

*Snow Angels*

Anastasia has always felt a little different than the other eight-year-old girls.

She should know. After all, it feels like she's been eight years old for *ages*. She's very ready to be nine. She even has a frilly pink dress from the corner store all picked out for when her mama takes her shopping. She frequently lists all the names of the friends she'll invite, and daydreaming about the cake she'll ask her mama to bake makes her stomach growl every time. Maybe her daddy will make hot dogs.

However, the day is still far enough away that she can enjoy the other days without too much impatience.

She passes her time playing singing games in groups of chattering girls, dirtying her tennis shoes in the damp mulch of Hillcrest Park. The small playground is located on the corner of two of the subdivisions on the edge of the northern city, and Anastasia knows it like the back of her hand. She spends all her time here in this beautiful little bubble, and she's confident that she knows it better than any of the other girls and boys who come to play.

She knows all the hidden nooks and crannies of the expansive jungle gym, and can hide quite well and for quite a long time during hide-and-seek. She has mastered the monkey bars after several failed attempts, and can easily swing across them in under ten seconds, which is quite impressive to her peers. She likes to sit very, very still in the middle of the seesaw, trying to stay perfectly balanced.

Her favorite, though, is the swing set. She's spent hours kicking her little legs for all she's worth, building up the stamina needed to out-swing all her competition. She'd even

challenged herself by jumping off at her highest point, enjoying the *oohs* and *ahhs* from the others.

She giggles as she recounts her days, enjoying the company of her friends, and is always saddened when the shadows start to lengthen.

Jealousy pangs in her chest as she watches her friends disappear, one by one, with their mamas, and she sits on the swing, dutifully waiting for hers.

When the sun sinks behind the trees, and she had yet to see a sign of her mama, she sighs.

She'll give it five more minutes, then she'll make her own way home. It's not very far, anyways.

...

The days are getting shorter, which makes Anastasia sad. That means her friends go home earlier, and she's left to wait alone for her mama.

She wants to be angry at her mama for always forgetting her, but she really can't be. In fact, she used to remember to come get her every day, and they'd skip home together, laughing. Anastasia misses those nights, because now, she just waits alone.

Even though her little heart wants to be mad, she can't. Daddy said it wasn't mama's fault, after all.

When she was six, much younger than she was now, her daddy sat her down and explained that mama was sick, but not the kind of sick you could see. That had confused little Anastasia quite a bit, but she understood now that she was older. Daddy explained that it was a sickness in the head, in the brain.

Her schoolteachers had taught her that the brain controlled a lot of what they did and felt, so she couldn't imagine it not working right. No wonder her mama forgot her all the time. If she was hurting in her head, she'd forget her, too.

So, no, she can't be mad at her mama.

But it still kind of hurts to see all the other little girls go home with their mamas.

One day, though, her mama remembers.

It's quite a normal day, too. Only Peggy and Jean and Lynn remain, and they are playing Ring Around the Rosie, giggling as they all collapse into the snow on the last round. It bites through her heavy coat and tingles against her skin, but it doesn't bother her so much anymore. After all, she spends quite a bit of time outside, and the city isn't warm except in the middle of summer.

Anastasia prefers the winter, but she loves getting ice cream with her mama and daddy during the really hot days. She wonders how long until they can do that again.

As the thought crosses her mind, she sits up, brushing the snowflakes from her shoulders, and looks up.

Her mama is there.

Her mama is there!

"Mama!" She shouts, running to her with arms open wide. She crashes into her mama's front, wrapping her arms around her waist, but her mama doesn't budge. She doesn't even seem to realize that Anastasia is there.

Anastasia looks up, resting her chin against her mama's stomach to see her face.

"Mama?"

Her mama's eyes are suspiciously blank and wet as she stares at the playground.

“Uh-oh,” Anastasia says almost to herself, tugging on her mama’s hand. She glances nervously around to see the other mothers staring, whispering, and feels a blush creep up her neck. She doesn’t want them to make fun of her mama, or her. It isn’t *her* fault.

“Mama?” She says again, tugging her hand. Her mama doesn’t look at her.

Anastasia swallows, traitorous tears brimming in her eyes. Her daddy had told her what to do. Sometimes, he said, when mama’s sickness got bad, she didn’t know where she was, or who she was with, so Anastasia had to work really hard to help her remember, and could she help Daddy do that?

“I can do it,” she said to herself, blinking back the cold tears that stung her eyes, tugging her mama’s hand again. “Mama. It’s me, Anastasia. You’re at the park. Remember?”

But Anastasia seems to have said the wrong thing, because her mama yanks her hand away, pressing both of them firmly to her mouth. Now her mama is crying, too, and Anastasia doesn’t know what she did wrong.

*That’s okay, she assures herself. Daddy says sometimes she cries for no reason.*

She glances nervously at the other mothers, who are still watching. Why are they just watching? Why aren’t they helping? Her mama would never leave another mother in trouble like this.

Anastasia takes a deep breath.

“Mama!” She yells up at her mama, hoping to shock her awake.

It does something! Her mama looks frantically at the swing set, then down at her hands, as if she can’t see them, and she sends a passing glance towards Anastasia before looking at the throng of whispering mothers, whose eyes are both worried and suspicious. They hug their little girls close.

“I’m sorry, Annie,” her mama says, tears on her red cheeks, before she turns and runs away.

“Mama! *Mama!*” Anastasia screams as her mother disappears, losing her valiant battle with the tears in her eyes.

She looks towards her friends, but they’re being quickly dragged away by their own mamas, and—and hers just left without her.

Anastasia flees to the solace of the jungle gym, pulling her knees to her chest and crying her little heart out. Her mama just—just *left* her, and she’d been so excited, because she’d finally come on time.

And she *knows* she shouldn’t be angry. Daddy will be disappointed in her if she’s angry. It isn’t mama’s fault, it’s the sickness. But...but Anastasia is all alone, now, and...

Anastasia cries for a long time, even after the sun goes down.

She still waits, but her mama doesn’t show, and she decides to make her own way home.

...

The first snow is always special for Anastasia.

She giggles as she stomps around in the fluffy white blanket covering the dirty mulch, laughing as she trips and falls on top of it, the melting snow soaking into her winter clothes. Her friends soon join her in her aimless frolicking, and it’s even better.

Anastasia and her mama and daddy always used to celebrate the first snow of the year together. Daddy went out and bought special syrup, and they collected the top snow to make snow cones, which they ate in front of the fireplace. That was only after they made a gigantic snowman, of course.

She and her mama and daddy all had to work together to roll the gigantic bottom snowball around their yard before it couldn't get any bigger, and then they'd make another big one, and a little head. Her mama would help her decorate it with sticks and buttons and a carrot while her daddy rummaged through their winter clothes, searching for suitable garments for this year's winter guest.

When she was five, her daddy chose a bright red and blue plaid scarf to wrap tightly around the large snowman's shoulders, complete with a matching vest that her mama cut and sewed back together to fit around the snowman's wide middle. Anastasia giggled when her daddy said the snowman had eaten too much pecan pie at Thanksgiving.

To finish off the ritual, her daddy would put Anastasia on top of his shoulders to fix a tall black hat on the snowman's head while her mama took a picture, and every year, she retained a spark of hope that it would turn into Frosty. It never did, but the memories were magical, anyways.

Then her mama got sick in the head, and they couldn't do that anymore.

She misses her snowmen. Maybe her friends will help her build one today!

The thought warms her all day, and when her friends finally meet her at the park, they set to work. They roll a lot of the mulchy snow into a gigantic ball (not quite as big as the one she made with her family, but it will do) and barely manage to lift the middle section up on to the base.

The head is tricky. Anastasia ended up placing the head by carefully balancing on the monkey bars, leaning out with her torso over open air as she struggled to fix the head atop the snowman, finally succeeding with a triumphant yell.

They decorated the snowman as best they could, and decided he was lonely. They all fell on their backs surrounding the snowman and giggled as they spread their arms and legs rapidly, making snow angels to keep their creation company. Anastasia giggles and laughs as the snow falls into her eyes and settles on her eyelashes.

She pretends, while she's on the ground, that she lives in a snow globe, and that's where the snow is coming from. In the snow globe, her mama isn't sick, and her daddy is still happy. Daddy hasn't been happy since mama got sick.

She closes her eyes and smiles as the snowflakes tickle her red, frigid nose and cheeks, giggling some more.

When the other mamas come to get their children, they all take sticks and draw their names sloppily in the indent of their angels, hoping it won't snow too much to cover them up.

Anastasia hears Gloria's mama come over to inspect her angel, commenting on how beautiful it is. "Who made an extra one?" She asks, counting the angels.

"It's not extra, it's Annie's," Gloria corrects, and Annie feels warmth spread through her.

Apparently Gloria's mama doesn't feel the same, though. Her mama looks at Anastasia's snow angel and glances fleetingly at Annie, not even bothering to speak to her before hurrying Gloria away.

Anastasia feels hurt tears prickle in her eyes, but stubbornly sniffs, wiping her eyes on her damp jacket sleeves.

Just because they don't like her mama doesn't mean they shouldn't like *her*. Why won't they let her friends play with her without looking like—like *that*? Why can't the other mothers understand that her mama is just sick, and she'll get better?

All her friends leave eventually, and Anastasia foregoes the swing set in favor of settling back into the indent of her snow angel, fluttering her eyes as the snowflakes tickle her face.

She smiles, and imagines that she's back in the snow globe. She giggles.

...

She sees her Daddy a few days later.

Anastasia dearly misses her daddy. Since mama got sick in the head, he's been around less, and she really, really misses him. She misses the way they'd stay up late on nights with thunderstorms and he'd read to her in front of the fire, kissing her head whenever thunder rumbled and she got scared.

She misses his big, warm hugs and his funny jokes that always make mama mad. She misses him.

She and her friends have made more snow angels, since theirs are buried by the new, fresh, fluffy snow. Their snowman is still standing tall, and they don't want him to be lonely, so they have to keep re-making his snow angel friends. She doesn't write her name in hers this time. She doesn't want to make the other mothers mad again, even though it makes *her* mad.

Her mama would say that it isn't Christian-like. She decides to be Christian-like for just a day, then she'll go back to being mad.

Anastasia is a little sad, because Peggy and Dolores have stopped coming to the park. Gloria says that their mamas didn't like them hanging around the park, anymore, but she doesn't know why.

Anastasia feels tears prick her eyes, and she can't help but wonder if it's because of her, but she wipes at them quickly. She's going to be Christian-like today. She's not going to cry or be angry. For her mama, for just one day, she's going to be Christian-like.



Anastasia and her remaining friends have fun that day. Lynn teaches them a new game she learned at school, and even though Anastasia keeps messing up, she giggles, and has fun. She's going to be Christian-like and not think about the bad things.

It works quite well until the end of the day, when the mothers come to collect their little girls, and Anastasia looks up. She always looks for her mama, even though she knows by now she won't be there. It hurts, but she's going to be Christian-like.

She sucks in a surprised breath, though, when she sees her daddy, instead.

"Daddy?" She says tentatively. She hasn't seen her daddy in...in *so long*. So long, and she's *missed* him! "Daddy!"

But her daddy is looking in her direction with angry eyes, and though Anastasia has started to run to him, she stumbles to a stop, cringing hesitantly under his eyes.

Her daddy looks like he does when he's angry, but also hurt. When...when he's stepped on one of her toys, and his foot hurts, but he's also mad at her for leaving it there. She doesn't like it on him. It's scary.

"Daddy?" She asks quietly.

Her daddy looks past her, like he refuses to see her, like he's angry.

Oh, no. Is this because she couldn't help her mama? Because she didn't defend her mama against the other mothers who were being so mean to her? Daddy had *asked* her to help, but—but she didn't know how! It wasn't her fault, it was—it was the sickness!

"I didn't mean to," she says shakily, stepping towards her daddy.

But tears stream from her eyes as her daddy shakes his head, that same twisted, hurt expression on his face, and leaves.

“Daddy,” she says quietly, before tears fall, despite her efforts, and she sobs. “Daddy, no! Don’t leave me! *Daddy!*”

No. She’s made him so mad that he’s going to let her walk home all alone tonight. She didn’t stick up for her mama, and now he’s angry with her.

Her friends are leaving, and her mama is sick, and her daddy is angry at her, because she can’t help her mommy.

The shadows are stretching over the park, and in the safety of those shadows, Anastasia forgets being Christian-like. Christian-like folks don’t hate, but Anastasia *hates*. She hates her mama, she hates her daddy, and she *hates* the sickness in her mama’s head. She hates it, she hates it, she *hates* it!

She hates it *so much* that she throws a tantrum, and she attacks the snow angels and the snowman with her gloved hands and her damp boots and she throws herself at the looming structure, and she isn’t living in a snow globe. Her mama’s sickness is real, and she *hates* it.

She destroys the snowmen, and the snow angels, and then she sits on the swing and cries until the sun sets.

She waits there for another disappointing night.

...

Anastasia has always felt a little different from the other eight-year-old girls.

Day by frigid day, she sits on the swing, her pale fingers clutching the iron chains. Her feet dangle just above the slight ditch worn by years of kicking feet, and she wonders how much longer it will be until she’s tall enough to kick off the ground all by herself.

She’s felt quite lonely, lately. The other little girls she used to play with have all left, and no one comes back anymore. The little park she loves so much has fallen into disrepair, iron

rusting under the heavy snowfall and mulch disintegrating into brown sludge, clogging the grass around the park.

She feels like she's been eight years old for a very long time. She can't wait to be nine. Maybe the nine-year-olds will be different.

She waits on the swing another night, and wonders why her mother is so late every day. She sighs, long-suffering and weary. The cold is nipping at her.

*Don't let Jack Frost nip at your nose*, her mother chided in her mind, when she was much smaller.

She supposes she should follow her mother's advice and start on home. She'll give it five more minutes, then she'll go. Maybe Daddy will make her hot chocolate, if he's not still mad at her.

...

Two women walk briskly down the sidewalk, shopping bags lining their arms as they hurry home through the fading sunlight. The cold is biting and brutal, and their exposed noses and cheeks sting red in the frozen air.

"You'd think we lived in the Arctic Circle," one of them complains, shivering as she tries to maneuver her thermal coat tighter around her shoulders. "It must be below freezing."

"It hasn't been this cold in decades," the other woman agrees, her eyes flicking briefly to the destitute playground, once the life and color of the neighborhood. "I'd just moved here after college. That...oh, I remember. That was the winter that poor little girl died."

Her companion gasps in surprise, following her line of sight. "Oh, goodness. What happened?"

“Poor girl’s mother was sick in the head,” she tuts, adjusting the straps of her bags. Pity lingers in her tone, judgment in her eyes. “Had an episode while she was supposed to be picking up her daughter from the park, and the little girl waited so long she froze to death. They found her the next morning, frozen on the swing. Her father left soon after that—comes back every year for the anniversary of the death, though—but her mother used to visit the park, just...staring.”

“Oh, that poor baby,” the other woman says in horror, a gloved hand covering her wind-chapped lips. “Is that why people started avoiding the area?”

“No, actually. Several kids still went to the park. It was...the rumors that really scared everyone away.”

“What rumors could there possibly be?”

The woman glances around, leaning in to her companion’s side. Her voice is conspiratorially lowered, and though her tone is skeptical, her eyes are alight in morbid fascination. “Some say that little girl is stuck there. Multiple mothers have heard their children talking to or about a little girl named Annie, even when there’s no one there. If you ask me, it’s a bunch of hocus pocus. Poor dears probably heard about the tragedy and felt sorry for the little girl, pretending she was there with them.”

Her companion sighs, her eyes shining even in the dry cold. “How awful.”

The woman glances at the rusted swing set. The empty, faded-green seats have icicles dangling below them, snow frozen over their seats, ice twisting up the rusted chains. One of the seats swings gently in the breeze, the other mostly blocked from the wind by the jungle gym slide. “Awful, indeed.”

...

Anastasia watches them walk hurriedly away and wonders why people would want to talk about something so sad. She feels so bad for that little girl. They even share a name! Still, she's around quite a lot, and she's never seen a ghost.

She giggles to herself at the thought, kicking her legs to swing back and forth. Snowflakes nip at her nose and fingers, but she doesn't mind so much.

Ghosts aren't real. How silly.