

SHEILA DEANE

Ascendancy

It's my duty day at my daughter's preschool
And I'm in the creative room vacuuming;
Stray bits of playdough, collage, cookie crumbs, sand
(Please *do not* vacuum up large amounts of sand)
Are not being sucked up very well and I begin to
think
That maybe I should change the bag when I hear
chanting
From the next room "No girls allowed, No girls
allowed"
And my own daughter weeping, so I strike off the
vacuum,
Run into the room feeling that I'm intruding where
the teacher
Should be, but, damn it, she's moving too slow, not
moving at all
And it's my daughter weeping, who I take by the
hand and pull
To my lap, "What is it?" (I know, I know), "No girls
allowed,"
And over her sobbing face I am glaring at the three
confident boys
On the climber who know they will win this one
And any one they please because you just can't climb
On a climber if there's a gang ready to push you off
And you have no answer to their taunts, being raised
In kindness and encouragement, no answer to "No
girls."

Why *no*? Why *no girls*? It doesn't make sense to her—
She is lost in her grief and its mystery;
I say soothing, hopeless things:
"They don't know that girls can be fun, they just
don't know"
(They know what kind of fun they want), I feel the
teacher's
Eyes on me, she's smiling, happy that I'm going to
sort it out
In a good-girl, good duty-mom way. I say: "You want
to play
With them, honey, and that's too bad, but choose
something else.
There's Thida, play with her now, sweetheart,
She likes to play with you," and it's over.
Her tears are dried (the wet glaze of her hurt stays in

her eyes)
And she runs off to push a baby buggy with the
others, round
And round the menacing climber they go, like a
crowd of tired
Friday night shoppers, stiff and desperate, under the
ladders
Of the boy's boisterous play. The teacher nods, and I
turn away

Furious. Hypocrite, coward, good-girl, polite
Shit that I am to my own love's cause,
When I should have simply thrown the climber down
in a heap,
Bar by bar, until it was just so much glossy rubble
against
The bright shag carpet of the activity room. I know
It would be right, it would be the right message, the
heart-sized
Message she should have from me, that I am strong
enough,
And love her enough to undo the "No girls allowed"
in her life,
That there will be no more "No girls allowed" in her
time,
No fortress she and I can't storm, no world we can't
open
Enter and possess. Daughter, I go with you in this—
Against harassment, injustice, tyranny, amidst
whatever
Toys we find it, no matter what the age of those who
shout it;
Daughter you fight for me and I for you in this.
And we cannot refuse to fight.

But I don't really make a scene. I even go back to my
Vacuuming. The image of my dewy-eyed daughter
clear
In my mind as she shuffles around the room tensely
cradling
A filthy, floppy doll. I don't cry out, break things,
weep;
I only wonder under what rumbling mountain I
myself
Learned how to crouch and cling this way.

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