

PLASTIC MOM AND DAD

Matthew F. Amati

They took Mom and Dad away and replaced them with actors. Bad actors.

It was the War that took Mom and Dad away. The Council gave them back. It's true Marcus and I haven't seen our parents in four years. But I'm not fooled.

I told my seventh-grade teacher Sergeant Adams that I thought my parents might be fakes. She told me "Samuel, don't go asking questions if you think you won't like the answers."

Well, I've got questions. Like who is this person pretending to be Mom? This woman is way too short. She has one blue eye and one brown eye. My real mom had two brown eyes.

NotMom (as I think of her) has the same hair that Mom used to have (long, blonde). But her eyes are different, and she talks wrong. Her voice is all creaky. My real mom's voice was loud and she laughed a lot, which is a thing this NotMom never does.

NotDad's even faker. My real Dad had a full, bushy mustache, and crazy wild black hair. He could make his hair stand on end when he ran a hand through it. This pathetic NotDad has wispy hair streaked with gray. His wimpy 'stache looks like he grew it last week.

My brother Marcus... OK, same old Marcus. Whiny, annoying.

The world is different, too. Sergeant Adams says the Committee is in charge now. That they picked up the broken pieces of our country, and they're determined to make everything capital-N Normal again.

Normal? I walk past craters where neighborhoods used to be. People without limbs go begging on our street. Is that normal? We used to live in a huge house with a maid. Now we live in a shack. We're always hungry.

Everyone must have a Two Parent Family. That's what they say in school. Marnie Lind asked, what if your parents were killed in the War, then how can you have two parents?

That's enough out of you, young lady!

No parents were killed in the War. Everyone is back with their Two Parent Families. Everything is Normal. The Committee says so.

I proposed something to Marcus. I said Marcus, what if a lot of moms and dads were killed in the War? What if this Committee is only pretending it didn't happen? And what if they fixed us up with fake moms and dads, so we can all pretend to be Normal?

Marcus thought this over. Then he popped me on the nose. "Shut up!"

So I did some snooping.

First, the dirt on "Mom."

I spied on NotMom when she was getting ready for bed. First thing she did? She took off her hair! That's right. A wig! NotMom's real hair is stubbly and white. Then - that blue eye? It's fake, too! She popped it right out of its socket, and put it in a little bottle of liquid.

I saw NotMom take her dress off. Her body is all scarred up. She has nothing in her bra but a couple of cloth bags. Is she even a woman?

I hid in the refuse bin and watched NotDad wash himself with our rationed cupful of bathing water. This guy's hair is real, but awfully gray. He's got angry stripes across his bare back. I saw a blue number tattooed on his shoulder. I used to see my real Dad shirtless when we'd go to the swimming hole. My real Dad had big muscles. He never had a tattoo.

I had the evidence. So I came right out and accused them, like you do in a Clue game. We had a family conference in our tiny living room.

I expected our fake parents to deny everything. Guess what? They came right out and admitted it!

We aren't the same Mom and Dad you had before we were all separated.

I knew it!

They kept talking. Dad talked about prison camps, and work details, and guards with electric prods. And starvation and cold and the smoke from burning bodies.

Mom's voice got really quiet. She told us about a place called a Comfort Station, and how cruel soldiers were. How she was still young, but her body was all broken.

"I'm sorry, kids," Dad said. "We should have had this conversation earlier. The War has changed all of us. None of us are who we were before. We just have to make the best of it."

"We still love you two, just as before," said broken, creaky-voiced Mom. "That hasn't changed."

Dad reached out to hug me with his horribly shrunken arms. I ran out of the room crying.

Sergeant Adams was right. I don't like the truth at all. Everything's Normal, and I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.