

# Baseball and Dora Around the Fire

by Holly Via Gorski

*Author's note: I'm writing along with StoryWonk's "The Dollar Short."  
This story is for January 2016.*

Jason and Missy's deck takes up half of their backyard, appears to be made of some sort of endangered rare wood, and has a fire pit in the middle of it. There is also a hot tub designed for swinging.

My spot on the built-in bench around the fire that June evening provided an irritating view of it all. Jason managed a residential construction firm; he had probably made the guys redo his backyard when business was slow. At least Missy had made a pitcher of margaritas on the rocks. I was on my second.

We weren't here for me anyway. We were here for Ashley, who had to forgo the margaritas, but didn't care. She had been thrilled when her cousin Missy had invited us for a long weekend to celebrate Ashley's graduation from her Master's program. Gas to Spokane was about all we could afford, vacation-wise, and we hadn't seen Missy or her husband Jason since our wedding two years before.

Ashley adjusted one of the bench's many pillows behind her back, leaned her head against the bench, and smiled. Missy tousled Ashley's hair as she walked past and stepped down into the seating area, a plate of snacks in one hand.

She sat down at the end of the curved bench and handed the plate to Jason, who offered it to us. I waved it off. Ashley took some crackers and cheese.

Missy leaned forward, her hand on Jason's knee. Her large, tanned breasts were framed by the V of her shirt. "So . . . any names yet?"

Ashley glanced sideways at me, her face still turned towards Missy. She smiled. "I'm thinking Alex- Alexander, or maybe Lucas, but Daniel isn't sure."

I shrugged. "We have time."

"He's all cool, you know, because he's done this before. Not me."

"That's right; I'm not stressed at all. No big thing."

"He's a wreck. We both are, but he doesn't want to talk about names yet. I think we worry about different things." She reached over and helped herself to more cheese off the plate.

"Tell me about it," Jason said, his rocks glass passing close to Ashley's face as he turned toward me. Ashley blinked. "Eighteen years we've been parents, and I still don't understand why Missy cares about the stuff she does. I've learned enough to know what to expect, but I don't understand it."

Jason is compact; Missy is not. He's short, in good shape, and keeps his thick dark hair short. Missy is tall, voluptuous, and heavily decorated by both jewelry and makeup. She has a lot of shiny hair.

"Was it that way with you and your ex-wife, Dan?" Missy asked.

"Missy!" Ashley said, pointing at her with a piece of cheese.

"No, it's fine," I said. I finished off my margarita, closing my eyes as I tipped my head back with the glass. Jason had the pitcher ready when I opened my eyes. I let him refill my glass.

"I never understood my ex-wife," I said, "and she never understood me. We fought about Isabella because she was one more thing to fight about. She was only three when we divorced. There weren't too many parenting issues to fight about, yet." I knew that wasn't true as I said it. We had fought about so many baby-related things: feeding, sleeping arrangements, how long to let her cry . . .

"Potty training," Ashley said, interrupting my thoughts.

“What?” I asked.

“Potty training! God, you told me that story once and I’ve never forgotten it. Dora and Boots! Tell them about it.”

“You go ahead.”

“So they were potty-training Isabella, and Christina – that’s his ex – had gotten her these underpants with Dora the Explorer and Boots and all the characters on them. And Christina told Isabella that whenever she had an accident and Christina had to rinse the underpants out in the toilet, Dora and all of them drowned. Drowned! The woman told a three-year-old she had to keep her underpants dry so her friends wouldn’t drown.”

Missy gasped. “That’s terrible!”

“Did it work?” Jason asked.

I nodded. “It worked.”

“But you were so angry at the time, weren’t you, Honey? And poor Isabella.”

“I was pissed. Christina didn’t get it.”

Jason poured himself and Missy another round. He offered Ashley a bottle of water and she took it, one eye on the snack plate. Jason handed the plate over with a smile. “Second trimester, huh? It’s been a long time – a long time – since we had to worry about that, or about potty training. It’s college now for Brandon. And Hannah will have her learner’s permit in three months.”

“That’s unbelievable,” Ashley said. “How is she 15?”

Missy laughed. “How are you 25?”

“You are old,” Jason said to his wife. “Not me, though.”

Missy put her foot on Jason’s thigh and pushed him away from her on the bench. He grabbed it, placed it in his lap, and started rubbing circles with his thumbs on the ball of her foot. After a moment she placed her other foot in his lap as well.

“Not potty training,” she said, “but we still worry. Before college it was baseball.”

“They’re related, but yeah,” Jason agreed. He looked at me. “Brandon was on track to get a baseball scholarship. We knew what he needed to do – hit the camps, summer tournaments, all of it. Played ball since he was five.”

“That’s back when I was still here,” Ashley smiled at Jason, “I remember going to his T-ball games.”

Jason smiled briefly, still rubbing Missy’s feet. “That’s how it started: T-ball. He played every sport we could sign him up for at least once. Settled into football and baseball when he was older. He’s not built for football, but baseball . . .” He shook his head.

“He could have played for Whitworth; they were interested, but he didn’t want to go there,” Missy explained. “He wants to major in Communication & Society at WSU. It’s like . . . a social media degree, I think? But more than that.”

“If he wants to be a YouTube star, he can stay home. He already has a laptop with a webcam.” Jason stood up, dislodging Missy’s feet, and walked around the fire pit to the other side. He picked up a log from the pile and stared into the fire. “Although, if it’s gotta be Wazzu, he could try to walk on there.”

“He’s done, Jase. He told you he was done a year ago.” Missy turned her face away from Jason and back to me. They both kept directing this story to me, not Ashley, even though she was the one who had known their son since he was born. “He refused to play the summer between his junior and senior years. Stayed on the high school team, played the usual spring season, but told Jason he wouldn’t do anything else.”

I nodded and looked down into my glass.

“Hannah’s still in it,” Jason said, putting the log he had been holding on the fire. “She plays soccer, basketball, and golf. Just finished her freshman year. Three to go.”

Missy stood up and walked barefoot around the fire pit to Jason. She shushed him, wrapped her arms around his neck, drink still in one hand, and kissed him. I looked away from them, towards my wife. Her head rested against the back of the bench and her eyes were closed.

“What do you want for your daughter, Dan?” Missy asked. She and Jason had their arms wrapped around each other and were both looking at me across the fire.

I stared at them, wondering what they expected me to say. We weren't into sports and Isabella was only nine. Her career plan was to be a paleontologist, schoolteacher, and movie star. She had told me she could spend one-third of the year on each job.

“Daniel?” Ashley asked when I had been silent too long. She must not have been asleep after all.

“I want her to know that I love her,” I said, answering truthfully for Ashley, but looking at Missy and Jason. “I want her to be happy. I pray, when I pray, that she will make it through her childhood safely and understand her mother's erratic behavior is not normal, not her fault, and not how she should behave as an adult.”

No one else spoke. After a moment, Jason coughed and said, “That's what I want, too. I mean—“

“Hey!” Missy stepped away from him. “What are you saying?”

“No, I—”

Ashley interrupted, “Christina is terrible. Unbelievable. Nothing like either of you on your worst days.”

“I'm sorry,” Missy said.

I nodded. “Thanks.”

She brought the pitcher over to me. What was left just filled my glass. “You're right,” she said. “Forget about the hopes and dreams stuff. When it comes down to it, we just want them to be safe and happy.”

She handed the pitcher to Jason, who took it silently and walked towards the kitchen. Missy leaned over to hug Ashley, then sat next to her on the bench, holding Ashley's hands with her own. Her eyes shone.

“Ashley, you’re gonna have this sweet tiny baby, and he’s gonna be beautiful, and helpless. And you’ll be so happy and so scared at the same time. It doesn’t matter how great a babysitter you were, or how many thousand parenting books you’ve read – and I know you have – when you bring that little boy home and he’s yours, at some point the weight of that will hit you, and you will flip out.”

Ashley squeezed Missy’s hands and let them go. “Thanks. For the . . . pep talk?”

Missy laughed. “Dan, can you help me out, here?”

“She’s right. She’s not selling it – but . . . well, you’ve seen it. You’ve seen me in some of my darkest times with Isabella. You’ve pulled me through.”

“I saw you and Isabella suffering through one of Christina’s darkest times. I helped, yes, but I could only do so much.”

I took a deep breath. “The point is,” I said, “being a parent is scary, but you are amazing. I’ve known you for six years and you’ve done everything, every damn thing, you set your mind to in that time. You’ll conquer this, and Alex or Lucas or - or whoever he is - will be lucky to have you as his mom.”

Ashley’s eyes welled up and she scooted closer. “Aww, Honey,” she said. I pulled her to me and put my arms around her.

Jason had come back from the kitchen with a full pitcher of margaritas and another bottle of water. “Have you considered the name Jason?”

“No,” I answered over Ashley’s shoulder. We pulled apart and turned side-by-side on the bench. She rested her head on my shoulder.

“There are things I want for him,” she said, small, unadorned hand rubbing her belly. “I think about it a lot. ‘Hopes and dreams’ things, yes, but also more basic things. I want him to feel secure and loved. I want him to be smart, and I hope he learns to read on his own, because I don’t know how to teach him.” She lifted her head slightly to look up at me. “Do you?”

I shook my head. No. I hadn't been there when Isabella learned to read; I didn't know how it happened. I couldn't speak, but luckily, Ashley didn't notice. She accepted my head shake and moved on.

"I hope that he makes friends easily, but I don't want him to care too much what other people think. I want him to be comfortable by himself."

"Those are all good things," Missy said, "and don't worry; our kids learned to read in school." She sighed. "I worry so much about keeping them safe. You can't, you know. Not once they leave the house. When they're little, you babyproof and you follow them around – moving things out of their way, redirecting, picking them up, saying 'no' – but they get older and you can't follow them around. You don't want to; they don't want you to, and that's right. But the amount of their lives you can control gets smaller and smaller. And that's right, too. But it's terrifying."

"That's how I feel about Isabella," I said. "It started earlier, because of her mother. Like I said – all I can do is show her that's not how it should be. Try to keep her safe."

"If the woman is crazy, can't you get custody?" Missy asked, indignant. "If it's not safe for her there, she should be with you and Ashley!"

I looked at her, then down at my glass again. She couldn't understand the years when I had to choose between legal fees to enforce my visitation and rent so that my daughter would have a place to come to when she could. I would not try to explain it; there wasn't enough alcohol in their well-stocked fridge.

Ashley shifted in her seat. She needed better back support. I handed her another pillow. She took it, then held on to my hand, tight.

It was Jason who spoke. "He's a man, Missy. You know courts favor the mother."

"Favor is an understatement!" Ashley exclaimed, sitting up and leaning towards Missy. "They turn a blind eye to everything she does and refuse to give Daniel any credit!"

"I'm sorry," Missy said again. "I guess that's all I can say tonight."

I shook my head and tried to smile. "It's all right," I lied.

The twilight around us had turned to darkness. Missy got up and moved around the deck, lighting citronella torches.

Jason stared at me from across the fire. “And you chose to do it again?”

“I chose to do it with Ashley,” I answered, returning his gaze. After a moment I looked away and tried for a lighter tone. “She’ll have to worry about my influence on the kid, not the other way around.”

Jason laughed. Ashley squeezed my hand.

Copyright 2016 Holly Via Gorski