

New Fiction from John P. Palmer: “Lasting Impacts”

Johnny felt the oak floor tilt sharply below him. He had no idea what was happening or why, and he was frightened.

The tilt was steep, so steep that he felt himself sliding, then falling. He wanted to cry, but he was so terrified that he couldn't make a sound. Suddenly he fell right off the floor and landed on the next oak floor right below the one he was falling from.

As he was landing on it, that floor tilted in the opposite direction, and he began sliding again, uncontrollably in that direction.

He fell again, to another floor, and that floor tilted back. His fear intensified. Finally he was able to cry out, but the see-saw tilting and sliding wouldn't stop! Worse, the room began to spin, and Johnny was totally disoriented. The falling and sliding and spinning sensations were new to him; he wasn't hurt, but he was more terrified than he had ever been. He couldn't stop crying.



As he slid downward from level to level across the tilting, sloping floors, Johnny looked up and saw his father laughing, and that frightened him even more. This man was his father; he

wasn't supposed to be a man who made floors tilt and who made Johnny fall from one tilted floor to another. But there he was: Johnny was falling from sloped floor to sloped floor, and his dad was laughing while Johnny was crying.

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The memory of this trauma haunted Johnny for years. When he was a toddler, he woke up after having nightmares that his crib was tilting and he was sliding back and forth on it.

When he was six years old, Johnny woke up at 4AM from a completely different nightmare. In this one, his dad was grinning at him. That was all – it was just a grin, but in his dream Johnny saw it as menacing, and he couldn't get back to sleep. It rekindled the old nightmares from his infancy.

When his mother woke up, she saw his bedroom light on. "Johnny," she asked, "Why do you have your bedroom light on, and what are you doing up so early? What happened?"

Johnny knew his mom loved his dad, and so he didn't feel free to say anything. He knew she would pooh-pooh the nightmare. After some hesitation, he mumbled, "I had a nightmare."

"What happened?" she asked again.

Johnny wouldn't tell her.

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Johnny's dad died at the age of 43; John was only 15.

John missed his dad, but not a whole lot. They had never been close. His dad was a respected man in the community, and he did many of the usual fatherly things with John, but there was always a barrier between them. John had always been a little afraid of him. John didn't think about the nightmares of his infancy or childhood very often, if at all, but they had affected him.

One day shortly after John turned thirty, he spent an entire day closeted in his office at work. He didn't answer knocks on the door, he wouldn't answer the telephone, and he didn't go to lunch with his co-workers. He just sat at his desk all day, talking with his dad, trying to imagine a day-long visit and conversation. It wasn't until then that he realized his dad had grown up the middle boy in his own family, not particularly well-loved and maybe even half-rejected by the rest of his family. Only then did he begin to understand that his dad was shy about showing emotions and had never learned how to give or show love to his son. And John realized, finally, that his dad had loved him deeply but didn't know how to do it. He felt at peace with his dad.

At least he thought he did.

Many years later, his older sister and he were talking among some friends when she mentioned that alcohol had been banned from their house as they were growing up. She and John laughed about the religious conservatives in their neighborhood, but his sister added, "No, there was another reason. Dad had some men over one night and they all got drunk. Mother threatened to leave him and said he was never allowed to have alcohol in the house again."

That night John understood. And felt sad. And missed his dad... again.

He understood that during that drunken party, his dad had been tossing him in the air and laughing with his drunken friends. John's nightmare of sliding on tilting, sloping floors wasn't a nightmare at all; it had been real. Up and down, up and down, and around and around. The world really had been spinning and falling away from him.

John tried to talk to his dad again that night. He tried to forgive his dad, "I know it wasn't malicious, Dad. I know."

And he wept silently.