

# Everything Was Beautiful

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There are times when I wake so early that it's still dark outside. Mum's always asleep when that happens, rolled over on her stomach with her arms out either side like she's flying. I go in to pull the covers over her, and watch the air in her chest give in and out like a balloon.

By the time Mum wakes up I'm already dressed and have put the kettle on the stove to boil. She likes a tea in the morning, a glass of milk at night. These are the things that I know now. Like I know she's feeling pretty good when I hear her singing bits of *Goin' to Acapulco* from her bedroom. Or I know that I won't be going to school on mornings she comes out still wearing her flowery nightie only to turn the kitchen lights off 'cause they're shining in her room. But it's okay. Today's a good day.

Dad used to say that where we live is God's country. I think it's 'cause when you stand right at the edge of our property, the main valley drops down so low it's like you're standing on the edge of the earth. That, and the fact that we've got this dam so huge not even Dad could feel the bottom. In the summer months, that felt like a proper blessing. One time, he and I even put some fish in it! And I'm pretty sure they're still there, 'cause when I dive deep down and the water gets cold and my stomach starts to cramp up, I can feel something nibbling on my toes. Dad and I were always running around doing funny things like that, but Mum didn't mind as long as she was spending her days painting. Dad used to tell everyone how well she paints, how she could describe the sky to a blind man. I never really knew what he meant when he said that, but he'd laugh and reach for Mum's hand. This was all before Dad had to go away for a really long time, and I didn't need to be home so much to make sure Mum wasn't trying to cut veggies when her hands get shaky.

The day that Dad went away, Mum threw out a lot of things. Books, paintings, clothes. Even new ones. She said it was so she could have enough space to clear the back room, and turn it into her studio. That room was mostly empty anyway, but I learnt not to ask her questions when she starts

doing stuff late at night. Mum started working on this big painting in the back room, and I'm not allowed to go in, but she says she's gonna fit the whole world on that canvas, and give it to Dad when he comes back. She uses the whole back room like a stage, I used to watch her in the window outside before she caught me. She'd pick up all her brushes like she was trying to tune every instrument in an orchestra. I thought the painting would only take a couple of weeks, and then Dad would come home. But it's been almost a year now. Sometimes I get sad thinking about how much Dad must be missing us, but then I remember he's gonna have Mum's whole world waiting for him when he gets back. And then I feel okay again.

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By the time summer started to come round, things were going real well for Mum and I. She was spending all her days painting away, and singing songs so loud I could hear them even out the back of the house. I liked to imagine her brush working on that canvas, carving away at the time left before Dad came home. One day I even came home from school early 'cause it was too hot for all the kids to be in the one classroom, and I yelled out to Mum as I banged the fly screen shut. I thought Mum was gonna come out to tell me off for slamming doors, but she came out of that back room covered in paint with the kookiest smile on her face. Said that her painting was almost done. And that meant Dad was gonna come home soon.

That night I went to bed feeling the fullest I had in a while. I lay in bed and breathed in so deep I swore the whole room shook. I looked outside my window at the sky and there was God, showing my Dad the way home.

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After that night, time seemed to move so slow 'cause I was getting so impatient about Dad. When was he coming home? I asked Mum. Why would he go so far away from us? Has he gotten any of my letters? But Mum wouldn't budge. Think she wanted it to be a big surprise for me when he

finally came home or something, 'cause she wasn't telling me one thing. She wouldn't even let me see her painting. It wasn't finished yet, she kept saying. It's not finished. But she seemed pale and empty and drained from it all, and I hadn't heard any verses from *Goin' to Acapulco* for a while.

I could tell Mum was getting bad again, 'cause she'd cry a lot over little things or even for no reason at all. Sometimes she'd drop a carton of milk, or spill something that she'd spent ages cooking for us, and it'd take me a few hours to calm her down. I started waking up dead in the middle of the night, all sweaty 'cause I was having these bad dreams, where I wake like normal, but it's freezing, so cold it must be in the middle of winter. I don't know where anyone is, so I go outside to look for them, and suddenly I'm at the dam, ankles deep in dirty water. But I realise something's different - it isn't just dirt or mud - and I look down and all the fish Dad and I put in have floated to the top of the water and are around my legs. Some of them are dead and bloated, with their skin already rotting away in the water, but some are still alive - caught in the shallow water where I stand, flailing and twisting, with their eyes wide open and mouths choking on air. It went on like this for a while, and I got pretty good at putting myself back to sleep. Except one night I just couldn't shake the feeling of the cold and the wet, so I went to Mum's bed, 'cause she used to let me sleep there with Dad when I got scared. She'd even trace *I love you* on my back until I fell asleep. But when I crossed the hallway to her bedroom she wasn't there. Her sheets were all made and pulled up so tight and stiff it looked something like a grave. I turned on her bedside lamp and started off for where she was.

I walked out the back door and grabbed one of the big hunting torches that lit all the way ahead of me. I was careful not to step on the main path where the worn out bits of earth are harsh on your bare feet. When I got down to the water, I flashed the torch over the dam and saw her floating right in the middle with her arms and legs star-fished out. She looked so tiny out there. Like one of those fish Dad and I had put in the dam, as if it had floated up to the surface just like I had dreamt. But I wasn't sure how she was lying so still on that black water.

'Mum!' I yelled out. 'Mum!' I yelled again, but louder this time. She didn't move. She was just lying there, and as I reached the bank and shone the light right at her, I realised her eyes were closed. 'Mum! Mum!' I dropped the torch on the ground and began wading through the water that was so dark it looked like bunker oil. My clothes hung thick and heavy and the water was a lot colder than I thought it would be. I tried not thinking about those fish. I started swimming breast stroke when the water got deeper, and eventually got to Mum in the middle, where I could see she was still wearing her nightie.

'Mum?' I said more quietly, puffing as I treaded water and reached to touch her shoulder. Her eyes opened real slow, like she was waking up from a dream.

'Oh,' she said. 'My darling. You'll get a cold swimming at night.' And she smiled, a small smile. And even though I was so angry at her for doing this again, I smiled small too.

'Come on,' I said, and she turned on her side and began kicking back to the bank, even with her hair all stuck to her white cheeks and the big nightie weighing her down. When we got back to the house, I was shivering from the water and had grass stuck all over my legs. I put her in the shower like I always used to do, and just left her nightie on. It seemed dumb to take it off now, it being all wet and all. Then I wrapped her in a towel, and made her lie down on her bed. She lay there so quiet I wasn't sure if she was remembering to breathe. Eventually she fell asleep the way a child would. Slowly and stubbornly, then quickly and deeply all at once. I sat up next to her with the light on, praying for nothing, nothing to happen.

The next day I was so tired I didn't go to school. Mum was tired too, and she didn't come out for lunch, or dinner either. I left both outside her door but she didn't touch them at all. I sat on the kitchen floor and thought about Dad. I thought about how he used to roll those cigarettes so gently, and let them burn right down to the butt without even taking a drag, as if he forgot it was ashing away in his hand.

I knew I wasn't supposed to. I knew I wasn't allowed to. I knew Mum would be so angry. But I couldn't help it, I didn't mean to. The sun was going down and the light kept inching me closer and closer. I walked to the back of the house and pushed the door open slowly. If I could just see it, I thought, if I could just see Mum's world, I'd know how soon before Dad was home.

I stepped inside and looked in all excited. But there was hardly anything in there. Just a bunch of newspaper scattered on the floor, a big empty canvas propped up against one of the walls, and cans of paint everywhere. One had even been knocked over and left to dry on the floorboards.

I sat down low on the ground and felt it sink underneath me. I don't know why, but I remembered then so clearly the day before Dad left. How he had come into my room and sat on the foot of my bed, and told me that he loved me. And I said I did too. Real quietly, real gently.

