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What Scared Me Most

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My sister and I had a fight that morning. She was the one who got me ready for school, and my mother had already gone to work. My dad was supposed to come home that afternoon from a big road trip in Ohio with his friend. We hadn’t seen him since Memorial Day weekend and I was missing him a lot.

I didn’t get a good night’s sleep, and that morning I felt off. We were almost late for the bus because I didn’t want to go to school at all. It was almost summer and the air was starting to get hot and muggy. Once we got there, we apologized to each other, her for pushing me out of the door, and me for almost making us late.

We sat on the wooden bench outside of the cafeteria and talked as we waited for the bell to ring. She laughed at me for sneezing too loudly when the principal came over. We straightened up immediately and noticed he looked especially nice. He was never nice.

Behind him were two men in suits, one of whom my sister recognized as a friend of our dad’s. They were cops just like my dad, but I couldn’t quite remembered them. They told us to come with them, but my sister kept asking why. She was older, so I let her speak for the both of us. They explained that something happened at the house and they were sent to the school to take us home.

“Pete, can you please just tell me why we have to leave?” she kept pressing like she already knew the answer.

Pete looked down and shifted his feet, while the other man with the salt and pepper hair simply said, “Please, we can’t say. Just come with us.”

We reluctantly got into their car. It was a black town car with leather seats. It was too professional looking and it made me uncomfortable. Every time I shifted, the seats made a squeaking noise.

“Is our house on fire? What is it? Just tell me!”

I drowned out the sound of my sister’s sarcastic and irritated voice. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her arms go up every
time she spoke. I sat quietly and gazed out of the window, watching the scenery pass us by.

I kept thinking to myself, this is definitely about Dad. He had just had an accident only a year ago on his motorcycle, and he was in the hospital for a week with a major concussion. Still, I thought he was just driving in a car with his friend. It can't be any worse than that. When we were about half way home, I lowered my head and closed my eyes. Dear God, please let him be okay, and if he dies, which isn't the case, send him to heaven anyway. Amen. Being only ten, my prayers were not that sophisticated, and it felt like I should at least say something.

We finally pulled up to our house, which had become a circus. Police cars were lined up in our tiny driveway, and men in uniforms were standing their tallest as I walked past them. Officers with their hands on their hips shook their heads as they saw a small girl and her sister weave in and out of strangers in their living room. It no longer felt like my home, and it no longer felt like I was myself. This is when I started to fit the pieces together. I told myself it wasn't true, so I did my best to believe it.

Finally, they led us to my parents' bedroom. Still forcing myself to be blissfully unaware, we entered the small room. It had dark wood furniture and the bed took up most of the space. At its foot, my eldest sister sat on the ground. She was silent, just sitting there in a white sweater jacket with a silver metal zipper. She was gripping the jacket with her hand zipping it up and down. Just up and down, not saying a word.

I looked at my mother, who was sitting on her side of their bed with her head hanging low. I glanced over towards his side of the bed. That was where I usually climbed in on the weekends. He would be in the shower and I would sneak into his spot and hide. My giggles always gave me away as he took a pair of his white and grey socks out of his dresser and threw them at me while calling me Stinky Feet.

My mom was crying, her face flushed and her shirt was damp from her tears. Her glasses were slightly fogged as she looked up and ushered us to sit on either side of her. As we sat down, my face began to scrunch up the way it did right before you'd get a flu shot.
I whimpered timidly and asked, "Mom, what's going on? What's wrong?"

She grabbed our hands, still crying as she mumbled something that came out like a gargle. My sister must have caught it because she started to sob heavily.

"Oh, God," she sharply exhaled.

Then my mother said something else.

"Dad's in heaven now."

That I understood. I choked and a moment later, I began to cry like the rest of them. I kept wanting to ask my dad if he was okay, but I couldn't. The thought of never being able to see or speak with him again took the breath straight out of me.

That night, after everyone had come and gone, I went back into my parents' room. The house was nearly empty, except for a few people. Exhausted from the day's pandemonium, I quietly curled up under the covers, and fell asleep in my dad's spot, next to my lonely mother, holding on tightly to a pair of my dad's white and grey socks.