and offers, “Wanna see my new dress and shoes, Daddy?”

Not really, but before I can supply the answer she wants to hear, she’s gone, her little feet thumping up the stairs.

From Susie’s glare, I must be copping a crummy expression. “Get yourself a beer and be nice,” she proposes. “Or it’s going to be a while before Mama-bear makes nice to Papa-bear.”

So, how do ya really feel, darlin’? Half a beer later, my Princess makes a grand entrance complete with a pirouette that flares out her new dress. Geez, a year ago I didn’t know what a freakin’ pirouette was. I got educated, though, thanks to my daughters’ ballet lessons.

She’s running off at the mouth with, “Isn’t it perfect, Daddy?”

I’m speechless. Fit for a wedding ‘r something. It’s all lace and velvet--dark pink velvet! What’s it with girls and pink? I hate pink almost as much as I hate purple. Makes my eyes bleed.

Gushing like a broken water main, my little girl continues, “And see, the shoes match. Mommy says she’s got a purse I can use that goes with it too.”

I’m so freakin’ impressed.

“We ordered you a...a button thing to wear on your coat.”

“What?”

“You know a flower. It’s almost the same color as my dress.”

Oh geez, a boutonniere! Probably a pink one. Somebody pass the barf bag!

“Daddy, Gabby’s getting to go in a limerzine and Mommy said it would be okay if we went with them.”

“Zat so, Princess.” I turn so she can’t see my face and blast Susie with an evil scowl. Her reply is her patented wanna-make-something-over-it glower. I don’t suffer from high blood pressure, *per se*, but, right now, I bet I’d blow the top off one of those thingamabobs. You’re damn right I’m going to make something over it.

“This is the stupidest B.S. I’ve heard in years,” I bellow. “That ain’t no church dress. Flowers? A limousine? You’re out of your friggin’ mind if you think this is okay. She’s six years old, for crying out loud!”

Dead silence falls. Even Danny ceases making “vroom-vroom” truck noises while staging a mock Indy five hundred with Matchbox racers. Colleen busts out bawling and makes like a gazelle out of the lounge for her bedroom while my wife commits ocular murder. I might as well slit my throat right now.

Sue shuts off the stove. “Way to go Logan,” she mutters, following after Colleen.

Not about to admit I’ve screwed the pooch big time, I just growl.

Collin, pretending to read while watching the drama, goes turtle by pulling his shirt up over his head. It’s Danny who eases the tension, mimicking my growl and collapsing into a belly laugh. Who can stay pissed witnessing a two year old belly laugh?

It takes a good half hour before Susie returns, minus Colleen. Wound up and reeking with anger, she plants hands on her hips and lays into me in a voice that’s excruciatingly controlled. “You’ve done some pretty spectacular screw-ups in your day, James Andrew! This one might just top ‘em all. What the heck were you thinking?”

Ready to rumble, I return fire with, “I’m thinking that somebody needs to put a stop to this right now. And for ya to lead things on like ya are, knowing how I feel, don’t cut it.”

She’s about to spout-off and, from her scent, it’s a gut-ripper, but she pauses and sighs, “You know, I agree in principle. And maybe I’m a little guilty...”

Applying thumb screws, I answer, “A little?”

“Okay. A lot guilty. But you hafta understand, after how many boys now...I guess I get carried away. But think about it. What are our options? Tell her no? Make her feel singled out? Different? Break her heart?”

Yes, depends, and she is, are my answers to questions one through three. Break her heart? Ah crap, I don’t want to break either one’s heart. And I just did, *big* time.

“Okay. Fine. I shouldn’t have lost it,” is my best offer.

“Hon, parenting is fraught with land mines like this. If we set a precedence of inflexibility, what do you think she’ll do as she grows and becomes independent?”

“Right, I get that, but lemme ask ya something. Say tomorrow she says all her friends are wearing makeup ‘r something. Ya gonna cave?”

“Not quite the same thing, but no, I would not cave in. And no, I don’t think you get it. The goal is not iron-clad mandates. The goal is to build open lines of communication and trust. She needs to feel free to approach us with anything and everything knowing she’ll get a thoughtful and fair response from us.”

“Fair enough. But I still think six year olds going on a...a date, and that’s exactly what this is--is flat out wrong!”

“Why not turn it into an opportunity?” She wags her finger and scolds, “Don’t snort at me you grumpy old bear! It’s a golden time to make an impression on her. For her to see what it means to be treated like a young lady. It’s not necessarily the event or destination, but the quality time. Your positive male influence on her self esteem might make the difference...”

Yada, yada. Stow the lecture, doll.

“When it comes to some hormonally deranged boy from school whose singular goal is to get into her pants.”

Hello, talk about a bash on the head with a sledge hammer! I was one of those sexed-up teenagers—hell, make

that adult-- with a primary goal of...well, never mind. The first kid who even thinks about it with my little girl's gonna be wearing his intestines on the outside of his body. "Can't argue, darlin' But I gotta say this, havin' her school promote crap like this is screwed-up."

"You know, if you're that chapped, volunteer on the school board and have some influence."

She kidding? My response is plain and simple: a dirty look followed up by a snort.

"Don't give me that. Every year the board plans and votes on the next years events. Sign up for a committee and put forth another option."

"No! No way."

She's disgusted with me and it shows. "Of course. Just go upstairs and fix things with your daughter, while I rescue our supper."

Fix it with my daughter? Tide, don't come in. Magneto, give up your quest for world domination. Any one of these is more likely than me fixing up my latest foul up.

Standing just outside Colleen's bedroom door, I sense dissipating ribbons of emotion. Susie's anger towards me lingers like sour wine sandwiched between empathy and maternal nurturing. None of that warm fuzzy for me, that's for sure. What's with Colleen? I smell disappointment and sore feelings, but it ain't all that fresh. She sure ain't crying. This is good. Then I hear her. The little faker's singing!

"...Little bunny foo-foo hoppin' through the forest, scoopin' up the field mice and boppin' 'em on the head..."

'Kay, so maybe I'm off the hook. I gently tap on the door. "Princess?"

She stops dead in her ditty.

"It's Daddy. Can I come in?"

She doesn't answer except to start back into boppin' the bunny and my nose hones in on condescension. Arrogance, maybe? I'll be damned! The little lady's playin' her ol' man. Susie put her up to that? She wouldn't. Hell, yeah, she would!

"Colleen Elizabeth!" I say.

Dead silence.

"Ya got to the count of ten to answer me."

More silence.

"One...two..."

There's rustling.

"Three...four...five..."

The door handle jiggles.

"Six...seven..."

The door creaks open a tiny crack.

"Eight...nine..."

She's got a mischievous sparkle in those doe eyes of hers, "Hi, daddy."

"How come ya didn't answer me?"

"I didn't hear you."

Folding my arms across my chest, I cop a frown, "Is that the truth?"

Don't even need to smell it on her. Her face tells it all. "Nooo."

I settle cross legged on the floor among a zoo of stuffed animals and pull her into my lap. "I know you're mad 'cuz I hurt your feelings, but that's no excuse to tell a lie."

She fidgets and squirms, "I know."

Itching at her nose, she explains, "It's just that...you yelled..."

Now she's picking her nose. A universal little kid nasty habit. "Don't do that," I admonish, brushing her fingers away from her face.

She pays no heed other than to fiddle with a strand of hair. "...And...and...you called me stupid." Great big juicy tears pool in her eyes.

Did I? Craps sake, I don't remember what I said. "Whoa, honey! I'd never call you stupid."

Affirming her accusation with a vigorous head nod she blurts, "I don't...like it....and I...don't like you very much right now."

Drive a stake right into my heart! Her sayin' this and feelin' like this hurts me more than anything. Even more than the torture her grandfather's dished out in a past life.

She wiggles and complains, "Daddy, you're hugging too hard."

"Sorry," I whisper and kiss the top of her curly head. Geez, I gotta think something rotten to keep back a tear of my own.

She drives the spike deeper by pushing me away. Settling opposite, she sets up a brigade of stuffed lions, tigers and bears.

What do I do? How do I take it back? "Colleen...um...let me explain something to ya...."

Your father's a stupid low life worm and there ain't an explanation in the world that's gonna stand up.

"Yes, I yelled. And it was a bad thing."

"Mommy says yelling only makes people mad and sad."

"Your Mom's right. Now, the part where I said you were stupid. . . honey, if I said it I didn't mean it."

Fiddling with the fur on a stuffed lion, a brittle smile softens her face, "It's okay Daddy. I guess if you put some quarters in the bad-word jar and say a prayer it'll be better."

If real world problems could be such an easy fix. "How many quarters ya think, Princess?"

"I think you need to put in four."

"Four? Stupid's only one word."

"No, Daddy. You said..." She scoots across the floor, puts her soft little hand to my ear and whispers my other offenses. "Don't tell Mommy."

"Cross my heart and hope to die." I hold out my arms and I guess by the way my little Princess tackles me, all's forgiven. "Ya hungry?"

She draws out, "Uh-huh."

I hoist her onto my shoulders. "What say we devour your mom's spaghetti and meat balls?"

"And garlic bread, yay!" Kicking her heels against my chest, she yells, "Go horsey!"

Snorting, I duck under the door frame and we make like a wild Indian charge for the kitchen.

Three voices shriek in unison, "Yay, Daddy's home!"

Sweet words to my ears. Ranks right up there with 'I love you' from Susie or 'the cold beer's in the fridge.'

Ten seconds later. Collin's piggy-backed, Colleen's wrapped around my neck and Danny's glommed tightly to my leg. There's fierce competition to out shout each other recounting the day's events. Hurts my ears and some nights it's the last thing I want, but it's miracles like this that keep this ol' wandering fool tied to one hitchin' post.

Stirring up a pot of something fantastically aromatic is Nina, the kids nanny, "Hola, senior Logan!"

Greeting, "Hey, lady," I deposit the twins at the breakfast bar to continue their homework. "What's cooking?" I ask, gripping the straps on Danny's coveralls. He makes like a dive bomber, noises and all, as I propel him through the air.

"Caldo con Pollo," she answers with a laugh aimed at my game with Danny.

Mexican--well make that Costa Rican, since that's her home, chicken stew works for me and I smile my approval.

"Ready for touchdown," I tell my little man as I plop him belly first on to the couch. Don't have time to make it over to the desk to check the daily mail before he's squealing like a banshee and bouncing all over the couch.

Nina scolds in Spanish and English, "Danny, inside voice, por favor." It doesn't do much good.

"Put a cork in it, dude," I grumble. His response is to hang over the back of the sofa and blow spit bubbles.

Ah, well, at least it's quieter.

"Homework folders," I demand of the twins. It's my job by default this week with Susie on business travel. Their

teacher makes it simple with a week's worth of lessons planned out.

In a solemn tone Colleen informs, "We hafta do a search project, Daddy."

"Yeah," Collin adds with disgust. "Teacher wants us to look up a dumb ol' folk dance from some weird place."

The teacher's got radar, I swear. She just knows when Sue's going to be out of town. "Lemme see."

Rummaging through identical stacks of paper, there's the usual read-this-and-check-off-the-box nightly assignment. There's a list of words that must be neatly printed onto flash cards in three languages and also drilled every night. Finally, a page or two of numbered worksheets. This is kindergarten?

Uh-huh, here it is. I groan out loud reading the instructions: ***Assist your child in discovering a simple folk dance from one of the countries listed below. We have also included a list of folk dances and sources of information to help you and your child.***

It's a friggin' full page list!

Help your child compose a two paragraph history and description of your child's chosen dance.

'S'cuse me. We're talking little kids here just learning to write. Don't ya mean write it for 'em?

Diagrams and drawings are encouraged.

Bet they are.

For extra credit consider a recording or video demonstration.

My sweet butt!

Those students attending Saturday's Father-Daughter Tea Dance will perform of few of these dances.

Just ream my sweet butt!

Forget it. I ain't doin' this. It can wait 'til Susie gets home...nope, I can forget that. It's due Wednesday. Sue gets home Thursday night.

"Daddy why do you look mad?"

"Cuz this is the stupidest..."

"Nahh-haa! Put a quarter in the jar," both of them bleat in sarcastic glee.

Enough of this junk! I guaran-damn-tee "stupid" ain't a cuss word in Merriam Webster.

Nina comes to my rescue scolding, "Los ninos, no disrespect a su padre."

Gruffing, "Yeah, what she said," I flick a quarter into the bad-word bucket. Wow, thing's getting full! One of these kids becomes a T.P., I'm goin' to the poor house.

Their reply, "Sorry, Dad," won't win any prizes for sincerity.

Danny, bored with destroying the couch, tries crawling up my leg. "Hungwy," he whines.

"Me, too, little man. Hey Nin, how long 'til supper?"

"Right now," she replies, shutting off the gas burner on the stove. "Children, go wash your hands."

The mandate goes for me too, if only to save the bathroom mirror and walls from a potential water fight.

Right on schedule my phone emits Susie's ring-tone and the kids take turns passing it around the table while they eat. Fascinated by anything with buttons, Danny disconnects her twice before my turn comes around.

"Sounds reasonably calm around there." She sounds surprised.

"Don't jinx it, darlin'. How was the flight?"

"Long, bumpy and crowded."

"Hey, I offered to fly ya out there."

"I know; but, with the turbulence, a jet liner does a little better than your puddle-jumper."

"Whassamatta? Don't dig roller coasters?"

"Not so much. So, what's with this project the twins mentioned?"

"It's an evil, twisted plot designed to drive me stark raving crazy."

"You're not there already?"

"Har-har." I leave the twins to clear the table and take a calculated risk that Danny won't create too much havoc while I talk to Susie out of range of the twins. "Babe," I begin, keeping watch from the far end of the room. "I can build tooth pick bridges and string macaroni necklaces if ya threaten me with castration, but I ain't gotta a

clue how to approach something like this.”

She laughs.

I'm getting pissed. “Are ya done?”

“I'm sorry. Fax the directions to my phone and I'll try to help.”

“Ah, hell. I don't have a clue how to do that.”

“Good grief! You can hack into...well, never mind. You've got several great sources of first hand info.”

“Yeah? Who?”

“Umm, who did you invest a small fortune in to attend the New York School of Dance?”

“Wendy? Ya think she'll know anything about stuff like that?”

“What do you think dance theory is all about?”

“No friggin' clue.”

“Another option is to get the kids together with Gabby. And you know, with Kurt from Bavaria, Ororo being African decent...oh and who else? You might try asking around.”

“Ya think I wanna look like an idiot? I ain't askin' them.”

“Right. Have Nina drop the kids by tomorrow and let them do the asking. After all, it's their assignment.”

“Did I ever tell ya you're a genius, darlin'?”

“Can I have that in writing?”

“Anything ya want.”

Micro moments of peace come to an abrupt halt, as I suddenly shout, “Freeze!” and, sprinting the distance, scoop Danny into a fireman's carry. A second more and he'd have slammed the dishwasher shut on an extended rack and I'd be picking glass out of it 'til hell froze over. The little bugger kicks and howls in protest.

“Problem?” Susie asks.

Over Danny's tirade, I assure my wife, “Not any more. I'll call ya after the kids are asleep, okay?”

“Okay. Give 'em kisses from Mommy.”

“Promise. Bye, babe.”

Things settle into Dad's routine, which is Danny swimming in the big tub in our bathroom while the twins do their mandatory reading thing spread out on the bedroom floor where I can hear 'em. The phone rings and Colleen's on it like a bee on a flower. It's killin' her not to answer, but for a lot of reasons we've trained the kids not to. Instead, she gives over the handset. Caller ID reads a number I recognize.

“Yo.”

I hear a deep breath before, “This is Gabriella Paloma Marquez,” rushes into my ear. “May I please speak to Colleen?”

Surprised, I hand it over. “It's Gabby. Five minutes, okay.” My little girl nods obediently.

Right. We'll see.

Bicycling her feet in the air, she calls to me. “Daddy, can me and Collin go over to Gabby's after school tomorrow?”

Wow! What are the odds?

I'm thinking the helpless husband rescue network's been called to action, as in Sue calling in Electra on this project the kids have. My pride smarts imagining how the conversation must've gone down, but I get over it real fast. “Yeah, lemme talk to Gabby's Mom.”

What is it about the female of the species and getting ready to go anywhere? It's one of those questions without an answer. Kind of like trying to discover the meaning of life. Takes me a grand total of fifteen minutes, and that's takin' my time, to shower and throw on clothes. Under my wife's tutelage, my daughter is learning the fine art of power primping. The evidence hangs in the air in the form of noxious odors wafting from the upstairs bathroom. Bubble bath. Makes me itch thinkin' about it! Nail polish. The stink hurts like havin' an ice pick shoved up my nose! Hair spray. Makes me sneeze! Perfume. Break out the gas masks!

Susie emerges from Colleen's bedroom. Hanging over the railing she casts a critical eye, "Now tell me the new jacket isn't comfortable."

"It ain't comfortable," I lie, but she catches the glint in my eye. Bossy broad, she made good on her threat to update my wardrobe and ordered a custom jacket. Yeah, cut nice 'n roomy. Nappa lambs-skin is real comfortable. Now if she only hadn't sent my black jeans to the cleaners and had 'em starched and creased! Darn things almost stand up on their own.

Susie exclaims, "Fan fare of trumpets, please."

I play the game and appropriately vocalize.

Susie bows. "Presenting Her Royal Highness, Princess Colleen Elizabeth Harris-Logan."

Beaming, my little Princess emerges from her room and proceeds delicately down the steps. She's dolled up to the nines with her hair pulled back in a braid; a French braid, I'm told. The things ya learn having daughters. Looks cute on her. The nail polish is a bit much, but what do I know? I'm only her Dad. Can't help fast forwarding in my mind her ten or fifteen years from now. She's gonna be coming down these steps and it ain't gonna be me waitin' on her. It was tough letting go of Wendy and I didn't even raise her. Setting Colleen free's gonna kill me.

Time to get into the game. Meeting her halfway, I take her little arm, demonstrating the right way to be escorted.

"Daddy, in Shrek Two, Prince Charming kissed Princess Fionna's hand."

"Zat so?"

"That's so. Will you kiss my hand?"

"Only hand I kiss is yer Mom's. It's a rule, ya know?"

She frowns and the scent of bruised feelings filters through the fog of Susie's borrowed perfume. Fortunately, thanks to Susie, I've got just the thing to save the moment.

"Oh Daddy!" She handles the white orchid like it's a precious gem. Seeming oh-so-grown up, she sighs, "It's so...squizzit."

Winking thanks to Susie, I repeat, "Exquisite." Chuckling, I slip the corsage over her wrist. Hafta knot the band to keep from sliding off her tiny hand.

She reminds me, "I've got one for you too." The Princess's Lady-In-Waiting, also known as Mom, produces a clear plastic container with--just as I feared--a pink carnation.

Didn't even wear one o'these things at our wedding.

I hafta kneel, so she can clip it to the breast pocket of my jacket. She smiles demurely, kisses my cheek and pronounces, "Now you're es-squizzit, too."

'S'cuse me while I turn into a puddle of sentimental goo.

Escorting her highness to our royal coach, the Jaguar, my wife reminds me to have a wonderful time with a certain inflection attached on that word wonderful.

Susie catches my eye with a wink of her own and instructs, "Colleen, remember to have your Daddy home right after the dance."

A mile or two down the road, Colleen asks brightly, "Did you ever take mommy to a dance?"

"Nope."

"How come?"

Cuz, I wouldn't have been caught dead. "Dunno. Weren't any to go to...*she* took me one once. Does that count?"

"She did? Tell me about it."

"It was a long time ago. Before you were born. Think it was a Christmas party. Your Mom even made me wear a tie."

And I beat the tar outta a guy who thought he could smear your Mom's rep, but we ain't goin' there.

She laughs, "What color?"

“Red. It’s still hanging in my closet. Never wore it again.”

“That’s ‘cuz you don’t like ties, right?”

“Right.”

“So did you dance mushy slow dances?”

I tip her nose with my finger and laugh softly, “Yes, we danced mushy slow dances.”

“Did you take mommy on dates?”

Hoo-boy, loaded question! “Mommy and I were grown-up when we met, so we didn’t go out on dates like you’re thinking of.”

“Oh. So what did you do?”

Got cozy real quick. “Uh, stuff like going out to dinner. Doing stuff with your big brothers and sister.”

“Everyday stuff, just like now?”

“Pretty much.”

Fiddling with her corsage, she got quiet except to sing softly to herself, fogging up the glass on the car’s door with her sweet breath.

Holy Cow, it was a Valentine's nightmare!

Alternating pink and red paper covered rectangular tables no higher than two feet off the ground. The chairs, only big enough to accommodate about half a man's butt, if that, are gussied up with single mylar heart shaped balloons. And the place reeks. Thirty dads, stuffed into the combined early school classroom, all feeling as stupid as I do. Ice it with thirty perfumed, pint-sized wanna-be women exuding the sweet scent of childish excitement and I feel a migraine coming on. Except I don't get migraines.

Colleen, quick to spot her classmates, drags me over to the pack—then promptly ditches me.

This is fun. Six little girls mushing over each other’s dresses with six fathers standing around checking their watches.

Don’t know a soul except Vic and Gabby and the kids aren’t particularly keen on proper introductions, which suits me fine ‘cuz with introductions comes small talk and questions like “whacha do for a living?” More times than not, the truthful answer’s a conversation killer.

A skinny Asian-looking dude reaches out with his right hand, “Michael Chang, Emily’s dad.”

Not in a hand shakin’ mood, I manage a reasonably friendly nod. “Colleen’s dad, Logan.” Now go talk to somebody else.

He doesn’t and takes it on himself to introduce the other men who all gotta offer the hand shake thing.

If I crush somebody’s hand, think they’ll get the message? I really don’t belong here and can’t relate to anything they’re jawing over. Don’t give a hoot about last weeks’ Superbowl. Wait five minutes, the friggin’ weather’ll change. Yeah, we all agree our daughters are cute and precious, but let’s not beat the topic to death.

“So what do you do for a living?” one of ‘em has to ask.

I get some hearty laughs dead panning, “Sponge off my wife.”

“Seriously, though,” prods another.

I just grin and let ‘em think what they want.

Just then, my little girl grabs my hand and attention, “Daddy, come have some punch and cookies.”

“Sure, Princess.”

Glad to trade an inquisition for insulin shock. The punch’ll do it, too. She presents me with a paper cup, the kind with handles too small for an adults pinky to fit through and, surprise, it’s printed with little pink hearts. White lumps float in the syrupy pink liquid. Izzat ice cream? Happy, happy joy! Heart shaped cookies and, hey, I get to choose my poison. Thick pink with purple icing or red sprinkles? Can ya consider this crap a substance fit for human consumption? Adding insult to injury, there’s small bowls full of chalky tasting heart-shaped candies with messages. Wait a sec, all’s not lost. I can definitely handle M&M’s and slip a handful into my pants pocket.

“Hey, go easy,” I warn Colleen as she fills her plate with enough cookies for an army.

“I’m taking some home for Collin and Danny.”

Danny can’t have ‘em and, even if they made it home to share with Collin, there’s enough to give ‘em stomach aches for the rest of the weekend. “That’s nice, honey, but maybe not so many. Some o’that fruit looks safe.”

She curls up her nose at fruit chunks on toothpicks. Sighing, “Okay,” she puts a few cookies back, but ignores the nutritious stuff.

It’s laughable watching a fair number of these idiots actually sitting in chairs meant for small kids. With my weighted bones, there’s no way I’m going to even attempt it. Vic’s standing behind Gabby and I lean close and murmur, “Bets on who lands on their butt?”

He cracks a sly grin and motions to the right with his eyes. Two tables over, a chair bows under the strain of a mountain of a man. I mean this guy makes Blob look svelte.

“Eat your snack, Daddy,” Colleen chirps.

Bravely, I take a nibble from a sprinkled cookie. Delectable! Cardboard and sand.

Raising the cup to my lips, the punch punches my senses. Smells like medicine, the kind the kids take for ear aches. Taking the wimps way out, I fib, “I’m still full from breakfast, okay.”

At the front of the room, the teacher from the grade level above Colleen’s announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, please fill your plates and take your seats.” She gives it a couple of seconds before continuing, “As you know, your child has been studying folk dances this week.”

If I hear the Mexican Hat Dance ‘r the Hokey Pokey one more time my head’s gonna explode.

“In just a moment those of you with daughters in Teacher Rosemary’s class will perform a medley of dances for your enjoyment...”

Swear to ya, teach, it ain’t necessary.

“After that we will combine class celebrations with dancing and games in the community room.”

Yippee!

Colleen’s teacher, Rosemary, motions and all eight girls queue up like ducklings.

“My name is Emily Chang and I want to tell you about...”

My brain turns to mush. And leaks out my ears as another one takes a turn.

“My name is Colleen Logan...”

Listen up, bub. You know there’ll be pop quiz from the wife when ya get home.

She recites, “The Landler is a dance from Austria. It is like a waltz, but to do the dance you have to stomp and hop very fast...”

Think she’s lost her place ‘cuz I smell a smidgen of anxiety, but it only lasts a second and she’s back on track.

“Sometimes there is only music, but other times there is yodeling. It isn’t anything like on the Sound of Music.” She makes big, proud eyes right at me and curtsies.

Melted, I smile and wink, thinking, “Hey, ya bunch o’bozos! Clap harder, that’s my kid!”

I make it through the dance demonstration without incident. Think I deserve a medal’r somethin’.

We follow the pack to the community room. It’s decorated equally cutesy, but it’s packed to overflowing.

Senses beginning to overload and paranoia itches between my shoulder blades. Let it go, Wolverine. I check my watch for the zillionth time. Forty five minutes to go. I think I can, I think I can...

A goofy ‘sixties tune crackles over worn out speakers. I’d say the daughters dancing with dads is less than fifty-fifty. Seems like more of ‘em, girls that is, are dancing in groups with each other leaving dad’s doing the wall flower thing. Suits me fine, though outside with a soothing cigar would suit better. But I know better and know I’d better give it the ol’ college try and ask my little gal to dance once—at least.

Daydream Believer’s as good as any number. I take her hand, “May I have this dance?” I request with a slight bow.

She turns pink as her dress and replies in complete seriousness, “I can’t dance with you, Daddy.”

“What the...? Why not?”

“Because my boyfriend won’t like it.”

Boyfriend! Now wait one second. Why ain't I heard about this? "You...um...have a boyfriend?"

"Of course. His name is Ethan Williams. He sits next to me."

"He does?" What else does the punk do? Ah geez, get a grip! We're talking six year olds here.

"Yes, and he's very nice. Sometimes we share our lunches."

Better be all yer sharin'.

"He loves Mommy's mimento cheese sandwiches."

"He does, eh?" Loves pimento cheese sandwiches? Somebody needs to straighten that boy out.

"And his Mommy makes his sandwiches in neat shapes so we trade--a lot."

The music changes, sling-shooting forward to the early 'nineties. Colleen's friends beckon "C'mon Colleen, let's do the Achy Breaky," needing her to fill a spot for one o'those line dances.

How do I know this stuff? How does she know this stuff? She wasn't even born when I was smashin' heads into juke boxes over this piece o'crap.

Vic approaches and offers a cup of pink bug juice, "Not as bad as you thought, is it?"

"What? That crap you're drinkin'?" Toss in a couple liters o' one-fifty-one and maybe it won't dissolve yer stomach lining."

He laughs, "Or if it does, you won't give a rip."

I nod.

"Meant the dance," he adds.

Not about to concede anything less I sully my carefully crafted rep, I just shrug.

Something slow starts up and the gaggle of little girls disperse, some to the sidelines and some with their Dads.

"Papi, dance with me," Gabby challenges Vic.

"Miha, you dance every one! Papi's tired."

Yanking on his hand, she argues, "Are not."

"Putz!" I mutter as my best pal caves under pressure. Guess he heard, cuz his expression is so warm and cuddly. Not.

Colleen yawns and starts picking at the ribbon on her corsage, but I don't sense she's really tired. She hops on one foot and then another. Next she's hanging off my arm. "Daddy, I'm bored. Can we go home?"

Did I hear right? Bored? Go home? I must be livin' right for a change. "Anything you want, honey. Are ya sure?"

There's still twenty minutes left and I know if we show up home early, I'm gonna hear it. From out of nowhere, I'm struck with a notion. "Wanna do something else?"

"I guess so. What?"

"Well, if I had to take a pretty lady, like yourself, on a date..."

"You can't do that, Daddy. That would be cheating on Mommy."

"Well, for pretend. Then Mommy'll understand."

"Oh! Okay. What do we do?"

"First we scam out of here. Daddy really doesn't like to dance."

"Yeah, Mommy told me that."

I'm gonna have a heart attack and die from that surprise. "And then we go over to Gran'pa Charlie's school and whack a bunch of hockey pucks around. Maybe get Uncle Pete and Aunt Kitty to play."

The look on her face says she's not convinced and her scent says I missed the mark—by a very long shot. "Hoo-kay. No hockey pucks." I am never going to live this one down. "I've been promising to..." This really sticks in my throat. "...go figure skating with ya since ya started lessons."

If how she's jumping up and down and clapping her hands is any clue, I just scored a goal. And anybody who gives me one word of grief over figure skating with my kid is gonna get their teeth rearranged with a hockey puck!

The End

D.G. Davis enjoys feedback, so please send any comments to: fiction.zone@yahoo.com and they'll be passed on.