

Paulie's Fight

“Hey, kids. Come down here. Your mother and I need to talk to you,” Andrew Freeman called up from the foot of the stairs.

Oh, boy. This can't be good, ten-year-old Paulie thought. We must be in trouble big time. What in the world did we do wrong?

If his parents confined him to his room for the rest of the day, he could finish playing this round of TEKKEN, his favorite martial-arts video game, and many other rounds as well. He set down the controls of his PlayStation.

When Paulie and his nine-year-old sister, Courtney, came downstairs, their mother and father were sitting in the stiff wingback chairs on either side of the lamp table in the living room. He and his sister sat next to each other on the edge of the sofa opposite them. A moment of unbearable silence.

“I know I didn't take out the trash yesterday, but I'll do it this morning,” Paulie said, hoping to avert disaster.

“And I’ll clean my room today,” Courtney added immediately. “I just didn’t have time this week, with the math test and all.”

“Don’t worry, kids,” Colleen Freeman said. “You’re not in trouble.”

Paulie and Courtney leaned back against the sofa.

“Your father and I want you to know that we both love you very much.”

“Wait,” Paulie said, bolting forward again. “You didn’t call us down here to say you love us. You do that every time you hang up the phone.”

“And you never talk to us together,” Courtney said.

“Well, we have something important to tell you,” their father cut in. He shifted his weight in the chair and cleared his throat. “Your mother and I are . . . uh . . . well, we are— ”

“Your father is moving out on Monday,” their mother said.

“But why? You don’t want to live with us anymore?” Courtney asked her father. Her lower lip quivered.

“No, it’s not that. Your mother and I are . . . uh—”

“Getting a divorce,” she completed his sentence.

“What? But you can’t do that!” Paulie objected. He had just been sucker-punched in the gut.

“I know this is a shock,” their mother said, “But don’t worry. We’ll still be a family.”

Like hell. Paulie wasn’t giving up his family without a fight. Now it was his turn to throw a few punches.

“Oh yeah? Will you still be in Dad’s family?”

“Well, no—”

“And will he still be in your family?”

“No, but—”

“Then how will *we* still be a family?” Paulie thought he had won the first round.

“We will always be your parents, Paulie.”

“Are you leaving because I made a B in math?” Courtney asked her father before Paulie could spar again with his mother. Her voice almost broke.

“No, no. This has nothing to do with you, dear” her mother answered in her father’s place.

“But why, then?”

“Well, these things are hard to explain to children. But the important thing is that you both understand we will always love you.”

“Promise?” Courtney wiped away a tear.

“Yes, of course, sweetheart.”

“But you don’t love each other anymore?” Paulie was coming out of his corner for round two.

“Sometimes adults fall out of love,” his father answered.

“But didn’t you promise to love each other forever when you got married?”

“I suppose we did, but things have changed.” He shifted his weight in the chair again, crossed his legs, and then uncrossed them.

“So, when you promise that you’ll love us forever, that can change too?”

“Uh . . . well . . . uh—”

“No, we’ll never stop loving you. I promise,” his mother interjected.

“But you’re both promise-breakers.” Paulie thought he had just boxed them into a corner.

“And when I grow up and get married, my husband can fall out of love with me and just leave?” Courtney said.

When he saw the tears welling up in Courtney’s eyes, Paulie took her hand. He knew that she couldn’t fight the way he could.

“No, honey. I’m sure that will never happen to you,” her mother said.

“So where are you going to live?” Paulie asked his father. Round three was just beginning.

“I’m getting a two-bedroom apartment in Retiro. I’ll need you to be the man of the house from now on and take care of your mother and sister when I’m gone.”

“But I’m just ten years old. You’re supposed to be the man of the house. You and Mom are supposed to take care of us.”

“Will we ever get to see you?” Courtney said, the tears still hovering on her eyelids.

“Your father and I have decided that you will each spend a week with one of us and then switch the next week. That way we will each have to take care of only one child at a time.”

“You don’t want to take care of us anymore?” Courtney’s little body collapsed back into the sofa.

“No, that didn’t come out right. What I meant is that we both want to be involved in your lives—but we also want a little more freedom for ourselves.”

“So Courtney and I are going to share a room at Dad’s?” Paulie was probing with a slight jab.

“Well, not at the same time. You’ll alternate weeks,” his father answered.

“Can I hang up my kickboxing posters?” His room was his space; he was defending his territory now.

“Eew, no!” Courtney said, taking her hand away from Paulie’s, though her tears hadn’t dried up yet.

Paulie had just taken an unexpected hit but chose not to fight back. Changing his stance, he tried a new jab. “How will we get to school and back?”

“You’ll have to take the bus,” his father said.

“But what about my kickboxing practice at the dojo?”

“Well, I have to work. I won’t be able to pick you up.”

“So, I have to quit the team?”

“Uh . . .”

“When I first started kickboxing last year, I wanted to quit because I couldn’t fight as well as the other kids. But you said I couldn’t because we don’t have quitters in our family. So I worked real hard and got a lot better. And now I have to quit the team because you’re quitting your marriage? That’s not fair. The instructor and the other fighters are counting on me. We have a big tournament coming up.”

“Now, Paulie,” his mother said.

What? He didn’t think he was hitting below the belt.

“And my piano lessons?” Courtney asked, tearing up again. “You won’t have a piano in your apartment, will you? How can I practice?”

“We’ll all have to make some sacrifices,” her father said. “For one thing your mother and I will have to maintain two households on the same income. There won’t be as much money for things we want to do or buy.”

“But what about Thanksgiving and Christmas and our birthdays? We won’t all be together then anymore?” The tears were streaming down her cheeks now.

“I’m afraid not, pumpkin,” her mother answered.

“Wait a minute,” Paulie said. “If I live with Mom one week and Courtney lives with Dad, and then we switch, Courtney and I won’t be living together anymore. We’re not the ones getting divorced. We’ll never see each other.” That realization nearly knocked him out.

“I guess we hadn’t considered that,” his mother said. “Your father and I just thought it would be easier if we each took care of only one child at a time.”

Paulie was reeling; his head was spinning; he was about to fall on the mat. Now he was losing not only his parents but his sister as well. He scarcely had the strength for one more jab.

“Maybe that’s why you’re getting divorced. You each just think about yourself and not anyone else.”

As though returning to his corner of the ring, Paulie slumped back into the sofa. He wanted to keep fighting, but he knew the final bell had rung, the last round was over, and he had lost the fight. Courtney was still crying, and now he was too.

Yes, this fight was over. Paulie’s parents were getting divorced, and there was nothing he could do about it. But another fight was just beginning, a much longer one. He would no longer be fighting against his parents. From now on he would be fighting for himself and for his sister. Was he equal to the task? He had to be.

Paulie dried his tears.

Glossary of Names

Andrew: man (Greek)

Freeman: = free man

Colleen: girl or young woman (Irish). Andrew and Colleen Freeman are a man and a woman who want to become free from each other.

Paulie: the diminutive of “Paul,” which means “small” (Latin)

Courtney: short (ultimately from Latin)

Retiro: retreat, retirement (Spanish). By moving to Retiro, Andrew is retreating from his family and retiring from his responsibilities.