

Energy

“Everything dies, Joseph,” was the last thing that Dad ever said to him. “Nothing lasts forever in any kind of permanent form. Everything breaks down and gets rearranged, over, and over again. The energy that was in Ollie isn’t gone, just dispersed” he made an exploding gesture with his hands and trickled his fingers down like rain, “to become part of everything.”

Joseph thought about this for a minute. “So,” he said, “Ollie isn’t in Heaven?”

Dad licked his thumb and wiped the crusty tear trails from Joseph’s cheeks. “In way he is. In a very real sense, Heaven is all around us at every moment.” He put this hand over the little boy’s heart. “Even inside you. And when you think about Ollie and remember all the good times you had together, he’ll be there, too.”

The boy closed his eyes and images of the events of that day flashed through his mind. “*Ollie, how did you get out?*” he had shouted out the school bus window as the dog ran toward them from across the street. He felt the thump from below, saw the heap of brown fur on the road behind them, heard the bus driver cry “*oh my god.*” They had walked him to his front door after that, animal control came, and just like that, Ollie was gone. He had cried for hours, but now his tears were dry, and he was left with only question. So many questions, and no words to express them.

Finally, he managed to say, “Dad?”

“Yes, Joseph?”

“Are you going to die?”

“Yes, son. Someday we all will.”

“Mom, too?”

“Everybody, son.”

“Even me?”

“Yes, son. But not for a long, long time.”

Dad wasn't sad or afraid as he told him these things and that was enough. Joseph accepted this explanation and closed his eyes. After pulling the blankets over him and kissing him on the forehead, Dad turned off the light.

Mom met him on the other side of the door and Joseph squeezed his eyes tighter as he listened to their argument fade down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“Christ, Troy. That's what you tell him? For God's sake, why couldn't you just say Ollie's in Heaven or something. No, you put him to bed with *Everybody's Going to Die*.”

Mom brought up Santa Claus and Joseph fought the temptation to get out of bed and remind her that it was Aunt Lisa, not Dad, that had broken the news about that to him last Christmas.

“I'm not going to lie to my kid, Amy.”

The discussion continued from the kitchen where it heated up, quickly turning to the topic of money like it always did.

Joseph fell asleep to Mom's angry voice and awakened to her screams about an hour before sunrise when the police told her that Dad had been t-boned by a drunk driver on his way to work. His energy had been dispersed.

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“Joseph?”

He opened his eyes to see his mother's bare feet and unshaven legs, the hem of her nightgown coming unstitched in places. The nightgown had gone unwashed for nearly two weeks. Aunt Lisa had stayed with them for a month after the funeral, until Mom didn't cry herself to sleep at night. Until she even laughed a few times. Until all the legal stuff was taken care of and all the wine was gone. When she left, there was no one around anymore to remind Mom to get out of bed, to take a shower, to eat.

Joseph peeled his cheek from the linoleum and crawled out. Mom was already seated with a glass of orange juice and half a bottle of vodka. Rubbing his eyes, he made his way from the pantry to the sink to the fridge, and after situating himself across from her, assembled his breakfast. There was just enough milk left to get his cereal wet, but not enough for it to float.

"There's no more milk," Joseph said.

Mom twisted the ring on her finger absently. "No more milk," she said in a dry, shallow voice.

Joseph crunched a few bites, chasing away the heavy silence that was permeated by the remnants of Dad's ever-dissipating energy. Mom lifted her eyes, once again becoming aware of his presence.

"Did you sleep under the table last night?" she asked.

"No, Momma," he said with his mouth full, spitting crumbs back into his bowl and everywhere else, "I fell asleep with you on the couch. Watching TV."

"Then what were you doing under the table?"

He thought about it for a moment but no clear memory manifested. How exactly did he end up under the table?

"I don't know," he said at last.

“Did you have a bad dream?” she asked.

Joseph thought about it, his mind swirling with colorful abstractions.

"No," he said. "I can't remember my dream. But it wasn't bad."

Mom looked as though she was about to say something else, but only a wordless sigh escaped her. She took a long, deep drink from her glass and went back to studying her ring.

Joseph finished his breakfast and returned the bowl to its place in the sink.

He approached his mother and put his arms as far around her middle as he could reach, nestling his head under her arm. He tried synchronized his breathing with hers as the rhythm of her heartbeat pulsed through him. He longed for her to hug him back, but she didn't. Instead she took in a long, sharp breath, and released it in a series of hiccupping sobs. He let go of her and went to the back yard. The neighbor's cat was there, creeping around the swing set that Dad had built for him. He hopped onto the swing and the cat darted across the yard and up the tree to a branch directly above Ollie's vacant doghouse. Joseph could see the ghost of his late pet scratching at the tree and barking at the cat as had always been their routine.

He pulled the chains of the swing and kicked his legs, building momentum until he was swinging high enough to see over the fence. With Ollie's ghost barks echoing through his head like music, he closed his eyes and pretended to fly, until one of the chains broke and he didn't have to pretend.

He soared through the air for one glorious moment before gravity brought him back down with terrible force. Everything went white at first, and then effervesced into a kaleidoscope of sound and color before the cloudless blue sky emerged and everything was calm. A single line was being drawn down the middle of it by a tiny airplane, like God unzipping the sky. Amber light slipped through the newly formed crack he reached up to touch it. It was silk on his

fingertips and he pushed his thumb into the opening and peeled back the firmament. The amber flowed out like blood from a deep wound and quickly spread, swallowing the tiny plane and bleeding down on the tree and the cat and Joseph.

The air was warm and tasted like honey.

He stood to his feet and looked around. Everything was still there. The swing set with the broken chain, the doghouse. The cat hadn't moved from its spot on the tree branch and didn't seem to be bothered at all by what had just happened. The ghost of Ollie had disappeared, but he could still feel the dog in the ether.

The ground beneath him was soft and offered little resistance to his feet as he bounced across the yard like an astronaut on the moon, getting a little higher with each step.

By the time he reached the edge of the yard he was bouncing high enough to completely jump the fence. He touched down in the middle of the neighbor's yard and then jumped high enough to see over the tops of every house on the street. When he landed once more, he was half a block from home. He made one more incredible leap and this time he stayed in the sky, looking down on the neighborhood he recognized, now bathed in sweet, golden light. He continued to ascend for a while, the houses getting smaller and smaller. The entire town was spread out before him like a giant living map and he was able to identify Aunt Lisa's house and the plant where Dad worked on the outskirts. There was the church, the movie theater, and the park. The high school, the community center, and the bar.

The sky grew darker around him and a moment later it was night. A man stumbled out of the bar and climbed into a four-door pickup. Three blocks away, Dad came out of their house in his work clothes. He started up the family car and backed out into the street. Joseph watched helplessly as the two vehicles were drawn to one another by some invisible force. The pickup

swerved over the yellow line and ran a stop sign. He wanted to call out to his father, to warn him, to save him from the doom that was racing his way. He wanted to fly down there and tell him to change course. Turn around, go back home. Anything.

Before he could act, however, the moment arrived. Dad's car pulled through the intersection and the truck smashed into the driver's side door. A billion particles of light flew out of Dad's body and spread out into the night like fireflies. Some of them floated up to where Joseph was and surrounded him before fading away like dying embers.

Some of them fell to the earth and were absorbed.

Some of them clustered together in eddies and grew brighter before being carried away on the wind to who knows where. Joseph chased one of these clusters, soaring through the night sky until the town below became fields, and the fields became hills, and the hills became mountains.

Soon he was over the ocean, still trying to grab hold of the twisting, turning cluster of light. Just when he thought he had caught up to it enough to touch it, it exploded like a firework into millions of tiny pieces, each one fading into nothing as it fell into the sea.

He hovered there above the surface of the water until uncertainty and despair overcame him and pulled him from the empyrean realm and into the dark and formless deep.

He plunged headfirst into the abyss and, although he anticipated a biting cold, it was a blanket of warmth.

The ocean cradled him and spoke assurances to him.

Heaven is all around us, at every moment. Even inside you.

Mom cried his name from somewhere beyond. From a place of sadness and dying, to which he was afraid to return. Her hands pierced the fabric between the two worlds and pulled

him close to her.

“Joseph,” she asked, “are you okay?”

He sucked in a deep, sharp breath and the world regained its shape. Mom’s face came into focus, her brow wrinkled with concern, her eyes still damp with tears. There was a stinging sensation in his elbow. He touched it and saw a small amount of blood on his fingers. Mom examined his injury and lifted him to his feet, guiding him back toward the house. Looking back, he could see the neighbor’s cat watching them from the tree, unmoved, as Ollie’s fading ghost barked at it from the ground below.