

Raindrops

“Princess,” he says, “let’s go walking. So I can show you something.”

“Is it something nice?” I ask.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

I follow my dad to the end of our driveway and pass his two old Cadillacs, one white, the other light blue. Across the street is nothing, just creepy corn fields. The boy from Miss Morales’ class told me someone died in there. Kyle’s basketball rolled over the road and got stuck between the stalks once. I dared him to go get it and he made it all the way to the dusty pebbles on the border of the field before he ran back, so I think he’s brave for a little brother.

The sidewalk in front of our house leads into town when I turn right, but to the left it dead ends after the neighbor’s mailbox. There are a few extra concrete squares and then it stops. The road continues around the large fields of wild grass that make my calves itch, and next is the forest. I’m not allowed to go in the woods. I start towards the town. Maybe Dad will buy me a New Kids on the Block magazine or some candy cigarettes. I pretend they’re KOOLs, since he smokes those after work.

“Where are you going? It’s this way!”

I turn around to see him several steps in the opposite direction. “I can’t go that way! Kyle gets frogs from that way! And he said he saw a...you know...”

“A what?”

“A snake,” I whisper and shut my eyes.

“Your brother didn’t see a snake! He was trying to scare you.” He gives a small laugh. “Come on, I’m gonna show you some flowers.”

“Oh...I do love flowers.” His hand reaches for mine. I don’t care about my dad’s hands being dirty. He has black marks on his hands from fixing cars. I hold him tight. Our hands are the same color, except my tan is all over and his is only on his face and arms. We have the same crazy and curly hair. No one else in the family has our brown curls, but only he has the green eyes.

“Are there any tiger lilies in the woods?”

“Why? Are those your favorite?”

I nod. “Well, I love orange. And tigers.”

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He looks serious. “I got bit by a tiger before.”

I stand still. “You were bit by a *tiger*?”

“Nope. By a tiger lily! Roar!” He makes claws with his hands and tickles me.

I start walking again and wonder what kind of flowers there are. My grandma that speaks Spanish loves turquoise forget-me-nots with yellow centers. She says Jesus made them pretty like His mom’s eyes. My grandma that speaks English loves sunflowers. She even read me a bedtime story about sunflowers that could grow all the way to the clouds. I asked her if that could happen, and she said no, but it is true that sunflowers know exactly where the sun is. They’re soulmates.

“Almost there,” my dad says.

I thought we were going to the forest, but we stop at a ditch with shallow water and giant grass that’s as tall as him.

“This is it, princess.”

I turn in a circle and look in every direction. “There’s no flowers here. Why did you trick me?”

“I didn’t trick you. These are the flowers. They’re called cattails.” He takes slanted baby steps into the ditch and gets mud all over his leather cowboy boots. He pulls a small knife out of his pocket and cuts one down for me. “Your grandpa used to take me to look at cattails all the time when I was your age.”

I hold the plant in my hand and stare at its ugly brown top. “Looks like a corndog. And it stinks.”

Dad laughs at me. “Well, I like them. Watch this.” He takes his knife and cuts through the brown top, straight down the middle. “Okay. Now touch the inside.”

The inside is white and soft. It reminds me of the fluffy dandelions that carry wishes. “Dad, these *are* nice. I like cattails.”

“You wanna know something else neat? They can only live if they stay in the water. They’re not like other flowers. Other flowers, you can water sometimes and they will still grow. Cattails, they need the water to live...always.”

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My grandma that speaks English wakes me up at 5 o'clock in the morning. "Put your shoes on. You can stay in your pajamas." She is already dressed and the car is warming up outside.

"Where are we going?" I put my raincoat on over my mermaid nightgown. My grandpa carries my sleepy brother, puts him in the backseat, and I climb in next to him. No one is talking. We get dropped off at my Spanish grandma's house. No one is talking at her house either.

Grandma gives us warm corn tortillas and *chorizo con huevos*. We eat our breakfast, then she tells us to go lay in her bed to sleep. Kyle gets in the covers and I watch the storm outside. My dad's white Cadillac pulls up, but my mom is the driver. She sprints inside, straight to my grandma's bedroom, and falls onto the bed.

"Mom? Why are you crying?" She is face down, with her head in her arms, and she is loud. She can't breathe all the way.

"Your dad..."

"Mom? What did Daddy do?"

My grandmother walks in to get me. "*Mija*, your father has passed away this morning. He was in a car accident."

"Does that mean he is...dead?"

"Yes, *mija*. I am sorry... He is in heaven now." She tries to hug me, but I don't move a muscle. She goes back into the kitchen and I hear her tell Uncle Hector to go buy me a surprise. "Get her a book about those singers she likes. And a game or something fun. Go now!"

I listen to Mom cry and stand with my forehead against the window. Hector backs out of the driveway in his white pick-up truck. The rain pours and pours. If my mom were a cloud, I wonder if she'd be this storm. Is my dad in the clouds now?

I hear the front door creak and Uncle Hector tells me to come to the kitchen table to play a new game. "It's called *Boggle*. Do you know how to play? You know how to spell words, right?"

I nod my head. "I won the second grade spelling bee."

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“That’s good.” He shakes up two handfuls of alphabet dice in a clear box. When he stops, the dice all lay flat in the bottom. “When I turn over the timer, you write down all of the words you see. The letter dice *have* to touch each other in the box or they don’t count. Alright...let’s try this. Ready? Go!”

I write down all of the words that I can find. I don’t see very many.

“Okay. Time’s up! If I say any of your words, cross them out. Whoever has the most words left wins. I have ‘bee’, ‘bed’, ‘did’, ‘dip’, and ‘pad’. What do you have?”

“Dad and die. I hate this game!” I throw my pencil on the floor and lock myself in the bathroom.

This is all my fault! I don’t tell anyone, but it’s my fault he’s dead. When I was four, I was jumping on the couch like Tigger and my dad walked in the room, smiling. He asked me why I was so happy and I told him it was because I had a good dream. When he asked what it was about, I said “ I had a dream that you died.” I didn’t know what it meant then. I just made something up. I still don’t know what *dead* means. I didn’t mean for it to come true! He gave me a whooping with his belt that day. It was the only time he was ever mad at me. An hour later, he told me he was sorry and brought me some toys from the drugstore. I got pink Play-Doh and a Rainbow Brite coloring book. He said I shouldn’t say things like that to people that I love.

My mother gives me a lacy navy blue dress to wear, with white stockings and shiny black church shoes. The dress is scratchy, but she says I have to wear it for the funeral. I don’t go inside the cathedral during the service.

“It’s time to say goodbye to your dad before he leaves,” my mom whispers. The church is starting to empty. I dip my finger in the holy water bowl at the entrance and let her walk me down the aisle, to the silver coffin. She lifts me up to see him. Curly hair, black suit, eyelids. I get out of her grip, and run to my grandma.

I bury my face in her side. She strokes the side of my face and I can feel the coldness of her wedding ring. “*Mija*, it’s okay. Your dad will watch over you. He’s with the angels.”

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“It’s all my fault, Grandma!” I tell her about my secret, about the dream, and the whooping, and the coloring book. “I killed Daddy.”

“No, no, no.” She shakes her head. “Only the Lord can make someone die. You had nothing to do with this. Your daddy was in a car accident. It’s not your fault, *mijita*. Do you want to know something your great-grandmother told me? If it’s raining when someone dies, it is a sign that the person went to heaven. It means God’s tears are coming down from the sky, to show he is sad for your loss also. It has been raining all week. Ever since the accident. I think some of those tears are from your dad, crying because he had to leave you.”

I sit with Grandma in the limo that’s going to the cemetery. It rains harder when we pull up. The adults have dark umbrellas and they shield me so I can walk to my seat in the coffin tent. Father Martin prays. My family begins to place flowers on my dad’s casket. Mom’s black makeup traces the tears on her cheeks. Grandma walks up to lay down her rose and I don’t go up with her. I sneak to the side of the road and sit in the biggest puddle I can find, in my lacy dress and white stockings and black shiny shoes. I splash water all over me. I roll over in the puddle and taste dirt in my mouth. Water squishes in my shoes and I splash faster. The rain makes my hair straight. I am going to be in so much trouble and I don’t care. I have to soak up all of the water. So I can live.