

Rebecca Petruck
2012 Metts Ave.
Wilmington, NC 28403
910.762.0515
Rebecca_Petruck@yahoo.com
www.rebeccapetruck.com

EXCERPT FROM *FISHING FOR PRESENTS*:

(Need to know: Madden is still short on cash. As a last resort he has decided to call Grandpa D. Grandpa D gave Madden fifty dollars for his ninth birthday. Madden plans to ask for an “advance.”)

Madden figured this was as good a time as any. He rinsed plates and loaded the dishwasher instead.

“What is it, Madden?” Mom asked.

He sighed. Sometimes it was hard having a Mom who knew so much. He dried his hands very carefully. “What’s Grandpa D’s phone number?”

There was no response. Madden dried his hands some more. Silence. He wondered if Mom had left the kitchen and looked up. She watched him, but he couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“You want to talk to Dad?”

He nodded. It was always weird to hear Mom refer to Grandpa D as ‘Dad.’ It was weird just to think of Mom having a dad. She was a mom, after all. She was *married* to Dad.

“You’ve never called him before.”

“Exactly,” he bluffed. “I’m almost ten. I should make my own calls now.”

She got beady-eyed. Madden sighed. She was on to him. But then she dug in the miscellaneous drawer for a pen and scrap of paper. She wrote the number down and

handed it to him. He studied it without moving. He liked the way Mom crossed her sevens and slashed her zeroes.

“He’d like to hear from you,” Mom said. “He’s not used to Mom being gone. He gets lonely.” Her voice wavered.

Each word felt like a hammer, striking him deeper and deeper into the floor.

Suddenly, she hugged him close, squeezing too hard, then pushed him away, like she had done in front of the coffee shop that day she’d thought he’d been lost or worse. “I trust you. You’ll do the right thing.”

She walked away, leaving him with the number and the phone. She definitely knew why he wanted to call Grandpa D. He felt like one of her ants, only worse, because she loved her ants. He felt stepped on.

But he said he’d call, and now he had to.

The phone smelled like lavender from the cleaning wipes Mom used on it almost every day. The phone was one of the few things she was weird about. He could probably drop a bagel in the dirt, cream cheese side down, dust it off and eat it, and Mom would be unfazed. But the phone had to be cleaned regularly or she fretted about bacteria.

Grandpa D answered on the seventh ring. Madden wondered if that meant his luck might change.

“Hello?” Grandpa D asked. His voice was rough, like he hadn’t used it much today.

“Hi, Grandpa, it’s Madden.”

“My grandson?” He coughed a laugh. “Well this is a surprise. What’s the occasion?”

“Nothing,” Madden said. Grandpa D sounded really happy. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Been fighting off a cold. Your mother’s been out a few times.”

“She has?” Madden thought he knew everything Mom did in a day. And he didn’t remember her mentioning that Grandpa D was sick. He bit his lip. “Is it bad?”

Grandpa D coughed another laugh. “Naw, don’t worry. Old roosters like me are too stringy to eat.”

Madden didn’t know what Grandpa D was talking about, but he didn’t sound worried so Madden relaxed a bit. Grandpa D asked him about school, and Madden told him about Jack’s Christmas miracle.

“His head will liven up the Christmas concert,” Grandpa D said, “I’m sure not going for the singing.”

Madden had to agree. He’d been dressing up and singing dorky songs twice a year since birth practically. It was torture.

“Speaking of Christmas,” Grandpa D chuckled, “I got a list. I’ve checked it twice.”

Madden squeezed the phone in his fist. “What?”

“Lots of socks, underwear, a book about the history of plastic, a picture of the president—”

“That sounds like Rose’s list,” Madden said.

Grandpa D laughed. “You’re a sharp kid, Mad. Comes from my side of the family.”

“That’s what Grandma M says.” He remembered that she actually had said that when he’d asked her for money, saying he was like his mother.

“Woah ho! You must have said something she didn’t like.” He snickered.
“Watch yourself there or she’ll stop feeding you.”

It was funny how all of a sudden he realized he *liked* his grandpa. He’d never exactly thought about it before.

“And you know,” Grandpa D added, “not all of that German she uses is suitable for young ears.”

“I knew it,” Madden shouted. He had hoped some of the words were curses, and now he had confirmation. “Which ones? What do they mean?”

Grandpa D snorted. “I’m no fool. You’ll have to guess.”

Madden begged, but Grandpa D didn’t give up a thing. Madden changed tactics. “About that list,” he began.

“I wondered when you’d get around to nagging me about what you’re getting for Christmas.”

He waited, but Madden didn’t have the heart to play along.

Grandpa D filled in the silence. “It’s been fun shopping and wrapping presents and such.” He hesitated. “I let your grandmother do that by herself.”

Madden remembered how every present Grandma D gave was like a fortress he had to break into because there was so much tape and ribbon, several layers of paper, and often more than one box. Hers were always the best to open—the gift hardly mattered.

“Well,” Grandpa D cleared his throat. “The concert’s Wednesday, right? I’ll bring my earplugs.”

“Can’t you just turn your hearing aid off?”

“Woah ho! Watch it, *der schatz*,” Grandpa D laughed. “I’m a tough old bird, remember?”

Madden had meant the question seriously, but he was glad he’d made Grandpa D laugh again. And that word had to be a curse!

They talked a few minutes more then Madden hung up promising himself that he would call Grandpa D more often. Mom and Dad watched TV in the living room, but it seemed like they were waiting for him. He walked to the stairs, giving them a wave, but Mom stopped him before he could ascend.

“How is he doing?”

Madden frowned at her. “Why didn’t you tell me he was sick?”

“He’ll be fine. The doctor said it was a simple head cold.”

“You went to the doctor?” Madden was outraged. It must have been bad for Mom to take Grandpa D to the doctor. She should tell him stuff like that.

Dad put an arm around Mom, speaking quietly. “It’s been hard for your mom, too,” he said, “since her mom died.”

Madden opened his mouth but no words came. Mom had cried a lot when Grandma D died. He’d been sad, too, but Grandma D was old, and it hadn’t seemed really real anyway. In his mind, she’d been at his last birthday party and was out for the big Fourth of July picnic Mom held each year. He expected to see her at the concert and Christmas dinner. He tried to imagine what it would be like if Mom died and immediately felt like throwing up.

“He sounded good,” he said finally. He grinned. “He cursed at me in German.”

“What?” Mom gasped, but Dad only laughed.

“I’m sure he had reason to,” Dad said.

Mom elbowed him hard enough to make him grunt. “We don’t curse at each other in this house.”

“He’s your father,” Dad protested.

She ignored him. “Do you remember the word, Mad?”

Was she kidding? Of course he did! He was going to write down every word that sounded like a curse so he could use them on Jack, and maybe Rose. “*Schatz.*”

Mom bit away a smile. “Ah.”

“What does it mean?” he demanded.

She shook her head. “I think it would be better if you didn’t repeat it.”

He squinted at her. He slumped. “It’s not a curse word, is it?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Dad said. “Don’t be disappointed.”

Madden made a face at Dad. Why was he calling Madden ‘sweetheart’? It was weird.

But Mom was beady-eyed again. “Why are you interested in German curses?”

“Uhhh.”

Dad saved him. “Well, son, it’s about that time for bed, don’t you think?”

It was early, but Madden was grateful for the escape. He dashed up the stairs, calling ‘good nights’ over his shoulder. That was a close one.