

ATF

by Yasmin Elaine Waring

Allison Truman Ford was a marked child.

She lived in the pocket city of Waco, Texas raised by a father who worked steadily at his discipline but wavered in overt affection. He did not feel guilty about this soft neglect. In fact, he was confident that he'd met his obligation to his only offspring. Considered himself heroic even in his paternal role, especially after the death of his wife, Allison's mother.

She'd crashed into a guard rail on I-35. A queen-sized Beautyrest mattress broke free from its bindings and hit her head on from the back of a pick-up truck that never stopped. A '99 F-150 the color of gun metal, they later learned. The mattress survived in tact. Still solid and firm to the touch, its soft white boxiness glowed against the black asphalt, and diverted attention from the wrecked body that was a bitch to remove for the first responders.

Allison's mother had excused her husband's detachment and gray calm as acceptable traits for a man with his distinctions—a history professor at Baylor whose tenure, for the most part, was based on the non-academic applications of his research by the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Who knew that the timely publication of his dissertation in 1993, on the emergence of extremist religious factions in the Southwest during the Great Depression—namely, a splintered faction of the Seventh Day Adventists called the Branch Davidians—would be assigned reading for gun-toting federal agents? The bold school-bus yellow A-T-F stamped across their backs were also the initials of his newborn and this was viewed as a dubious coincidence.

How does a tenured history professor, stoic by nature and insulated by job security, break the news of his wife's death to a six-year-old who shares his own unflinching stare? With minimal context and plenty of ice cream. He rationalized the former and fumbled with the latter—he didn't even know her favorite flavor. Allison always had to remind him.

She remembered that day. It was the only time her mother had not been there to welcome her home from school. She would usually wait for her in the front yard waving a burnt-orange Longhorn's flag—Allison's favorite color—that she could see as she left the elementary school and ran the three small suburban blocks all the way home.

There was no flag that day. Her smiling mother, who she always drew as the sun with a fat yellow crayon for art assignments, was not in the yard. Allison knew something was wrong and let her backpack drag, clasping a single frayed strap. She did not run. Her father opened the door before she reached for the knob. She did not squeal his name or hug him. Only looked up and asked, "Where's Mommy?"

Later that evening, she and her father sat at a square orange-laminate table in a bland coffee shop close to campus where you could order soft ice cream, cold pastas and paninis along with your lattes. Her father spread a discarded newspaper across the table top as a precaution, asked Allison what her favorite ice cream was and went to order. He didn't wait for her answer.

There was no mention of heaven and angels. Only that Mommy had been in a very bad, a terrible car accident and wouldn't be coming home again. She had to be a strong little girl. Now, it was just the two of them. She found it hard to swallow clenching the metal spoon between her remaining baby teeth. Her tears were cold, from the ice cream she thought. Her nose began to run. He passed her a napkin.

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"The kid's lucky she made it out alive," she overheard an officer say.

"Lucky? First she loses her mother in a freak car accident. Now her father. That's some messed up sh--" his partner stopped short realizing she could hear them, but only after the first officer signalled with a quick jerk of his head.

Both of them shrugged toward the other, unsure how to interpret the child's indifference. This would be a prize for the kiddie shrinks.

From the backseat of the patrol car, swaddled in a stiff blanket that smelled of motor oil and tires, Allison watched her house burn.

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