

Experiments

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My father, appliance repairman Ed Hart, had been dating a reporter from the local news for over three months, ever since he and my mother separated. They met when Channel Four's "Eye on You" News interviewed me at the Northern Virginia Sixth Grade Science Fair about my winning project, The Worm Farm--a kitchen composter made from a recycling bin filled with dirt, biodegradable household trash, and a hundred worms. She said she liked the way Dad sat off to the side of me holding his toolbox ("Just in case Old Bessie throws a rod--or a worm, as the case may be.") It showed, she'd said later, after the cameras were off, her hand on my shoulder, that he didn't mind letting someone else be in the spotlight. "You seem so comfortable with yourself. Most guys don't like being behind the scenes," she'd said. "What's your secret?" And then she gave him her phone number.

But now it was April and there was no time to lose. I wanted my dad to propose before summer, before too much time passed.

"Dad?" I was lying on the floor watching TV at his apartment in the new Willow Landing housing development, where I was visiting for the weekend. Over on the couch, he looked up from his sewing; he was mending a tablecloth my mother had let him take after that day in February when she told him he was too selfish to live with other people. She said he was an immature boy who got married before he knew his ass from a hole in the ground and that he'd probably be happy to have one empty affair after another for the rest of his life. "Do you like Darla?" I said. "I mean a whole lot?"

"Yes, I like her," he said, looking at me over the granny glasses he wore for close-up work. I smiled. See? I imagined saying to my mother.

Just then, what I had been hoping for happened: she appeared on the TV, in an ad for the news. Darla Starling. She was interviewing some housewives who were picketing the Mountainside Gentlemen's Club that was between Smoky Ordinary and Haymarket. She stood in an empty gravel parking lot beside a hunched white building with no windows, the sun sparkling off the buttons on her suit. The woman next to her carried a sign that read *Gentlemen? Ha!* and when Darla asked her about it, the woman said, "They should change the name to something more accurate. Like The Mountainside Simpletons or The Mountainside Booby-Peekers." Then the woman craned her pretty mermaid face into the camera and said, "Do you hear that, Todd?"

Dad clicked his tongue and shook his head. "You're in it up to your neck, Todd," he said to the TV.

The camera focused on Darla. "Will this establishment rise to the challenge?" she said. "We'll have the story at eleven."

I watched Dad's face for some sign; he didn't get that look, like he'd forgotten to turn off the iron, the way people in love did on TV. I ran into the kitchen for one of the juice boxes I'd brought. I was getting sweaty under the arms. What if he wouldn't get engaged? Then, how would my mother ever see that he wasn't selfish and give him a second chance? I straightened up. No. There was no other way. I would concentrate on tonight. My best friend, Zack Miller, had told me once that old people got gushy and romantic at bowling alleys because they made them think about Doris Day and certain dead presidents, and because games with turn-taking always led to people sitting on each others' laps. So, tonight, I had made Dad promise to take

Darla and me to the Bowl America. Tonight. Tonight. I took a deep breath.

Right then, I noticed that some woman, someone named "Lisa" had left her number on a sticky note on the kitchen table. The handwriting was wild and looped and there was a lopsided heart around the number. I crumpled it up and stuffed it deep into the trash can.

"What are you doing?" Dad called.

"Nothing," I said, hurrying back into the living room. I busied myself inspecting his one sickly houseplant for fungi and growths. Maybe Lisa was a customer from McCarty's Outdoor Power Equipment and Repair, where dad was the manager; or maybe she was a lonely little old lady who wore a fuzzy pink hat and made friends with everyone. Either way, Dad could do without her.

I eyed the clock. "Where's Darla?" I said. "Do you think she's coming?"

"She probably got caught in traffic." He glanced at the clock. "Or maybe—" He yawned and crinkled his nose. "—Maybe she got so worked up about coming to see me, she had to pull off the road and collect herself." He winked at me as if he was joking, but I hoped maybe he was pining. Sometimes Darla didn't call him at the times she said she would, and once, she forgot about a dinner date at The Black-Eyed Pea. Dad had let me order my favorite cheesy rice anyway and he laughed about the shoe being on the other foot, waving his feet in the air so much as he did that the waitress came over and asked if he was trying to get her attention.