



Donuts with Dad
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Published: 2009

Tag(s): popularity "elementary school" love daughters kindergarten gladiators fighting teachers

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To Maura.

Donuts with Dad

I think I was more excited about November seventeenth than Jae. I had it on my calendar a full month in advance and I never put anything on my calendar a month in advance... unless my job depended on it. Even then, I question the person who has to plan for anything that far in the future. I guess I was even a bit surprised that the school had sent out the invitations that early. On a light green paper it read, *Donuts with Dad*. The rest of the message was irrelevant. This was a fatherhood milestone. It was my first opportunity to escort my little girl to class and see how she *really* behaved with her classmates and teacher. Anna and I had always imagined Jae acting as she did at home while she was at school, which made us instantly embarrassed. Every parent-teacher conference seemed to commence with our sincerest apologies until the teacher reassured us that Jae was a perfect angel who simply chose when she was done paying attention. And when that moment came, she didn't act out. No. Instead, she simply stopped doing what she was asked and sat there, singing to herself or staring at the other children. We were always told that her schoolwork never suffered and, in fact, she was progressing slightly ahead of the others. Anna and I always left happy. But as soon as we were home and Jae was misbehaving, our fears resurfaced.

Anna and I would remind each other that Jae was only five and her behavior was no worse than any other five year-old. But she was our first child, and with that honor came a level of social ineptitude. She had no one to teach her how to act around the other children. To make matters worse, she had inherited her father's physique. She was built like a linebacker. Other parents in the neighborhood were constantly mistaking her for a seven year-old and treated her as if she were retarded. First impressions from other children were mixed. Some thought she was just being funny while others were cruel, completely ignoring her or outright telling her she couldn't play with them.

She cried a lot the summer of her fifth birthday. She was definitely old enough to understand that the other children were being mean. But what do you do? I could tell the other parents how their children were behaving. But parents whose children act like assholes are generally assholes. And I'd outgrown giving the neighborhood bullies a public beating. So, it quickly became the summer of consoling my daughter by being the father that played outside with all the neighborhood kids, the "fun" dad. After being beamed with a dodge ball, whiffle ball and soccer ball, the cruel kids quickly learned Jae's dad didn't jerk around. Make his daughter cry and sooner or later you'd have a ball sized bruise in the name of

neighborhood sport. And the other parents said nothing. It was simply “part of the game.”

The week leading up to the seventeenth was spent counting down the days until “Daddy comes to school.” Jae and I would talk about it every night after her bedtime story.

“Four more days until Daddy comes to school, Jae.”

She would smile, “Will we have donuts and juice?”

“I hope so.”

She giggled.

The next morning she would inform Anna of the details of our conversation.

“Daddy said we are going to have donuts and juice in four days... four days, mama!”

“Really, is that what your father said?” Anna liked to tease Jae by making her question anything I may have told her.

On our way to school, Jae would ask, “Mama didn’t know you told me that we will have donuts and juice in four days. We will, won’t we, daddy? Maybe I should ask Mrs. Faire.”

“Maybe you should.” I could play Anna’s game and confuse the poor child.

Three days passed. Jae and I replayed the conversation every night. And every morning Anna and I messed with her head. Every afternoon, the thought of Jae asking her teacher for verification of the *Donuts with Dad* menu made me laugh. I could almost see Mrs. Faire smiling and answering the question, all the while cursing Anna and me under her breath. It was funny... and worth every second of embarrassment I would suffer when I visited Jae’s class.

The night of the sixteenth brought a different question.

“Daddy, are you coming to school tomorrow?” Jae looked a little worried.

“Of course I am. Why would you think I wasn’t coming?”

“Cal’s daddy isn’t coming.”

I was thinking, *yeah, so*. But I said, “Really, why not?”

“I think he’s allergic to donuts.”

“I doubt that. Maybe he’s just scared of kindergarteners. Or, more likely, he’s scared of... the room mothers,” I said in my scariest voice.

Jae giggled, "He's not scared of the room mothers."

"I'm scared of the room mothers," I said.

Jae laughed.

"Now, go to bed so we can wake up and get some donuts!" I made a funny face and blew her kisses as I closed her door.

* * *

Jae was awake and dressed before my alarm went off. She stood at the side of my bed, leaning over me.

"Daddy," she whispered. "We're having donuts at school today."

"I know," I whispered back. "I'm sleeping."

"I know," Jae whispered and left the room.

It was only a few minutes until the alarm went off and I was out of bed being herded by my five year-old into the bathroom.

"Jae, let your father get ready," Anna scolded. "It doesn't even start until eight o'clock."

Jae pouted for a minute and shuffled out of our bedroom. She sat on the stairs and waited... impatiently.

It took me fifteen minutes before I emerged from our room. "Who's ready?"

Jae jumped off the stairs, "I am!"

She skipped through the kitchen and into the garage, forgetting her backpack and coat. I grabbed her stuff and walked out to the car. Her seatbelt was buckled and she sat there with a huge grin on her face. I laughed as I jumped into the car and asked again.

"Who's ready?"

"I am!"

Honestly, I was almost as excited as Jae. I looked at the clock on the radio. We were really early. I took the long route through the new subdivision and past the townhomes that were still under construction. Jae liked this because the road curved through the collection of cul-de-sacs and had two big hills that were as good as any roller coaster for a five year-old. As we topped the second hill, I saw two boys getting ready to cross the street. I recognized them as the sons of our neighbor, Phil, who had the nasty habit of using my backyard as his own private short cut to Steven Long's house. The younger of his sons was in Jae's class but I'd never taken the time to learn his name. The older son was Gary. I only

remembered his name from hearing his father scream it throughout the neighborhood when he knew Gary was hanging out with his friends at the park, smoking or doing whatever curious teenagers do. Then I saw his father, Phil, ten yards behind, screaming for them to stay on the sidewalk. He scowled as we passed, and I slammed on the brakes to keep from hitting Gary. I'm sure the boy felt the heat from my radiator as he stepped back onto the sidewalk. My first instinct was to look back at Jae as the car screeched to a halt. I rolled down my window.

"Are you okay?"

I could hear his father coming down the block, "What the hell, James? You nearly took Gary's leg off."

"Sorry, Phil, but jaywalking is a crime. Haven't you taught these boys to respect the law?" I could play Phil's game, too.

"Speeding's a crime. Vehicular manslaughter's a crime. When are you going to learn to respect the law?"

"Thanks, Phil. I'll be sure to slow down. Gary, are you okay?"

Gary wanted to be a wise-ass, but his father's presence forced his answer to a sheepish, "yes, sir."

I smiled and waved as we pulled away, mouthing one last "sorry" to Gary. He looked at me sideways and then at the ground as his father began to yell at him when he really wanted to yell at me.

Ours was the first car in the school parking lot. I looked at Jae, "What do you want to do? We're kind of early to go to class."

"Can we swing?"

"Of course." I said, as if she'd asked the dumbest question ever.

Jae was out of the car and skipping toward the playground before I could even get my seatbelt unfastened. She jumped on the nearest swing and yelled for me to push her.

"What do you do during recess, do the other kids push you?"

"Uh... no." She answered, as if I'd asked the dumbest question ever. "I push myself."

I smiled. "I didn't know you were fast enough to push and swing at the same time." I stood behind the swing next to her and pretended to push the swing and then jump on.

"Dad! I push with my legs." Again, her tone made me out to be the dumbest person on the playground.

More cars pulled into the school's circle drive as I pushed Jae. I watched as some of the children jumped out of the cars, waved at their parents and begrudgingly walked into school. I wasn't looking forward to the day Jae became one of those kids. The ones that thought they were grown-up, knew everything... pre-teen.

I stopped the swing as soon as I saw three or four dads walking their kids into the school. "Jae, are those kids in your class? Let's go in."

Jae jumped out of the swing and skipped as we made our way into school. She grinned the whole way, hoping to stop one of her classmates just long enough to say, "This is my dad."

I held her hand all the way to her classroom and only let go to kneel down and ask, "What do we do now?"

"You stand out here," Phil's voice seemingly came out of my little girl.

In the time it took Jae and I to swing and skip into the building, Phil and the boys had made it to school.

"Wow, Phil, you didn't yell at the boys nearly as long as thought you would." I smiled. "Seriously, is Gary okay? I'm really sorry about almost running him over." I was lying, and Phil knew it.

Jae let go of my hand and lined up with Phil's youngest. It finally dawned on me that Mrs. Faire had the children line up so she could greet them one-by-one to start their day. She'd explained this at Back to School Night... I think. As I remembered it, she did this to see if there were any issues she could diffuse before they became class distractions. For a woman whose sunny, kindergarten-teacher disposition made you feel as if she may not be one hundred percent stable, Mrs. Faire was pretty smart. I wished I could line up all my colleagues every day in the hope of diffusing any issues before they became work distractions.

The children filed in, one-by-one. "Good morning, Mrs. Faire."

"And how are you this morning, Michael?" She said with a smile.

That was Phil's son's name, Michael. Damn, he even looked like a Michael, very common, almost forgettable.

Jae stepped into the classroom and greeted Mrs. Faire.

"Good morning, Jae. And how are you this morning?"

When she got excited, Jae would stop talking and point. She quickly turned, holding Mrs. Faire's hand, and pointed at me.

"Tell me, Jae, don't just point."

"My dad's here," she said proudly.

Mrs. Faire smiled and answered as if she were acknowledging an imaginary friend, "Yes, he is."

All the children filed into the classroom and found their seats. One of the room mothers reached for the open door and, without so much as a glance at the group of fathers standing in the hallway, closed the door. Phil looked around at the other fathers hoping to find someone else to talk to. He quickly spotted Eric. Eric was the Pee-Wee League football coach. He was everything a football coach should be, one of those gruff and not-so-lovable types. He believed kindergarten boys should be having two-a-day practices. He had the completely unrealistic expectation that every child had a chance at becoming a professional athlete. I think he came from Texas. He was the type of asshole that made me happy Jae was a girl. But the neighborhood fathers looked up to him, much like they look up to the guy that has the greenest lawn or the president of the homeowner's association. It was a joke. I always suspected Eric would be the one we would see on the news for molesting the neighborhood boys.

"Yo, Eric, how's the team look this year?" Phil shouted across the hall.

"Hey, Phil. They're still figuring out how to run the ball the right direction," the other fathers chuckled.

In a much more subdued voice, bordering on a whisper, Phil asked, "So, you ready for today?"

Phil and Eric looked around the group of fathers, "Yeah, these jokers don't have what it takes," Eric said confidently.

I was confused. How hard is it to eat donuts and drink juice with your kids? Really, what does it take? I dismissed the comment. I figured Phil and Eric were just speaking in some sort of suburban swingers code. And that thought alone disgusted and amused me just enough to pass the few minutes until the room mother came back to the door.

"You can come in now."

The dads filed in one-by-one. Mrs. Faire was standing by the door, "Kids, come over and get your fathers. Please, show them back to your seat quickly."

Jae ran over and gave me a big hug as if she hadn't seen me for a week. She grabbed my hand, nearly pulling my arm out of the socket and we headed back to her table. On our way she stopped me and pointed to a long table in the middle of the room.

"Daddy, look. They have donut holes."

“Well, those aren’t really donuts are they? This should have been called *Donut Holes with Dad*.”

Jae smiled and showed me to her seat. I sat down next to her table.

“Your dad’s in the safe spot!” Michael squealed.

Jae rolled her eyes. “He’s not in trouble.”

Unknowingly, I had sat down in the one spot in the classroom all the children feared. It was a small circular carpet that had a sheriff’s badge emblazoned across it. I quickly realized my mistake and smiled at Michael.

“No, Jae, Michael’s right. Mrs. Faire sent me to the safe spot.” The other children at the table laughed.

Phil and Jae rolled their eyes at the same time. “Daddy, that’s not funny,” Jae scolded.

“Okay, let’s get some donuts... or... donut holes.”

Jae agreed.

As we stood in line, I could sense some of the other dads sizing me up. I was no stranger to being judged. Although I’d grown up in suburban Kansas City, I never thought of myself as being the typical suburbanite. I rarely made conversation with the other dads for one reason. I didn’t really like sports, weather or lawn care small talk. Sure, I’d played football and baseball through junior high. But in high school, I found music, chasing girls and beer to be much more exciting. The weather wasn’t really worth talking about. The heat, snow or rain was out of my control. So, why stand around and try to build a conversation around it. And, honestly, someone other than me mowed my lawn once a week. I didn’t know fescue from bluegrass. And that was how it was going to stay. Granted, these were not *always* the subjects that suburban fathers discussed. Sometimes they talked about home and car repair, or the occasional discussion about how well endowed various neighbor’s wives were. To me, it was all very creepy. And, no doubt, left me open to be a topic of neighborhood discussion. I had my ideas about what people thought of me. But when it came right down to it, I didn’t care.

Jae stood beside me in line talking to Cal. Cal seemed very proud that he had brought his grandfather in lieu of his father. He was not shy about telling me how his parents were divorced and his dad was far too busy to come today. His grandfather turned around, gave me a quiet smile-and-nod and subtly asked Cal to stop talking about his father. Cal was having none of it.

“Grandpa, it’s just Jae and her dad.” It was as if we were his oldest family friends.

“It’s okay, Cal. Go ahead and pick out your donuts,” I said. “You don’t want ‘em to get cold.” Cal and Jae laughed and grabbed four donut holes and two small cups of apple juice each.

We were shuttled away from the line by another of the room mothers. She stood silent and moved the dads and children as if she were a traffic cop. All she needed was a whistle and that ridiculous safety-orange vest and the vision would have been complete. I sat back down in the safe spot next to Jae’s table. She situated our plate, napkin and cups before asking, “Daddy, which donuts do you want?”

“Why don’t you choose first? After all, this is your party.”

She smiled and quickly moved the two chocolate donut holes to her side of the plate. It was no surprise. I smiled thinking about how Jae must have felt. I’m sure there was a small sense of pride in tricking her dad into giving up all the chocolate donuts. I put my hand on her back and gave her a small pat for being so clever. She looked at me and gave me a huge, chocolate donut-filled smile.

Before we could finish eating, Mrs. Faire was standing at the front of the room clapping to get everyone’s attention. Her face had gone from pleasant-kindergarten-teacher to determined-disciplinarian. I noticed the whistle bouncing on her chest as she smacked her hands together hoping everyone would listen.

Her announcement was simple, “Dads, it’s time for you to join me out on the playground.”

I looked at Cal’s grandfather and shrugged. He shook his head and rolled his eyes. I took a quick glance around the room to see if I could get a sense of what was going on. Most of the fathers had a confused look that was no doubt on my face as well. Eric smiled and nodded at Phil, and Phil winked back. Their smiles made my stomach drop. They knew what was going on. My mind raced through the possibilities. I landed on the least likely but most amusing scenario. This was undoubtedly some sort of fraternity-like circle jerk or something. What else could get Eric and Phil so excited?

The dads lined up and followed Mrs. Faire out of the classroom. As we left, we waved goodbye to our children. Jae gave me a big smile and waved as I walked out into the hallway. I could hear two of the fathers pondering our fate.

"They're taking us to the trains," I said jokingly. A couple of fathers turned around and scowled letting me know my reference was extremely inappropriate. I laughed, "C'mon, I didn't say gas chambers. See, now *that* isn't funny."

Mrs. Faire led us out to the playground. "Dads, please, everyone step into the square."

Painted on the playground was a large white square. It was just big enough for roughly fourteen adult men. Most of us were still a bit confused. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Eric move to the center of the square. Phil was close behind. I decided these two were the only two that knew what was about to happen and I was not going to let them outwit me. I pushed past Cal's grandfather and made my way next to Phil. He tried to ignore me.

"So, what's up, Phil? I know you know what's about to happen."

"Listen to the rules, jackass." Phil whispered. He wasn't pulling punches.

I feigned insult and smiled. "Now I *know* this is going to be fun."

Eric peeked around Phil, and looked me over. He let out a confident laugh.

Now I was annoyed. "Eric, seriously, I'm not your type. Trust me, you wouldn't be able to keep up."

Mrs. Faire's voice ripped through the confused conversations as the last few dads stepped into the square wondering to one another what the hell was going on.

"Fathers, today's party has two purposes for your children. The first is for you to see your children in their school environment and garner an appreciation for that environment."

A few of the dads laughed uncomfortably.

"That environment will change over the course of your child's time here at Nall Hills," Mrs. Faire continued. "Some of your children will go on to play sports while others play in the school band, some will be honor students while others will be held back, and some will be popular while others will be outcasts." She cleared her throat. "And who do you think controls what happens to your children in this environment?"

I had plenty of answers run through my head, but I knew this was a rhetorical question. I bit my tongue for Jae's sake.

"The teachers at this school, that's who."

I wanted to laugh.

"I'm sure some of you think that's funny." To my disbelief, Mrs. Faire was dead serious. "If you think about it for a few seconds, it may lose its humor."

For me, it was going to take a lot more than a few seconds. But as I scanned the crowd, many of the dads were nodding their heads.

"The second reason you are here today is to entertain the faculty. We started Donuts with Dad to, quite literally, see which fathers would fight for their children's social standing throughout elementary school. And to be honest, it has been a rousing success."

I remember an uncomfortable smile finally crossing my face as the thought of what was about to happen sunk in, Eric and Phil's comment, Mrs. Faire's whistle and the silent treatment from the room mothers. The faculty of my daughter's elementary school was about to watch us fight gladiator-style for our children's popularity. My stomach sank.

"The rules are simple."

Wait, I thought.

"Once you are out of the square..."

Wait!

"...you're out."

WAIT!

"And the order you are out, is the order of our little society."

The whistle blew and I immediately felt Phil's fist crashing across my face. I fell backwards, pushing four men out of the square. I heard the whistle blowing as dad after dad was being pushed out of the square. The numbers quickly fell to six as Eric easily pushed three of the older fathers out and Phil landed a lucky punch on one of the dads. I rubbed my cheek as it started to swell. I could see Phil making his move toward me. I moved to one knee and continued to rub my cheek and shake my head. He came closer. I saw him step forward and pull his leg back hoping to kick me over the line. I was not going to be beaten by Phil. He'd underestimated my reach, and my fist landed squarely in his groin. He doubled over. And with a small nudge, he laid on his side outside the square. The whistle blew.

Eric was having little trouble with the other three who had teamed up and piled on him hoping to drag him out of the square. I stood and watched for a moment, catching my breath and remembering exactly

how popular Eric's children were. This fight was nothing new to Eric. It was a game he knew how to win. He bit down hard on one father's arm, flipped another off his back and swung around to face the third, who was more than ready to run out of the square on his own instead of facing Eric alone. It was a blur of punches, kicks and whistle blows as the number was decreased to two. The whole match had lasted less than ten minutes, leaving Eric and I alone in the square.

Eric was breathing heavy. I could almost see the adrenaline pumping through his body. I remember thinking second place wouldn't be so bad. He circled. I remembered the old wives tale that if you hit a shark on the snout it wouldn't attack. As I wondered if this would work, Eric's fist slammed into my stomach dropping me to my knees. Before I could catch my breath, his knee pounded the left side of my face. I could hear my cheekbone crumble and crack. I could see my blood splatter across the blacktop.

I looked at the blood as it ran out of the square staining the painted, white line. I thought about Jae sitting in her classroom, playing and laughing with her friends. I thought about how I'd made her. Her size would make it nearly impossible to be a cheerleader. She didn't have the coordination to play sports. And her awkward manner was not the necessary charisma of a school leader. I thought about what I'd given her. She was smart, not book-smart... more smart-ass. She was funny. But in school, funny only goes so far... and it definitely doesn't make you popular. All of these traits were mine. I'd made her.

My anger rose as I felt Eric moving in. Jae was going to be someone. I was going to give her that. Eric stepped closer. My daughter was not going to suffer my fate. She would be more than the class clown. Eric was standing over me. He pulled me up by my collar. He shook me and reached back for one final shot. One of my feet strained to touch the ground. It wasn't enough leverage. I felt Eric's fist shatter my nose and drop me just enough to gain my footing. Tears filled my eyes and pain pulsed through my entire body. I pulled my shirt from his grip and took a step back. In my head I could hear Jae laughing. I shifted my weight and lunged.

The whistle blew.

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