

A Parental Visit from the Goon Squad

By Emily Crutchfield

Parental influences are sometimes overlooked in literature in areas where they could be immensely beneficial to understanding the characters. This is especially true in Jennifer Egan's novel entitled, *A Visit From The Good Squad*, where there are so many other aspects of people's lives to focus on. From the passing of time to stealing and nostalgia, it's no surprise that parent and child relationships are extremely overshadowed. That does not take away from the importance of these relationships, however. The relationships between children and their parents build the backgrounds and the foundations of the characters and shape them into the people they all eventually become. Egan suggests that despite the relationships that children may have with their parent(s) or the rest of their families, the child can overcome the issues within them and do not always allow the past to define them. She shows both the good and the bad consequences of coming from a broken home, and ultimately leaves the reader with a sense of hope for those who are products of single-parent families and nontraditional homes.

It is, unfortunately, a commonly known fact that a very high percentage of American children live in single parent families or come from broken homes. A study conducted in the year 1985 suggested that 70% of white youth would live with a single parent for some period of time before the age of 18, and that number was even higher for African American youth (Demo and Acock, 619). Children who witness their parents' marriage fall apart have an entirely new array of personal issues to confront when compared to children raised in traditional, nuclear families.

Research has also suggested that boys coming from divorced parents have a harder time adjusting than girls do. This is because mothers typically get custody of children, and that deprives boys of a same-sex role model. Boys coming from broken homes have proven to be less socially adjusted than their female counterparts (Demo and Acock, 626). Throughout Egan's work, nearly every character is the product of a broken home, or another type of nontraditional family. The three most poignant characters we see living through this situation are Christopher, Bennie's son, and Rolf and his sister Charlie, Lou's children. They all suffer greatly as a result of their parents' decisions and handle it much differently than other examples from the book.

As the reader learns in the chapter entitled "The Gold Cure," the relationship between Bennie and his young son Christopher are severely strained. Bennie simply does not know what to do with his son during their visits together. In the novel, Bennie comments on the fact that they do a lot of aimless driving together and they occasionally struggle to make conversation with each other. These strains on their relationship are most likely due to the divorce of Bennie from his ex wife that Chris witnessed and endured. According to a study performed by Paul R. Amato, "Marital conflict was negatively associated with the quality of the child-father relationship," (Amato, 409). This is demonstrated all throughout the second chapter of the book. At one point, Bennie embraces his son in a hug and Egan depicts it, "As always, Chris went still in his embrace, but whether he was savoring it or enduring it Bennie could never tell." (Egan 35) This shows how the effects of the

divorce impact not only Christopher, but also negatively impact his relationship with his father.

The strain being worse between child and father is a common theme that Egan plays on throughout the book, and many other characters also suffer from that same problem. The other male perspective we get of a child from a broken home is that of Lou's son Rolph. The reader only gets a brief introduction of the relationship existing between Rolph and his parents, as with Christopher and his father, but that does not take away from the significance of their role in the novel.

Rolph has had an interesting childhood. With a father as vivacious and eccentric as Lou the record producer, it is understandable that he leads a much different lifestyle when compared to the typical American child. At the same time, his experiences with his father are universal. He is the child of divorced parents, and when the reader meets him, he is on an African safari vacation with his father, his sister, Charlie, and his soon-to-be stepmother. Rolph does not exactly know how to handle this new woman in his life, and often reminds his sister of the past family vacation when their mother was present. On page 59, Rolph says to his sister about a past family vacation, "Remember? How Mom and Dad stayed at the table for one more drink -," (Egan 59) Later in the chapter he confides in his sister, "I miss Mom." (Egan 76) It is clear through these comments that Rolph is struggling with the separation of his parents and accepting the fact that his father is moving on and dating new women. Watching their parents date often comes with much anxiety for children of divorced parents.

Throughout the trip, he consistently compares Mindy, his father's new girlfriend, to his mother. At one point he compares the way that their smells differentiate, "All of it is suffused with the feel of Mindy holding him from behind, her cheek against his head, her smell: not bready, like his mom's, but salty, bitter almost—a smell that seems akin to the lions themselves." (Egan 73) Through this comparison, Rolph makes his dad's new girlfriend seem to be as vicious as a lion and have an undesirable scent. It is very common for children of divorced parents to have a difficult time accepting their father or mother's new love interest, and often face anxiety that they, too, soon will be replaced.

Rolph and Lou do seem to have a consistently loving relationship throughout this chapter, however. Rolph, at the ripe age of eleven, claims to only know "two clear things about himself: He belongs to his father. And his father belongs to him." (Egan 63) He also knows that Lou will be there for him no matter the circumstances. On page 79, the narrative reads, "If he sinks, Lou will jump in instantly and save him." (Egan 79) This is why it is such a shock to the reader, when at the end of the chapter the narrative explains that Rolph will eventually commit suicide. The reader discovers that he shoots himself in the head at his father's house at the young age of twenty-eight.

Although there is not much information surrounding the reasons for Rolph's suicide, one can assume that it involves his father because of the fact that it took place at his house. Could this suicide have been an accidental side effect of the divorce that Rolph witnessed his parents go through? That question, however, is ultimately unanswerable, but knowing that the suicide purposefully took place in

Lou's apartment gives the reader a good reason to assume that he was in some way connected to it. Knowing that Lou had two additional failed marriages after his marriage to Rolph's mother surely had an effect on his life. Research shows that the continual dissolution of marriages in a child's life has been shown to create negative effects for that child in their present life and in their future lives. (Amato 1270) It is also known that children coming from broken homes typically have much lower self-esteem than children coming from nuclear families, which leads to depression. In the chapter "You (Plural)," Jocelyn, a character who has a history with Rolph, seems to put the entire blame for his death onto Lou. She goes as far as to tell him that he deserves to die, and that she ought to kill him.

Rolph was not the only child of Lou's that was negatively affected by his reckless behavior with women and marriage, however. His sister Charlie, who was also present on the safari, suffered greatly as well. Charlie does not have what could be considered the best life after the vacation on the African safari. The novel only gives us a brief snippet of what Charlie's life becomes once she is grown and the results are not pretty:

Charlie doesn't know herself. Four years from now, at eighteen, she'll join a cult across the Mexican border whose charismatic leader promotes a diet of raw eggs; she'll nearly die from salmonella poisoning before Lou rescues her. A cocaine habit will require partial reconstruction of her nose, changing her appearance, and a series of feckless, domineering men will leave her solitary in her late twenties, trying to broker peace between Rolph and Lou, who will have stopped speaking. (Egan 80)

Drug addiction, family drama, near death experiences across the border and submitting herself to the cruel treatment of men could all be consequences of the rocky childhood she faced with her parents' separation and remarriages. As previously noted, children coming from divorced parents are more likely to suffer from self-esteem issues (Bynum and Durm 79), which is one of the leading causes of depression. This explains why Charlie was so easily controlled by the men in her life and was swept up into joining a cult. Egan gives the reader these examples of horrific consequences coming from strained parent and child relationships due to divorce because these consequences are unfortunately all possible in reality, and not just in a fictional novel, which is what makes the reader so attached to the characters suffering from their parents' mistakes.

In addition to these tragedies, however, there are also a few success stories. One of the relationships that readers of *A Visit From The Goon Squad* get the most insight on is the relationship between Lulu and her mother, Dolly. Lulu was the product of a short fling that her mother had with a client, so she was raised by Dolly alone. Lulu is not aware of this, however, and believes that her father is dead. Dolly convinces Lulu that a picture of one of her ex-boyfriends is actually her father. Her whole life she believes this lie to be the truth, saying in the final chapter of the book "Nvr met my dad. Dyd b4 I ws brn." (Egan 323) When the reader first sees Lulu and Dolly's relationship in "Selling the General," it is easy to assume that it is unhealthy and that Lulu will eventually turn out similar to Rolph or Charlie because of her relationship with her struggling mother, but this is entirely untrue. Ever since Dolly came back from prison after accidentally burning a party of celebrities, Lulu had

refused to call her “mom.” Although this has little to do with the fact that Lulu was raised in a single-parent household, it exemplifies some of the dysfunction in their relationship.

The fact that Dolly held a full time job outside of the home is an important factor contributing to the way Lulu is as an adult. In the final chapter of the novel, we meet Lulu again. This time, she is no longer a little girl accompanying her mother on a work trip. Now, she is an independent and successful young woman. Alex, the main character of the final chapter, “Pure Language,” says about Lulu, “Her confidence seemed more drastic than the outcome of a happy childhood; it was cellular confidence, as if Lulu were a queen in disguise, without need or wish to be recognized.” (Egan 319) Bennie Salazar says about her, “She’s going to run the world.” (Egan 335) Obviously, she ultimately turned out much different than Charlie or her male counterparts. She gives the readers hope that not all children coming from broken homes are destined to become like Rolph and Charlie.

This type of achievement in life can be partly attributed to the relationship that she had with her mother growing up in a single parent home. In a study done by Kei M. Nomaguchi, she finds that

Children with full-time employed mothers spent fewer hours watching television at home than children with homemaker mothers... Additional analyses indicate that this was because of the differences in hours spent in school settings per week and participation in organized activities, suggesting that the more time children spend outside the home, the less likely they are to spend time watching television at home. (Nomaguchi 1354)

Had Lulu's childhood relationship with her working mother been different, she may have turned out an entirely different person. Although Americans typically tend to think that children that were raised in single parent homes have it much worse off and typically think of examples such as Rolph, this information can prove that to be false, at least in Lulu's case. Had her mother been a homemaker instead of a powerful publicist, Lulu may have spent more time watching television and laying around at home, as the research by Nomaguchi suggests, rather than having a busy schedule at school between organizing her friends and her schoolwork that allowed her to become such a powerful adult.

In Demo and Acock's research on children of divorced families, they found that there could actually be some positives to coming from a broken home, which seem to be what Lulu absorbed in her childhood. They argue that children coming from one-parent homes tend to "display more androgynous behavior." (Demo and Acock 626) They then go further as to suggest that children in female-headed single-parent families do not feel the same pressure as a child in a nuclear family would feel to conform to traditional gender roles. This can be seen through Lulu's behavior as an adult with her commanding presence and control of her work, which would typically be considered masculine. If she were raised in a traditional home, she may not have learned that type of power as a female. Through Lulu, Egan gives the reader hope that not all is lost for children coming from nontraditional homes, and she continues that theme with one other dominating character.

The most hopeful character that Egan gives the reader throughout the entirety of the novel is Sasha. Sasha comes from divorced parents and has an

incredibly rocky and unstable youth. As a child, Sasha witnesses her parents' abusive break up. Her father ultimately leaves and she is left to live with her mother alone, until she remarries a man named Hammer who takes his role as stepfather seriously. When Sasha was seventeen, she disappeared from the safety of her home. Her uncle explains it this way: "Disappeared like her father, Andy Grady, a berserk financier with violet eyes who'd walked away from a bad business deal a year after his divorce from Beth and hadn't been heard from again." (Egan 213) She ended up in Europe eventually, fending for herself at such a young age. When the reader meets her for the first time in the novel, she is working for Bennie, Chris's father, and finally the reader meets her again at the end of the novel as she is parenting her own children.

It becomes apparent, the more the reader learns about Sasha, that she has dealt with many personal issues coming from the loss of her father. She repeatedly feels as though her father is watching her or is secretly protecting her. When her uncle finds her in Italy, she admits to him that at the beginning of her travels, she thought she saw her father, or at least parts of him (his legs, or heard his laugh), in different parts of the world. She admits, "I thought he might be following me, making sure I was okay. And then, when it seemed like he wasn't, I got really scared." (Egan 225) When talking to her therapist, in the very first chapter of the book, the narrative says that she was careful not to think about the topic of her father, "She did this for Coz's protection and her own—they were writing a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances. But in that direction lay only sorrow." (Egan 8-9) Obviously a sore spot, Sasha has developed a thick skin when it

comes to dealing with and discussing her parents' divorce, which is quite typical of any child coming from a broken home.

What is so redeeming about Sasha, however, is that later in her life she completely overcomes this sensitive area by becoming a great parent to her children and an excellent wife. Sasha waits to get married and have children until she is over the age of thirty-five. She is blessed with two children, Lincoln, who is autistic, and Alison. The reader learns of Sasha's parenting skills through the narration of her daughter, who although gets irritated with her at times, also has a high amount of respect and curiosity about her mother. Sasha tries to do for her children what she always wished her father would do for her: protect them. When Alison asks her about her life in the past and the struggles she has been through, Sasha simply says that it is "Nothing you need to think about." (Egan 259) When her husband can't seem to understand why their autistic son is so obsessed with the pauses in certain songs, she gently explains it to him to prevent him from further antagonizing their son. Her parenting skills seem to exceed those that she endured from her parents, and she is certainly a wonderful wife to her husband. Every night, she sits in her "waiting chair" and makes her unique scrapbook until he gets home. Although this could be out of fear of him never coming home, as she and her father both once did, it keeps their marriage a priority to her. It is obvious in this chapter that Sasha has overcome her struggles as an adolescent, and becomes more than just a product of a broken home.

The impressions that parents leave on their children are everlasting and can help to make or break their futures. Relationships are oftentimes strained between

parent and child when divorce or marital conflict are involved, as the reader sees in Bennie and Christopher's case, and tend to lead to devastating consequences for children, as it does for Rolph and Charlie. Egan makes it clear though, that while the past is a big part of a person's life, it does not define who he or she ultimately becomes. As it is present in Lulu and Dolly's relationship, their interactions and lifestyle, despite being raised in a single parent home, creates Lulu into a strong, fearless and independent leader of her generation. Sasha also manages to overcome her issues with her parents divorce and become what any American could define as a good parent to her children. Despite the bad connotation that typically comes along with children from broken homes and the devastating consequences it can have on a child's life, Egan teaches her readers that it does not define who they will ultimately become and gives any child from a broken home the most precious gift: hope.

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