

Daddy's Stories

The gleaming lights flicker around the large room and a live orchestra plays gentle music for the gathering, like in one of daddy's stories. Everyone holds a delicate crystal glass of some kind, which is filled with numerous colors that carry a pungent smell. The ladies glide gracefully around the room resembling majestic flowers with hidden thorns, while the men all sport a tuxedo of black or near black. The image of a twilight field of flowers with little bugs dotting around them come to mind as you watch the people mingle together.

You sit primly on the rich purple cushion eyeing all the strange people in gorgeous attire. The soft silk from your shimmering pink dress caresses your pale skin and gives you some comfort from the chaotic swirl of the blending crowds. Still, this does little for your foul mood. Your stomach knots into little tight balls of anxiety and small lumps form in your throat; you stare with annoyance behind your eyes.

You *still* cannot believe what your parents have done. They have ruined everything. You lost your friends, your school, and even your old pet cat, who has been replaced by an inbred retriever with an American flag bandana tied around his neck. Nothing is familiar anymore, nothing feels real.

You could remember only a few months ago, when your family lived in the little two bedroom apartment near the highway. It held the lingering smell of smoke from the people before you, as well as lightly stained carpets, and a shower that had a trick to get it to work. Daddy had tried to fix it once, but just ended up with a bloody hand and Mama telling him that she had said the apartments would fix it. Then, there was your cat, Chester, who would sit perched atop an old antique hutch with his tail flicking every now and then. Chester was getting old for a cat; his brown tiger fur now missing a few patches. But, he was the best friend in the whole world and you can remember with ease dressing him up in your doll's clothes when you were younger. You also remember that while you loved spending time in your room with your few toys, you enjoyed more going out to play with Emma and Roger, the twins who lived down

the hall. They were only a year older than you, at eight, and always knew the best places to catch bugs.

Your lips curl into a slight smile as you think about the days passed; you can feel the warm sun on your skin when you were outside playing, the smell the sugar cookies Mama would make daddy and you on Sundays, and hear the little birds that would chirp outside your windows in the mornings. Mama said the birds were mockingbirds, but daddy called them something that you were told to never repeat. But, what were best of all were daddy's bedtime stories of knights, princesses, and even dragons. However, despite the few joys, mama would always say she wished we could live in a real house with a yard and garden.

Nonetheless, you know despite your young age that with the good comes the bad. You remember the bad too, like when mama and daddy were too tired to play with you. The bad of them working day in and day out just to make sure there was food on the table. And now the bad of mama winning all that money, only a few months ago, and having parties every other night with people we do not even know.

All daddy says now is to be polite and smile. Daddy does not even have time for stories and *now* has the maid do it if you ask. He doesn't have time for you anymore. He and mama only have time for their strangers and their parties. But, you are tired of being polite and smiling. You are tired of it all.

You think back to the night mama won the money; daddy was asleep on the lumpy couch, his breath smelling of the drinks like at the party tonight. His hand clasped around a glassy brown bottle and his snores could be heard in between the words on the cartoon on the TV. Mama had left to go get more groceries, but daddy had yelled at her that they didn't have the money right now. So, she had left to just get a few things from the gas station, including a lottery ticket. They had started fighting earlier at dinner, about the food again. Mama had made some noodles with some red sauce on top, which you didn't mind. However, you remember daddy suddenly slamming down his fork so hard the table rattled and you jumped in surprise. He yelled that we had this last night and the night before, but all Mama could say is that we didn't have the

money for much else. You could see tears rimmed in her hollow eyes, but she still looked at you with a reassuring smile that all was okay.

“What’s a cute little girl like you sitting here alone?” a peculiar man’s voice cooed, interrupting your thoughts from the past.

You jump, nearly toppling from your bar stool. You manage to catch yourself without too much trouble and turn to see the tall thin man you had met from an early party; he gave you the creeps. He grins strangely at you and brushes some of his hair away from his sunken eyes, like one would try to brush away an ink stain from paper. He reminds you of the weird people who Mama calls “Baby Chasers” and told you to run away if you ever met one. You are not really sure why she calls them that, but you know it cannot be a good thing. You try a small smile just to be polite, as daddy would want of you, and turn looking away into the crowd. You try to pretend to just be glancing around, but you would rather be next to Mama, despite her wanting you to go play, like she had said earlier. Your mouth feels dry the longer he lingers near and you reason that she must be on the balcony. Before the creeper can speak again, you hop down from your seat and scurry across the freshly polished floor. As you skitter through the crowd of flowery women and bug-like men, it reminds you of that night again, the night of the winnings: with all that noise, the crowds, and the strong scent of that grownup drink.

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You never knew so many people could be packed into one small apartment. At least you knew most of them that night: family, friends, some distant relatives, and some of the neighbors from around your complex. They were all so happy, laughing and enjoying their drinks. You knew how much you loved drinks too, like chocolate milk, but you never thought a drink that smelled so bad could make people so happy. Mama was hugging everyone so tight and couldn’t stop crying, but held a big smile on her face. Grandma Jean came over next, giving Mama the biggest hug and was telling her our family would finally be all right. It felt good to you, like a budding warmth inside to see mama and daddy so happy. It made you smile too.

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You push your way through the never-ending throng of people, your flat heels clicking on the shiny floor, even loud enough to be heard over the noise of the flat screen TVs mounted on the walls. You stumble from the mass, nearly tripping over one lady's sparkling gown that reminds you of the ocean. She glares at you a moment, then turns back to the man she was talking to as if you never actually existed. You don't care, you need to find Mama.

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You needed to find mama, you thought. You were ready for bed and daddy was too busy yelling at a game on the TV to tuck you in, but you hoped mama would for sure. You pull yourself through the crowd of familiar faces and find it hard to believe it could be difficult to find her in the tiny apartment. The booming music and thick curls of smoke do not make your task any easier. After you made your way to the corner of the living room, you see Mama and another man you had never seen before. They were talking in the other corner on the other side of the lumpy plaid couch. She has her hand on the man's shirt collar like she does with daddy sometimes, sliding her fingers down along the neck of the shirt. You hurry and make your way to her to tug on her shirt.

"Mama, I wanna go to bed, but daddy says he's too busy to tell me a story."

She jumps startled, then looks down at you with her hands clutched to her chest. "Sweetie, you scared mama. Why don't you ask Grandma to tell you a story tonight, okay?" Her cheeks were a sunset pink and she laughed oddly with the strange man.

"But, daddy tells the best stories." You leave your hand on her side not wanting to go, until she pulls it free and nudged you in the direction of grandma, who had fallen asleep in an easy chair.

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Your hands press against the chilled glass of the enormous windows; then with searching eyes, you gaze around the large stone balcony. You know she is wearing a pretty black dress that shimmers and sparkles like the stars. Without spotting anyone after a few sweeps, you are just about to give up when a small flicker of light shines near the far railing outside. Your eyes focus on that spot and can barely make out the silhouette of two figures. Your eyes squint against the darkness and you wipe away the fog from the window as you press closer. One of the figures shimmers in a long dark gown.

“Mama!” You rush happily to the balcony door, swinging it open to feel the draft of a tingling breeze.

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The people pushed against you oblivious as the laugh and talk excitedly among one another. Grandma was resting in a bark colored recliner that had seen better days. Her eyes are mostly closed and she hummed softly to herself a tune that lingered on the edge of your memory. You make your way to her side, with the familiar fragrance of flowers filling your nose, and glance back at mama. Daddy stood there now too, but you tense up when you notice the anger in his eyes and the fierce way he grabbed her arm. The other man that she had been talking with, moved behind her, and pointed a hostile finger at daddy. Your eyes are fixated to the scene that unfolded in front of you. A pounding in your ears try to drown out the loud sounds, while the sweat coated on your palms remind you of the squishy chair arm you clutched desperately. You wonder what happened and how they could be so upset. Then, a wrinkled but soft hand rested gently on your shoulder, snapping you away from the sight. You turn to embrace Grandma Jean and want to hide from all the bad things. She hugged you back tight stroking your hair like a gentle breeze, trying to sooth your fears.

You both stayed like that for a long moment before she says, “Okay princess, it’s time for bed.”

“Can you tell me a story first?”

“Of course, dear. I’ll try, but I’m not sure I’ll be as good as your daddy.”

You yawned and smile a little, then take her supportive hand as you both head to your bedroom, and away from the gathering storm.

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The chilling night air prickles your skin, leaving you wishing for a fluffy coat. A new smell of evergreens drift into your senses as you head down the path, between outdoor glass sitting areas, and stop next to Mama’s side. She does not notice you yet and is giggling while leaning on a man. He is a familiar man, but not daddy. He was at the party you remembered from your old home. He looks at you and freezes suddenly with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, and then glances at Mama. You can barely make out their faces in the dark, as she turns to you and gasps in surprise!

“Oh! Sweetheart,” her words slur together and she has to steady herself by leaning against the railing. “You scared me. What are you doing out here?”

“I just wanted to see you. I was lonely and tired.”

“Honey, mama is busy right now, why don’t you go find-” she cut off as footsteps approach from behind.

You are shivering now, but are still curious to see who has joined you outside. The soft ambience from the gathering inside floats along the breeze to your ears as the newcomer approaches. Then, you can finally tell who has walked up to your small group. It’s daddy.

“What are you doing here?”

“Frank, let’s not start anything here! He was just leaving.” She nodded at the strange man to go. You stand frozen, petrified in this all too familiar scene. Even the wind seems to still from

the tension in the air. You try to call out, try to make a sound, and try to stop the roaring train wreck that is in slow motion in front of you.

“I think a talk is long overdue,” daddy says, stepping in front of the other man. The dark-haired man stares at daddy without making a sound and you can’t tell if you are trembling from the cold or from fear now.

“No, Frank!”

But what happens next is a blur to you; the lights, the colors, the sounds, all merge and blend like a painting you have seen once before. It is all overwhelming and you squeeze your eyes shut for a moment. When you open them again, you see daddy sitting on the ground with blood dripping from his lip and a heavy labored breath escapes his lips. His arms are shaking. Maybe he’s cold too? You turn looking for Mama and see her in a hurry through the glass balcony door, following the man she was with earlier. He is limping now and wipes at his cheek with his charcoal coat sleeve.

You glance back to daddy, who has stood up by now, and is watching them leave with a strange look in his eyes. Is he sad? Does he hurt? Does he know where Mama is going?

“Is she coming back?” you manage to squeak.

He turns to you, startled, as if he had forgotten you were there, but relaxes looking back at the glass door. He puts his hands in his pockets, muttering under his breath. His eyes trace to the ground and his back seems to sag the longer he stands there. You think he seems to be sad; he just needs a hug just like you sometimes. He doesn’t seem to notice you walking over to him and wrap your arms tightly around one of his.

The wind blows harshly now, creating a low moan that echoes from all around. You shiver, which seems to wake him from his distant thoughts. He turns and picks you up, wrapping

you up tightly in his arms, and carries you back inside. You rest your head on his shoulder, feeling sleepy.

The elegant room does not sound as loud as it did before and, to your surprise, most of the strangers are gone now. But you still don't see mama. Daddy walks through the halls to the kitchen to talk to one of the maids, and then moves on back to the main room still covered in a rainbow of lights. He speaks with the band and by now your eyes feel very heavy. The world of colors begins to dim and the air stills around you. Daddy's voice turns to a comforting hum in your ears.

You awake to the gradual ascension up the stairs still wrapped in daddy's arms. The hallway ahead is dark and lined with a few dimly lit lamps that hang from vine-like rods from the walls. You hug daddy tighter as he steps through the doorway with the pink castle that is hand painted near the middle of the door. The room is filled with cascading silks covered in sparkling stars, prancing unicorns with enchanting grace, and a large four post bed in the far corner that resembles a castle in its shape. A sheer sheet hangs from the top of the posts like mist that swims through the air and hides the earth from the tormenting sun. He sits and places you on the rosebud pink sheets, then asks you to get your pajamas on while he makes a quick call.

You tug on his sleeve before he can leave, "Can you tell me a story, daddy, please?"

He looks at you with red rimming eyes and nods. This is the first time in a long while that he has agreed without you begging him. He swallows hard before answering, "Yes sweetie, I can tell you a quick story, but you have to get ready for bed while daddy makes a phone call, okay?" He reaches and squeezes a comforting hand on yours as he stands to leave for a moment.

You jump up suddenly full of excitement and hurry over to your polished eggshell dresser and begin rummaging for your sleep time clothes. The door clicks shut as daddy enters back into the hallway. You find a striped lavender set in the drawer and change quickly into the soft material. The basket in the corner is full of clothes that you had already worn this week, but you still through your puffy dress on top of the pile hoping it won't topple out. You scurry over

to your bed and pull out the five layers of sheets that envelope the fluffy mattress beneath. The minutes tick by as you try to wait for daddy and your thoughts return to mama. How she left looking so angry at daddy keeps tumbling back into your mind. The scene plays over and over again in your head. Your hands clutch to the feathery comforter and you pull it protectively around you. A snuffle escapes you just as daddy opens the door. His face is illuminated by the tiny cellphone in his hand, which reveals two wet streams that glide down his stubbled cheeks. He wipes his eyes before flipping the phone closed and tucks it into his tuxedo pocket. He moves to sit at the edge of your bed.

“Are you alright, honey?”

You force a smile, “Yea, I’m okay.”

Daddy smiles back and begin to tuck you in. He adjusts the crumpled blanket that you were grasping before he came back in and moves your pillows to rest behind you.

“It’s time for a story,” you start, as you have many times before.

Daddy smiles for real this time and continues the song, “It’s time for a rhyme.”

“It’s time for a kiss.”

“And then it’s bed time,” he finishes the song you both used to always sing before bedtime and sits to ponder what story to tell. “Would you like the story about the young fairy princess and how she was captured by the trolls?”

You shake your head *no*.

He folds his arms in contemplation again, “Perhaps the young mermaid and her journey to the bottom of the ocean?”

“Nope, I want to hear about the beautiful queen and her travels through the lands.” Your arms fan out to express the vastness of the enchanted lands beyond.

Daddy hesitates, “you haven’t asked for that one before, but I’ll do my best.”

You smile in return and settle down into the fluffy sheets eager to hear the tale unfold.

Daddy forces a smile and begins:

“Once upon a time, there was a beautiful queen, who lived in the tallest castle in the land. She was the most adored ruler in the entire kingdom. She held parties every night that were nearly as enchanting as the castle itself. There was always music and dancing on grand platforms that were showered in beads of rainbows. The queen always wore the most elegant dress at the party and was always the most gracious hostess.”

“What about the king?” You question with a raised brow.

“The king?”

“If there is a queen then there is a king, right?” You inquire further.

“I suppose you’re right, sweetheart. The king was a good man, or tried to be. He always gave his loving wife everything she ever desired...or so he thought. He would accompany her to every party and help make sure the servants made her evening perfect. He made sure the wine was to the perfect year and made sure the dance hall would suit the hundreds that would come from miles just to attend the gracious queen’s party.”

“What about their daughter?”

He pauses, “and of course their loving daughter would always have a new dress for each and every party. She was the star of their betrothal and the love of their lives. The king often wondered if they could ever be happier, but sadly, the queen yearned to see more than just the

walls of her castle. She longed to see the enchanted sea, where mermaids frolicked in the waves and sprites played with the weather. Months passed and the queen grew evermore weary.”

He hesitates to see if you are still paying attention, only to look into your wide eyed stare of anticipation. He smiles and continues, but with a catch in his throat as he begins again. “The king begins to notice her solemn expression and tries desperately to cheer her up. He hosts even more grand balls and even hires performers to do tricks for the guests. This pleases them more than ever, but does little to break the queen from her sorrows. The king sends his servants to search the lands for entertainers of a grand scale. They find circuses, magicians, and even an enchanted white dragon, but nothing seems to bring the queen back. Finally, one of the scouts brings back a beautiful mermaid and places her in the biggest water tub in the kingdom. When the king presents it to his queen, she gasps!” Daddy gasps and causes you to jump, but you keep your eyes fixed on him.

He smiles and continues, “The queen is entranced by the mermaid and tries to ask it many questions. The king is very happy to have finally found what will bring his queen back to him. But, when she finds that the mermaid is unable to answer her, it makes her more determined to find the enchanted sea. That very night, while the party was still playing the soothing sounds of music and leading the gliding swirl of dancers along the dance floor, the queen snuck out of the castle.” He stops and swallows before speaking again. His voice is hushed and edges from mysterious to haunted. “The king and daughter see her leaving and rush to her side. They ask where she is going and why she is leaving them. She stares at her loved ones with a heart drowning in grief. Her words echo in the ghostly quiet hallway that, this is what she must do; she cannot live without seeing the sea. The king holds their daughter and lets her leave. They hear her horse gallop away and are left in the ear-splitting quite of their disgustingly beautiful castle.”

“Daddy?”

Your words snap him back from the dream he seems to be trapped in by the story. The glaze in his eyes begins to fade and only a single tear runs down his cheek, like the lone horse that carries the queen into the moonless night.

“Yes, sweetie?” He manages to ask.

“Did she ever come back?”

“The queen?” He questions with teary eyes. He huffs and blinks a few times as he tries to continue speaking. His hands rub at his eyes and he sighs like a drowning man gasping for one last breath. “I...”

“She never made it to the sea,” answers a soothing voice from the doorway.

Daddy turns with a stumble to face her.

“As she rides away on her noble steed, she realizes that though the mermaids may be enchanting, they do not love her and she does not love them. They are not comfort or warmth. They are not home or a sturdy shoulder. They are night ice cream outings or ballet recitals. They are just they to entice sailors to their doom and that is all. So the queen, free of the spell, returns to the castle and the king, queen, and princess all live happily ever after.”

Daddy stands, then walks up to mama. He embraces her with a loving smile across his lips. You gasp with a happy cry, “Mommy!”

The three of you hold each other as if there is nothing else in the world and after many minutes, mama looks down at you with a warm smile.

“See, I told you,” you say with tear rimming eyes, “daddy always tells the best stories.”

