

Learning Curve
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When I was six, my father taught me how to play *The Tease*.

Round one involved playfulness on his part, reluctance on mine.

My mom and I are going upstairs when my father calls from behind me, "Hey, Connie Sue, toss me your ball."

I turn around.

He smiles at me.

From past games, I had learned objections presented after the first smile were permitted.

"No Daddy. I'd rather not."

"Ah, c'mon, Babe."

"No Daddy. I'm afraid it will pop."

A reasonable concern, I had watched many balloons pop against our grainy walls. In my mind, there was no difference between my small beach ball's fragility and a balloon's.

"Nothing's going to happen. C'mon. Toss me the ball."

My mother skillfully played along. She acted as though an option other than capitulation existed.

"Bob, she needs to get to bed," she says.

But instead of continuing up the stairs, she, and therefore, I, wait for his response.

"C'mon. Toss me the ball. I'll throw it right back."

His voice, tinged with disappointment, signals I'm not playing fair.

Round two involved catch and release.

"Okay. But, please, give it right back."

"I will," he smiles again.

The second smile, as I had learned from watching him play similar games with my mother, was meant to disarm his opponent.

I toss him the ball.

He throws it back short of my reach. It bounces down the stairs. He throws it back again.

I stretch to catch it, but miss. I timidly laugh. I relax some. I want to believe he's just having fun with me.

Then, he banks it off the wall.

"Daddy, please don't do that again. You'll pop it."

"I'm not going to pop your ball," he shouts.

My heart hits like a hammer against my chest. I'm scared.

I don't like this game anymore.

Unwittingly, I began round three. It involved a combat of wills.

"Daddy, please stop doing that to my ball," I yell. "IT-WILL-POP!"

"Bob, just give her the ball. You're scaring her."

I realized my mother's role, at this point in the game, was to create the appearance of my ally.

*"I'm not going to pop her goddamn ball," he shouts, and launches it, hard, into the wall.
"STOP!" I scream.*

The world falls silent around me. No one moves.

"Get her up to her room, right now," he spits.

I run up the stairs, terror nipping at my heels. I dive into my bed.

Round four involved the breaking of wills.

"Bob, what are you going to do?" my mom asks.

"I'm going to spank her! That's what I'm going to do."

He grabs me, and begins to beat me. I've been spanked before, and it was honestly earned. I know this is different.

He stops.

Then, space wobbles, distorting itself. I'm no longer six. I grow larger than the room. I feel ancient.

I look at my mother. She stands, frozen: her expression, dazed and unresponsive.

I look at my father, straight and steadfast in his eyes. Telepathically, I say, "Now I know who you are. You can't fool me anymore. You set me up, just so you could do this."

He hears me. And, he understands. I can tell by the widening of his small, half-moon eyes. Then, he blinks, flinches really, because he is momentarily shaken.

Normal space returns and I'm six again.

I feel abject fear.

Round five involved the correction.

He leans over me and points his thick, stubby, index finger in my face.

"You'll be sorry if you ever talk to me like that again!"

He beats me until my bladder gives way, and urine drenches my pretty pink nightgown, my bed, and me.

With cold dismissiveness, he gets up. He walks by my mother without looking at her.

"Clean her up," he says, and leaves my room.

My mother does as she's told.

Sixth and final round involved taking a stance.

I might have to play this game while I live in their house, but as soon as I'm old enough to leave, I never will again.

Little did I know how addictive *The Tease* would be.