

# True confessions? Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*

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## 1.

Ted Hughes had remained largely silent about his relationship with Sylvia Plath, whom he married in 1956, his separation from her and her subsequent suicide in 1963. In contrast, Plath's version of the disintegration of her marriage and her mind had been revealed both in her poems (especially the *Ariel* collection, which appeared posthumously) and in her correspondence, later published by her mother as *Letters Home*. Plath had come under the influence of the 'confessional' poets of the 1950s, such as Robert Lowell – author of the self-exposing *Life Studies* - whose seminar she had attended at Boston University in 1959. She sought a modulation in her own verse from an evasive artificiality to direct statement, from aesthetic finesse to truth.

In contrast, Hughes' poetry remained notably impersonal. In more than forty books of verse, he focused on the external world of nature and its creatures, from early collections such as *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), through *Crow* (1970) to *River* (1983). In some poems, it seems as though the animals, in the process of the poet's identification with them, represent aspects of his personality:

Why do I find  
this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret  
interior and make it my own?

(‘Wodwo’)<sup>1</sup>

But the allusions, if they do exist, are at best indirect.

Then, in 1995, Hughes published half a dozen poems he had written for Assia Wevill, with whom he had begun an affair in 1962, while married to Plath. Later, the couple had a daughter, Shura. Wevill committed suicide in 1969, gassing herself like Plath, having given Shura a fatal overdose of sleeping tablets. Hughes was more deeply affected by their deaths than by Plath's. Hers was 'inevitable', he observed in an interview:

she had been on that track most of her life. But Assia's was avoidable. Her death was utterly within her power, and it was an outcome of her reaction to Sylvia's action.<sup>2</sup>

Hughes' poems about Wevill were deliberately hidden among the 240 in *New Selected Poems*, the poet being 'relieved' that such 'painful' works would be 'unnoticed by his readers'.<sup>3</sup> They lurk at the end, 'uncollected', undated, following without division from a sequence on Plath. Only the reader informed about small details of biography (for example, that Wevill sent her *au pair* out of the house before killing herself and her daughter), would notice that a poem such as 'The Error' is about Assia and not Sylvia.

Three years later, in 1998, just before his death, Hughes published *Birthday Letters*, which he had begun writing after Plath's suicide. The volume took him twenty-five years to complete and it has won several prestigious awards, including the T.S. Eliot Prize. Only one poem, 'Dreamers', describes Wevill, and then in the context of Plath's fascination with her 'many-bloodied beauty'. Here was the Jew Plath had imagined herself to be in poems like 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy'. 'Warily you cultivated her, / Her Jewishness', writes Hughes. Soon, Assia and Hughes began to cultivate each other:

The dreamer in her  
Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it.  
That moment the dreamer in me  
Fell in love with her, and I knew it.<sup>4</sup>

Otherwise, *Birthday Letters* is concerned with probing Hughes' much better-known relationship with Plath in poems of first-person address to the speaker's dead wife. Although Hughes was apprehensive about publishing the volume, 'I'm not sure that it isn't just too raw',<sup>5</sup> he wrote to a friend, the effect of writing the poems (he commented in 1996, at the end of the project)

was so great, I was sorry I hadn't done it before.  
Writing released a bizarre dream life, and I realised  
how much had been locked up inside me.<sup>6</sup>

Hughes' laying-bare of private lives, in the form of these apparently personal verse-letters to Plath, presents a public statement. The story of their marriage, at least from Plath's point of view, was already very familiar. *Birthday Letters* is, in one sense, an attempt to adjust the public record in the wake of her confessions and the mass of commentary which has grown up around them. 'From the time Sylvia became a cultural heroine, and was taken over by the feminists', Hughes had observed,

I have been portrayed as the villain of the piece  
and nothing will help in the slightest. So I have  
preferred to remain silent and not to give my  
version, avoiding adding fuel to the blaze.<sup>7</sup>

*Birthday Letters* breaks that silence, but to see the poems as 'the other side of the story' or, worse, 'the last word' on the matter is too simple. At their best, they provide a carefully delineated reading of aspects of Plath's and Hughes' relationship, set in wider contexts of human experience. To read them for the further light they shed on the troubled couple's misery or to apportion blame is ultimately less important than to discover the ways in which they are true to life at large. How effectively

does Hughes adapt language to experience in these poems, to bring people (as he put it) 'alive in words'?<sup>8</sup>

2

The common focus of most of the poems in *Birthday Letters* should not obscure Hughes' variegated approach to his subject and the range of style. The long verse-paragraph of the epistolary mode and the blank-verse utterance of direct speech dominate, but are varied by excursions into stanzaic forms, in quatrains and tercets. While it is an anatomy of dysfunctional matrimony, the collection also embraces nostalgic reminiscence (as in 'Fulbright Scholars'); Hughes' delight in details of place and setting in the context of extensive narratives ('18 Rugby Street'); celebratory observations of Plath's appearance and attire (as in the beautiful wedding poem, 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress'), and a sequence of poems about American landscapes in which Hughes responds animatedly to the new world and its creatures. Darker elements colour some of these works: in Dakota, the Badlands (in the poem with that title) force the couple to confront their own emotional desolation:

'Maybe it's the earth',  
You said. 'Or maybe it's ourselves.  
This emptiness is sucking something out of us.  
Here where there's only death, maybe our life  
Is terrifying. Maybe it's the life  
In us  
Frightening the earth, and frightening us'.

Titles (like 'Fever') and phrases – 'the waters off beautiful Nauset' in 'The Prism', for example – explicitly recall Plath's own poems,<sup>9</sup> as do others in which her father, Dr Plath, is invoked, such as 'A Picture of Otto'.

The pronoun 'you' constantly recurs - even in one of the poems' titles: 'You Hated Spain' – but with ambiguous effect. Used in this way, suggesting immediacy and intimacy (which

the third person, 'she', would preclude), the word also brings with it an accusatory tone. There is an odd sense of irrelevance, too - of telling the subject of the addresses what she already knows (that she hated Spain, for example, for its cruelty to animals). Even when the work is clearly not proceeding from a criticism or grievance, as in the opening lines of 'Sam': 'It was all of a piece to you', and of 'Setebos':

Who could play Miranda?  
Only you...

these compliments, especially when read with an emphasis on the pronoun, can easily sound like abuse or at least facetious mockery. It was a technique often used by Plath - in English and German, in 'Daddy', for example:

I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du.

Where Hughes similarly intends an indictment, the pronoun has a stabbing immediacy, as at the opening of 'Blackbird':

You were the jailer of your murderer.

In the course of a sustained reading of the collection, the insistent recurrence of 'you' presents an accumulating incantation of resentment.

3

This is scarcely anticipated, however, in the generally benign nostalgia of the opening poem, 'Fulbright Scholars', where Hughes begins by speculating about the first encounter he may have had with Plath, possibly looking at a photograph of a particular year's 'intake' of these bright young students:

Were you among them?

Plath had won a Fulbright Scholarship from Smith College for study at Cambridge so it is likely that she was in the photograph, but Hughes is uncertain even about where he may have seen it:

Where was it, in the Strand?

This first poem initiates the characterisation of *Birthday Letters* as a chronological, historical, biographical and autobiographical sequence. It is also important as an introduction to the negotiations with truth which the poems present, to the bias of Hughes' portrayals of Plath and to the ways in which the poems expand from personal to more general experience.

'Fulbright Scholars' is a meditation upon the difficulty of attaining certain knowledge, perhaps especially about individuals and events with which we have been personally involved. The title, referring to an anonymous collection of students with only a group identity, introduces the blurring of discrete, precise truth which occurs over the years. The speaker's series of questions and his vocabulary of uncertainty: 'wondering', 'doubt', 'maybe', 'unlikely' are an indulgent critique of the unreliability and perverse selectivity of memory:

Was it then I bought a peach? That's as I  
remember.

From a stall near Charing Cross Station.

In a mood of gentle self-reproach, the poem closes with the mature man's judgement of his much younger self in phrases which will remind many readers of Lowell's *Life Studies*:

At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh  
By my ignorance of the simplest things.

Yet 'Fulbright Scholars' is addressed to Plath and, in some fleeting references, Hughes initiates the disturbing portraiture which he will develop in subsequent poems. His memory of her is fanciful:

Maybe I noticed you.  
Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely.  
Noted your long hair, loose waves –  
Your Veronica Lake bang.

This impression (with its repeated, prioritised 'Maybe') is as fragile as the memory of the now all-but-forgotten starlet with her one distinguishing physical feature, an eye concealed by her blonde curl. That one-eyed outlook may be an apt symbol for the uncertainties of perception which dominate the poem and, perhaps, the sequence as a whole. No uncertainty, however, restrains Hughes' reference to 'your grin', the second physical feature he imagines he may have noticed and which he subjects to a xenophobic Englishman's disdain:

Your exaggerated American  
Grin for the cameras.

The grin is conjured up not only for 'the cameras', however, but for 'the judges, the strangers, the frighteners'. So the criticism of an affectation of geniality is modified in the sobering realisation that Plath, even then, had needed to prepare a face to meet the faces that she confronted. The 'frighteners' are the demons that haunted her and which will emerge more specifically as the sequence unfolds.

In contrast, 'The Shot' has a punishingly clear trajectory, from Plath's need for a 'god', triggered by her Daddy's death and culminating in her paradoxical desire both to return to him and to punish him fatally for deserting her. In its rapid passage, imitating her ricocheting 'flightpath' through life, it glances at Plath's 'Alpha career' (referring to her academic distinctions)

and the individuals she left in her wake (who ‘more or less died on impact... too mortal to take it’). The target of the shot would appear to be Hughes. But he is merely a Daddy-substitute:

your real target  
Hid behind me. Your Daddy.  
The god with the smoking gun. For a long time  
Vague as mist, I did not even know  
I had been hit,  
Or that you had gone clean through me –  
To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god.

Plath’s physical features as well as her behaviour justify the bullet metaphor:

Even the cheek-scar,  
Where you seemed to have side-swiped concrete,  
Served as a rifling groove  
To keep you true.

The irony of the poem is focused on that last phrase. It is an ambiguous compliment. Certainly, Hughes claims, she was true to her vocation, single-minded in its pursuit: ‘Your worship needed a god’. But she consumed others in the process, deceiving them into believing that they were her deity. The insistence of Hughes’ repetition of ‘god’ enacts, linguistically, Plath’s persistence in her quest:

Ordinary jocks became gods –  
Deified by your infatuation

That seemed to have been designed at birth for a  
god.  
It was a god-seeker. A god-finder.

The assonance of 'jocks' and 'gods', the congruity of the incongruous, wryly intensifies the speaker's accusation of her duplicity. This was *her* truth.

There is no space for sympathy here in recollection of Plath's 'undeflected' relentlessness, destroying all in her path. Hughes acknowledges

your sob-sodden Kleenex  
And your Saturday night panics...

but his details of her distress are trivialising, 'under your hair done this way and that way'. The metallic hardness of the personified bullet disposes of these traces of vulnerable hyper-femininity, although it has its own lustrous appeal:

You were gold-jacketed, solid silver,  
Nickel-tipped.

The poem closes in Hughes' speculation about how he might have prevented the shot from passing through him:

In my position, the right witchdoctor  
Might have caught you in flight with his bare  
hands.  
Tossed you, cooling, one hand to the other.

He lacked the supernatural powers – suspect, in any case, as a witchdoctor's cures – to forestall the unstoppable. At the end he was left only with fragments of her being, like the relics of God's martyrs:

A wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your  
nightgown.

In 'The Shot', Hughes presents his version of the truth of the motivation of Plath's psychology, in her Electra-like fixation on her father, which complies with the evidence of her own poetry, particularly 'Daddy'. The unswerving obsession this entails recalls Plath's own description of her desire for such ecstatic single-mindedness in 'Ariel': 'And I / Am the arrow', another identification with a death-bringing instrument. He indicates his helplessness in the face of her pre-determined psychosis. While these issues and emphases are debatable, the ultimate truth of the poem is undeniable. Hughes' metaphor of the bullet ricocheting from childhood trauma, captured in the insistent motion of the poetry and repetition of vocabulary, shows how the captives of psychological forces are as much at their mercy as their victims.

Similarly, in 'The Minotaur', Hughes sees Plath bringing death, determined to slay her father but destroying everything, the mahogany table-top, the high stool, their marriage, their children, her mother and finally herself. In classical legend, the Minotaur was a monster, half bull, half man, which was fed with human flesh and lived in the labyrinth in Crete. It was killed by Theseus. In this poem, Plath's Minotaur-father, Christ-like, is not only dead, but 'risen', so her quest is futile. He has departed the labyrinth which has become her tortuous, tormented reality. The labyrinth derives its pre-Hellenic name from the rite of the *labrys*, the Cretan double-headed axe. This may be relevant to Hughes' initial evocation of Plath's smashing hammer-blows.

His grievance dominates, from the first stanza. The table-top Plath destroyed, he bitterly complains, had been from 'my mother's heirloom sideboard'. It was 'mapped with the scars of my whole life'. The 'high stool you swung that day', in 'demented' rage, was similarly dashed to pieces because Hughes had been 'twenty minutes late for baby-minding'. The

dramatic immediacy of these recollections is intensified by the use of reported speech:

'Marvellous!' I shouted, 'Go on,  
Smash it into kindling.  
That's the stuff you're keeping out of your  
poems!...'

'Get that shoulder under your stanzas  
And we'll be away.'

This, at least, is what he wished he might have said and she was to do precisely that, vivifying her last poems with an angry energy rarely equalled in the language. But the couple were not 'away', as a result. Plath's anger was not simply transferred to her poetry; it persisted in her life. Fatefully, the 'skein' unwound

That unravelled your marriage,  
Left your children echoing  
Like tunnels in a labyrinth.

The possessive pronoun strikes us here. Why not 'our marriage', 'our children'? Plainly, Hughes considers that Plath had so completely entered her personalised labyrinth that he was unable to penetrate its umbrageous enclosure. Subject to an evil spirit – 'the goblin' inside her consciousness ('deep in the cave of your ear') - she was deaf to external voices. The rhetorical question: 'So what had I given him?' refers to Hughes' proposed literary therapy of transferring her goblin-driven anger into her writing. But the evil spirit 'snapped his fingers', Plath taking her cue from him, not her husband. The desperate end of her life ensued, leaving two children, in nightmarish, surreal images, 'echoing / Like tunnels in a labyrinth' and her mother, Aurelia, 'a dead-end'.

By the poem's conclusion, it seems that Plath herself, possessed by the goblin of angry insanity, is as much a combination of the human and inhuman as her Minotaur-father. She is part-woman, part-demon. The conclusion, where her own corpse is placed in the 'grave of your risen father' emphasises this identity. The poem laments a sufferer's failure to conquer possession by mental illness, the inability of the voices of sanity to interrupt its processes and, as in 'The Shot', bemoans the destructiveness of madness - of other lives and also, in this case, of treasured objects.

4

In her first year at Cambridge, Plath had hired an old horse called Sam who was expected to be placid, but bolted with the inexperienced rider on his back. While it was a frightening and dangerous experience, Plath recalled it as a time when she felt immensely alive. It formed the basis of the thrilling horse-ride described in the title poem of *Ariel*.

Recounting his observation of the event, in 'Sam', Hughes focuses initially on its physical details. We are given a description of the horse, reminiscent of Hughes' numerous poems about animals, with their carefully observed details: 'the white calm stallion'. The location is precisely noted too, 'down the white line of the Barton Road', as is the physical violence Plath endured as she lost control: 'you slewed under his neck'. Such detail exemplifies the truth of the poem's report. Added to it, is the imagined danger and horror experienced by the rider. Nonetheless, her almost comic appearance is captured in a neat phrase:

An upside-down jockey with nothing  
Between you and the cataract of macadam.

Further imagery and onomatopoeia assist the dramatic immediacy of the presentation:

... the propeller terrors of his front legs  
And the clangour of the iron shoes, so far beneath  
you.

This definite factuality and imaginative evocation lead, in the poem's second section, to Hughes' series of questions - 'How did you cling on?' 'What saved you?' – probing the truth of the situation, seeking an explanation. Could it be possible for someone, exposed, unprotected, by the loss of stirrups, reins and seat, to survive such an experience?

When he repeats his questioning in the third section: 'How did you hang on?' we realise that the persistent queries are not only about the incident with Sam, which Plath survived. The questions probe her life at large, expressing Hughes' wonderment in the face of it. In spite of its terrors, Plath managed to cling to her existence, not through any ability that she could recognise, but 'something in you not you did it for itself'. Hughes suggests it may have been her poems, 'hammoked in your body', determined to endure and be expressed. Saving themselves, they saved her. It was the spirit of poetry, never to be thwarted (as Plath suggests in a different context in 'Kindness', 'The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it'), which sustained her.

In the closing quatrain, almost as an afterthought, Hughes envisages the experience with Sam as analogous also to the denouement of his marriage to Plath. In 'one giddy moment', like her 'upside-down jockey experience', but in this case wilfully flinging herself, she fell off Hughes in order to trip him. He had 'jumped a fence' – an equine reference to his adultery – and, in response, 'you strangled me'. Unlike the horse-ride, however, she did not survive this calculated catastrophe, but 'lay dead', as if in just punishment for her rash action. As Hughes remembers the sequence of marriage break-up and suicide, it was 'over in a flash', like Plath's fall from Sam. But, as we have seen, that phrase should also be read as a reference to Plath's life at large, with the early termination of its brilliance.

Like so many of the poems in *Birthday Letters*, 'Sam' has a significance beyond the identities of the individuals concerned in the incident it describes. Its key phrase is its least elegant: 'something in you not you'. Hughes celebrates that mysterious quality of the human spirit, the antithetical other self within ourselves, which, *in extremis*, can even redeem our lives.

If he admires such a mysterious process in 'Sam', he is more often despairing of his wife's tormented personality. They had spent the first part of their honeymoon in Paris. In 'Your Paris', Hughes indicates that, from the beginning, their outlooks were different, antagonistic. The poem's title introduces the recurring idea of the impenetrable exclusivity of Plath's ownership of her experiences even – perhaps especially - when they are in circumstances, like a honeymoon, which are meant to be defined by sharing.

Plath appropriated Paris as a city of literary and artistic associations, particularly with the ex-patriot American writers who had lived there. On her own trajectory, as in 'The Shot',

your ecstasies richoceted  
Off the walls....

His version was so different that 'I kept my Paris from you'. It was the war-time city, occupied by the Germans and with earlier memories of French suffering in the first war. It seems that this is an infinitely more serious approach:

My perspectives were veiled by what rose  
Like methane from the reopened  
Mass grave of Verdun.

The poem exposes utterly different perspectives and, in the process, speculates about the solipsistic interpretation of any entity beyond ourselves, whereby we 'read' and appropriate it in our terms: 'my Paris', 'your Paris'. The recognition of such

subjectivity has momentous implications for the determination of truth.

Plath's Paris is entirely aestheticised, in 'your immaculate palette, / The thesaurus of your cries'. However, by nurturing such an artificial image, protecting it and, thereby, her own experience of the city, she was protecting herself from a pain as intense, personally, as the national sufferings which its streetscape commemorates. For Hughes, Plath's response 'was diesel aflame / To the dog in me'. He needed, 'dog-nosed', to search out the explanation for her construction and appropriation of a Paris wrenched from its recent painful history and reality.

Like the Maquis, Plath has an existence 'underground, your hide-out'. This torture-chamber of her psyche was 'a labyrinth' where she could not find 'the Minotaur' (imagery used again, as we have seen, in the poem of that name). Hughes comes to understand that what he experienced with her, traversing the 'plain paving' of Paris with its 'odd, stray, historic bullet' was, for Plath, a painful process of 'searching miles' for the alleviation of pain, only relieved by the 'anaesthetic' of her aesthetic sense. He presents himself, in caricature, as 'a guide dog, loyal to correct your stumblings'. The irony of this closing image is that it infers Plath's blindness. The painterly tableaux and vistas of Paris she supposedly traversed were a sleepwalker's delusions, therapeutic distractions from the reality on which her inner eye was transfixed: the impossible prospect of the 'final face-to-face revelation' with her father, 'a blessed end / To the torment'.

'Your Paris' moves from uncomprehending, self-righteous judgement, to tender sympathy:

The mere dog in me, happy to protect you  
From your agitation and your stone hours...

saved from arch self-congratulation by the humility of the canine image. Hughes, 'a ghostwatcher', speculates about the torments of opposing *Collaborateurs* and Maquis, 'the stink of

fear still hanging in the wardrobes'. These are images from the historical past. Present, walking beside him, is one with 'flayed skin', enduring her own internalised warfare.

In 'Red', which concludes *Birthday Letters*, Hughes begins again by indicating Plath's possessive impulse: 'Red was your colour'. Yet his certainty is immediately destabilised: 'If not red, then white'. But the association of red with wounding, earthen burial and memorials to a family's dead made it particularly appropriate to her suffering, suicidal tendencies and fixation on her father's death: 'red / Was what you wrapped around you'.

Metaphorically, their bedroom was as red as 'a judgement chamber' or a 'shut casket for gems'. Blood-red carpet, 'patterned with darkenings', represented a passion that had been portentously misdirected and had failed to circulate, with fatal 'congealments'. The blood-shedding of the decay of their marriage was like curtains:

ruby corduroy blood,  
Sheer blood-falls from ceiling to floor.

That 'only the bookshelves escaped into whiteness' reminds us of earlier images of the redemptive character of the literary life. To this extent, white was a possible colour for Plath, but it could not dispel the redness in which she was enfolded and 'revelled'. For not only in the microcosm of the bedroom of their marriage, but in the world at large, doom-laden redness predominated, as, in exquisite lines, Hughes explains how Plath had been named for flowers that can be aflame with this colour:

And outside the window  
Poppies thin and wrinkle-frail  
As the skin on blood,  
Salvias, that your father named you after,  
Like blood lobbing from a gash,  
And roses, the heart's last gout,

Catastrophic, arterial, doomed.

Dissociated, Hughes felt that red was 'raw – like the crisp gauze edges / Of a stiffening wound'. A possible sexual subtext suggests the troubled physical expression of their love:

I could touch  
The open vein in it, the crusted gleam.

Attempting to exorcise redness, with its passion and pain, Plath painted everything white. But, again, her colour would not be thwarted: she 'then splashed it with roses, defeated it'.

The pacific colour, blue, 'from San Francisco', should have been her hue. Kindly and caressing, it was a 'guardian, thoughtful', like the dame in Plath's 'Kindness'. Blue would have absolved the 'ghoul' of redness which the extremity of 'bone-clinic whiteness' could never defeat. In any case, it was another species of extremity. But Plath is beyond the blue domain as she confessed to being out of reach of Kindness's ministrations.

The last line of 'Red' brings the sequence at large to closure and, in doing so, we sense, expresses finally the absolving and resolving emotion of Hughes's experience of often bitter poetic meditation on his wife and their relationship. The tone is of regret, at once carefully restrained, as it is linked to the earlier reference to the 'shut casket', and beautifully expressed:

But the jewel you lost was blue.

This, indeed, has the ring of truth.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems 1957-1994*, Faber, London, 1995, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> In Eilat Negev, 'Ghosts of Love', *The Guardian*, reprinted in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May, 1999, 6s.

<sup>3</sup> In Negev, *art. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> All references to *Birthday Letters* are to the first edition, Faber, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> In 'Out from under', interview with Frieda Hughes by Victoria Laurie, *The Australian* magazine, 14/15 April, 2001, 18.

<sup>6</sup> 'My life with Sylvia Plath', interview with Eilat Negev, *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 October, 1998. Online at <<http://victorian.fortunecity.com/plath/500/phlife.htm>>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Plath's and Hughes's daughter, Frieda, shares her father's view: 'All those 1950s women wanting a way out, and what they needed was a martyr. My mother was only a martyr in the sense that they made her one'. Her interviewer, Victoria Laurie, comments that 'her contempt for the cult that enshrouded her mother is obvious'. In 'Out from under', *art.cit.*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Poetry in the Making*, Faber, London, 1967, p.42.

<sup>9</sup> 'Fever 103°'; '...in the waters off beautiful Nauset' ('Daddy').