

In Images from Dreams

I've got him right where I want him. He's looking around unsuspectingly. Scooting in a little closer, my hands are pursed in front of me my thumbs touching as my other fingers make a dome. Just as I lunge forward, knees hitting the soft dirt on the forest floor, he hops away into the pond. I've been trying to catch a frog for a few days now without any luck.

Our house sits on a few acres of land on the outskirts of town. A dense forest begins near the edge of our property line. Our section of the woods houses a pond and several nice trees for climbing and surveying the area. I often sit up among the birds and watch my grandmother tend to her garden. My sister and I have lived here with her for the past three years.

"Alfie! Come on Alfie it's time to go. We're gonna be late please hurry up!" Grandma yells to me from the edge of her garden.

I can barely see her through the trees, only the left edge of her short chubby body. I curse the frog and run to where they are waiting. Just having turned thirteen, my sister feels being four years older than me automatically gives her the power to boss me around. Her hair is tied back, but the blonde curls still spring this way and that fighting the hair tie. Her blue eyes look down my small frame and suddenly widen.

"Alfie! I told you not to mess your nice clothes up. Your knees are hideous. Why have you been wallowing around in the dirt again? You need to go in the house and change!" says my sister Sandra.

"There is no time for him to change. Lets get going." Grandma moseys over to the blue station wagon, unlocks the doors, and cranks the engine. The inside smells like stale

cigars. My grandfather used to smoke a cigar every time he was driving. Now he just sits back with air blowing in his nose.

Grandma floors it. The nursing home is almost thirty miles away and we have to make visiting hours. Sandra continues to badger me about my clothes.

“It was the frog you know. He did it. He was teasing me with his ribbits. I had to try and catch him. Grandma won’t let me get a dog. I need a pet. That way I don’t have to sit around and listen to you all the time,” I say.

She snaps her head forward and starts humming along with the old time country song. Patsy Cline really was crazy over something. I didn’t know what though.

The nursing home smells like it needs a bath. I hated the puke green tile with the little brown flecks and wheel chair skid marks. I could see the old people in those chairs racing each other down the halls, bumping into medicine carts, little blue, white, and pink pills flying through the air. That’s what I would do anyway.

My grandfather has the TV on, and he’s watching The Andy Griffith show. I know it’s not his favorite, but he loves TV so it doesn’t matter too much. It takes him a few minutes to notice we are there.

“Tiger there you are! Come give your grandpa a hug.”

I walk over to his bedside and reach my arms around the side of his neck. His unshaven whiskers tickle my face. The plastic tube attached to his face rubs against my cheek. He smells like the old library on Walter St. He pats my back gently. I move back to give my sister a chance. He shuffles in his bed and starts coughing. It sounds like

there's something stuck in his chest, something alive and moving around. Sandra talks with him for a minute.

I sit in the stiff chair next to the door. My grandma is out there talking with the nurse.

“How is he doing?” asks Grandma, “I ask him how he feels but he never tells me anything different.”

“I'm sorry Mrs. Dearly, but the cancer is spreading to his liver. He is in a lot more pain and it's preventing him from sleeping through the night and breathing properly. The doctor has recommended his pain medicine dosage be increased,” says the nurse.

All I know is that medicine makes him real loopy and then he usually just goes to sleep. I miss those months with him hobbling around the house sneaking me extra candy when Sandra wasn't looking.

His attention is turned to grandma when she enters. Sandra decides to change the channel. I sneak out into the hall to see if there is anything new.

After wandering around for a few minutes I finally find the snack machine. There is only enough change in my pocket for a pack of peanut butter crackers. They are very dry and I'm wishing I had money for a soda too. The water fountain near the nurses' station saves me.

The pink phone at the station rings and after a moment of talking she gets up and leaves. I crouch-walk over behind the station. Gloves, liquid hand soap, old people diapers, pens, clipboards. As quickly as I can, I stuff a pair of gloves down my pants to take home with me and steal another just in case.

Hand just out of my pants, and the nurse is standing over me, her shadow is oddly distributed between the floor and the shelf.

“What do you think you’re doing? Get up now!” She grabs my shirt collar. She drags me over to my grandfather’s room. It was the same nurse that was talking with Grandma.

“Mrs. Dearly, please keep an eye on your grandson.” She resumes her post at the station.

“Alfie! You are gonna get it when we get home!” says Sandra.

I didn’t care. Grandma was too caught up in Grandpa being sick to remember to reprimand me. Sandra would try, but it was easy to worm my way out of things with her. Sitting in the chair next to his bed, Grandma holds Grandpa’s big wrinkly hand and talks softly with him.

As we walk across the parking lot to the car, Sandra starts in on me.

“Why don’t you ever listen? You can never just be civil! You really are working my nerves, Alfie.”

She picked up that saying from our mother. It’s one of the last things she said to us before her and our dad left for their Ireland vacation.

Sandra’s favorite CD was in my hand behind my back.

“I’ll break it. Sandy, don’t come any closer. I’ll break it!” Her face looked like a tomato and her eyes were about to pop out of her head.

“Don’t you dare break it!”

She wouldn't let me pick out the movie we were supposed to be watching while Mom and Grandma, who was babysitting, went over the details of the vacation. Dad was loading the matching sets of black suitcases into our red minivan. It was raining pretty hard, but dad insisted that the flight wouldn't be cancelled.

"I want to watch Jurassic Park! Jurassic Park or your CD dies!"

She flew forward and tackled me to the ground, my head hitting the oak coffee table behind me. The CD disappeared under the couch. I started screaming and crying.

"You two are really working my nerves! Now stop whatever you are doing and sit on the couch. No movie at all. Just sit!" Mom screamed from the living room doorway.

We bolted to the couch sitting upright and looking straight down. She went back into the kitchen and resumed her conversation with Grandma. I wiped the tears from my cheeks. Sandra pushed my head sideways.

"Listen kids your mom is just stressed about the trip and leaving you here with Grandma. Grandpa isn't doing too well," said Dad from the doorway in his soaked raincoat.

Our mother's head emerges from under Dad's arm.

"I'm sorry you guys. I love you both so much. Give me a hug. We have to get going." She slid over to us.

"Alfie are you even listening to me?" says Sandra scowling at me.

I run two steps in front of her and stick out my foot. Her knees hit the pavement and her palms skid an inch. I see a few tears fall from her eyes. With a tomato face, she

gets back up and opens the station wagon door, cranking the music a few notches after the engine cranks.

The frogs mock me the whole way as I walk down the curvy stone pathway to house. My sea foam green walls enclose me as I sit on my bed. I can hear Grandma in the next room soothing Sandra.

“It’s okay Sandy. He didn’t mean it. He’s just taking things a little harder than you cause he’s younger. Be a good big sister and be strong for him.”

I turn and face the other wall. My mother’s blue eyes and wavy blonde hair stare back at me from a picture. My sister looks just like her.

Mom kissed Sandy and me one last time giving us a hearty embrace, our father holding the umbrella above us. He did the same as she shielded us from the rain. Grandma guided us back and they drive away. Raindrops thump on the black umbrella over us. I didn’t get to tell her I was sorry for acting up. She waved from the slightly foggy rain slicked windows, a grin stretching across her face.

Grandma comes into the room and sits next to me on the bed, sinking the mattress down. She smells minty.

“Things will be easier one day, Alfie. Just keep on keeping on.” She hugs me tight, as if she never wants to let go.

Flicking off the light she stands in the doorway, and her silhouette says,

“I’m taking away your bike for a week.”

“How am I supposed to get anywhere Grandma?” I sit upright.

“Walk.”

The darkness has turned all to shadow. The shapes on the wall made from the outside light flicker as the wind blows around the tree limbs. They don't scare me anymore. I drift off somewhere cold my dreams vivid and grim.

*Mom and Dad were in the car and the music was humming along some classical tune, Moatzart or somebody, but with a weird distortion. Mom sat quietly while Dad focused on the road. He could barely see the tail lights out front. They were a few miles from the airport exit and somehow it started to rain harder. Dad slowed down a bit, but someone behind him didn't. The speeding car from behind slammed into the back of the red minivan. The van surged forward into the car in front, which was also slowing down. Mom and Dad were creamed in the middle of the crunched shell of a van abruptly stopped. The rain cleared away the blood leaking from the crack where the door used to be.*

*Grandpa walks up to the van and helps Mom crawl out the shattered window on her side. Taking her hand, they begin walking down the side of the highway. With every step the rain gets lighter until it finally stops and they are walking down a dirt road through a cornfield. Mom only comes up to her father's midsection. He takes her up to the house and Grandma sits in the familiar porch swing. He stands her in front of the door with his hands on her shoulders and kneels down in front of her.*

*“What you did back there was wrong, but those kids are wrong for what they said about you. Things will get easier you know. Just keep your head up and be strong. Now go on up to your room.”*

I bolt upright in my bed. My small chest heaves and I lie back with a thud. A rooster that takes residence below my window cracks the morning. I get up and slip down the hall to Sandra’s room. She grumbles awake when I open the door.

“Sandra, I’m so sorry for hurting you yesterday.”

There is a loud banging on the wooden front door. Sandra and I both race to Grandma’s room and wake her. At the bottom of the steps, Grandma opens the door.

Two police officers stand on the porch. One of them is holding a coffee; the steam rises in little wisps. The porch swing moves gently from the morning breeze.

“Mrs. Dearly, we are sorry to have to come tell you this so very early in the morning, but we are really sorry to have to tell you at all. Your husband has passed away,” says the older looking officer.

Grandma clutches the doorframe and the blue veins pop out on her spotty wrinkled hand. Her knees start to give but she manages to keep herself up. I rush to her side and try to help keep her up. Sandra looks around on the floor for something that’s not there and starts crying. She always cries. I help Grandma over to the couch. She falls into the puffy blue cushions. A sob escapes her lips while she stares blankly at the ceiling clutching the collar of her lilac nightgown. I go over to Sandra and put my arms around her, hugging her, not wanting to let her go. I feel her hot tears on the side of my face.

“Don’t worry Sandy, things will get better. We can be strong for each other.”