

WHERE MOUNTAINS MEET SKY

Mom told me all the aspens are one living being, so if one gets sick, they all get sick.

“Daddy...?”

He looked down at me.

“How come we couldn’t all get sick?”

Daddy stopped. I touched my hand to the bark of one of the aspens. It had scars and spots. It made me wish my hand had scars and spots.

“C’mon Soph,” Daddy said. He took my hand and we walked some more.

I didn’t sleep much last night. We were in a tent. I don’t sleep much when I’m not in my bed. When I can’t sleep at night, I feel lonely, and sometimes I cry. I cried last night. Daddy rubbed my back, but I still felt lonely, so I kept crying.

“Me and Mom took our shirts off there one time,” I said. We were passing a sunny rock where me and Mom laid down and took our shirts off one time.

“You want to sit for a bit?” Daddy asked. I like my Daddy’s smile, but sometimes it feels like he’s smiling at someone else and not me.

“No.”

Me and Mom used to come here and we’d go past where the trees stop and it would feel like you’re in those dreams where the world got paused but you can still move. Then she got sick and her nipples turned inside-out and it moved to her insides and it made her insides burn until she couldn’t take it anymore, so she died. Then they set her on fire and gave us the ashes that used to be Mom and now Mom’s in my Daddy’s backpack.

“It was Mom’s favorite thing in the world to bring you here,” Daddy said.

When it was winter, at home, Mom would make a really warm bath for me and sing, and her voice was deep but soft and it made my hair feel good.

“You want to talk to me about anything?” Daddy asked.

And when she smiled at me, it made me forget there were other people.

“Soph...” Daddy kneeled down so his eyes were about my height. When he does this, I turn away. He took my arm and rubbed that inside part above my hand and below my elbow and the skin of his hands felt rough but he’s good at being gentle.

“Soph. You’ve gotta let yourself talk to me,” he said.

There was a yellow aspen leaf on the ground.

“‘Cause we’re both still here, okay?” Daddy said. “And we’ve gotta be here for each other.”

Aspen leaves look a little like teardrops when they’re by themselves.

“Soph. Will you look at me?”

I looked at Daddy. His eyes looked really green. More green than usual. Sometimes they look gray. I could see my reflection in the black spots.

"I love you more than anything," he said.

"More than you love Mom?"

Now Daddy looked to the side. His cheeks look like they have lines underneath them and when he feels things, the lines move.

"Mom's...no. It's not more or less. I love you both more than I can tell you."

"How come we couldn't die too?"

"Soph." Now Daddy looked up. The veins in his neck look like the cables that hold bridges together. "Mom wants you to live. She wants us to live—"

"The aspens do it."

"Come here."

Daddy pulled me close to him and we breathed together. He breathes slower and longer than I do. Mom breathed faster. Sometimes when I try to breathe with Daddy, it feels like drowning.

"I love you," he said. Then he kissed my hair and held his cheek against the top of my head. Sometimes Mom brushed my hair for me in the mornings. Daddy doesn't know how.

"You ready to keep going?" he asked.

I didn't want to keep going but I didn't want to stay so we walked up some more. The rocks in the ground are just rocks to me, but to ants, they must be like mountains, so it depends who you are.

Daddy put his arm out and stopped me.

"Look, Soph," he said.

In the trees there was a mama deer and a baby deer. I wanted to be with them, so I walked toward them. Daddy didn't try to stop me. I didn't want to scare them so I walked toward them the same way I walked toward Mom's bed at the end. She didn't have hair anymore and she looked like someone took a vacuum and sucked her out of herself. You could see her cheek and eye bones like the skeleton in Mr. Turner's class and there were tubes in her arms and there was a mask on her face and a machine breathed for her and I tried to hug her and breathe with the machine but the machine breathed slower than she used to and I couldn't feel her heartbeat and her eyes never opened so I gave up. The mama deer watched me as I walked and the baby deer watched the mama deer. They didn't move so I kept walking and I put my hand out a little bit. I could almost touch them, but I didn't need to. I just wanted to stand with them. The mama deer looked right at me. We looked at each other's eyes for a while then she looked toward her baby and then they started walking deeper into the trees. I wanted to go too so I tried to walk with them but then the mama deer started running and the baby

deer started running and then they ran away because they're a family and I'm not in their family.

I walked back to Daddy.

"They didn't want me to go with them," I said.

"How do you know? Maybe they got scared."

"They were a mama and a baby and they just wanted to be together."

Mom had a secret place here way up high where if you climb over a lot of rocks, you get to a spot where you can look out at all the mountains and look down at the trees and no one else would ever be there because no one else knew how to get there. Mom was really good at climbing rocks and she'd help me. That's where we'd go. And that's where me and Daddy are going.

"Can I hold your hand?" Daddy asked.

I didn't say anything and Daddy reached for my hand but I didn't feel like holding his so I didn't hold it and I kept walking. The day was that soft type of warm where it feels like the sun is hugging you. I looked up at the aspens and the sun fell through the trees and the yellow leaves danced like butterfly wings.

"I bet butterflies are happy," I said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you've been a caterpillar and caterpillars are probably sad. But then you get to be a butterfly and you get to fly and it's way better than being a caterpillar so you're happy. Then you get to die really fast so the happiness doesn't run out before you get sad again."

Daddy stopped. He didn't say it to me, but he looked up and said in a soft voice, "Help me, Cha." That's short for Charlotte. That was my Mom.

Daddy came over to me and knelt down so his eyes were about my height, so I turned away. He hugged my waist and pulled me toward him.

"Hey. Look up with me."

We looked up at the aspens and the yellow butterfly leaves.

"You see how they grow? It's toward light. It's always toward light. They're one family, but they're individuals too. And they grow close to each other but not wrapped around each other. They stay connected but they grow on their own. And they're always reaching up for the sun, growing toward light."

I looked up at the aspens. They stretched themselves up to the sky and their leaves did the butterfly dance.

"Here, Soph, stand right here."

Daddy was standing in a sunny spot and I went to him.

"Here. Do this."

He closed his eyes and looked up at the sun and reached his arms up. I closed my eyes too and reached up and the sun kissed my face and even though it was dark because my eyes were closed I could still see the light coming through.

“Feel that?” Daddy asked.

“What?”

“Light.”

“It feels like I have to sneeze.”

I sneezed. Me and Daddy opened our eyes and he smiled at me and this time it felt like he was smiling at me and not someone else.

“What about before the sneeze? What’d you feel?”

“The sun.”

“Did it feel good?”

“Yeah.”

“Could you feel its pull? Like it could lift you up from yourself if you’d let it?”

“I guess.”

Daddy reached for my hand and I let him take my hand in his and we walked. We were coming to the edge of the trees and there was more sun and I’d close my eyes since Daddy was leading and look up at the sun and I knew I was still holding Daddy’s hand but the sun would make me forget, and it felt good to forget then remember again.

At the end of the trees there’s a lake. Me and Mom would go in and the water was always cold but we’d come back out and lie down on the rocks and get warm like lizards, and our bodies would be touching, and I’d rest my foot against Mom’s ankle and she’d rest her hand against my wrist and we’d fall asleep. Daddy doesn’t like going in the water as much.

“Should we go in, Soph?”

“We don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

“You do?”

Daddy smiled and started taking off his shoes.

“Okay!” I said.

Me and Daddy took off our clothes and went in the lake and I floated on my back and looked up at the sky. The peaks made a circle and the sun floated above them and a flock of those big crows flew by and the water made me feel like I could slip away into forever, and it felt nice. I let myself get cold until it stung then waited until it stopped stinging, then there wasn’t much left to feel so I was ready to get out. Daddy was already on a rock in the sun and I went next to him and we laid on our backs with our eyes closed.

“Are you going to love anyone again?” I asked.

I could feel Daddy turn his head and look at me but I kept my eyes closed.

"After Mom?"

I nodded my head.

"I don't know," he said.

"But could you?"

"I can't know yet, Soph."

"I'm not."

Now I could feel Daddy sit up, but I stayed on my back and kept my eyes closed.

"It hurts too much," I said.

"Soph. You'll heal."

"I don't want to."

"Right now you don't want to. And neither do I. But we're remarkable creatures that way, Soph. We heal. Not right away. But we do."

"Daddy." I opened my eyes and looked at him. "My heart feels like someone ripped it out and the hole won't stop bleeding."

Daddy looked at me and his lip started to shake then he looked away because he doesn't let me watch him cry. I sat up and hugged Daddy and tried to breathe with him. Daddy scratched my back and after a little bit he looked to me and smiled at me but I could tell he was smiling at someone else again.

"I know it feels impossible right now, Soph," he said. "It feels impossible for me too. What Mom and I had, what you and Mom had—nothing ever fills that hole. I know I'll never love anyone else the same way. Neither will you. But that doesn't mean we can't ever love again."

Me and Daddy sat there for a little bit, me hugging him and him scratching my back.

"What do I do with the hole?" I asked.

"Kid truth or grown-up?"

"Grown-up."

"You live with it. And if you live the right way, if you're lucky, you learn to be thankful for it."

Daddy kept scratching my back, and I looked at the water then the mountains then the sky, and I could feel the hole in my heart, and it hurt. After a little while, we got dressed and kept walking.

The rocks that go up to the secret spot aren't far from the lake. We walked up a hill and the grass got thinner then there were small rocks in the grass then the rocks got bigger and the grass disappeared and pretty soon there was just a big field of rocks, the kind where you have to use your hands and you can fall between the cracks. Me and Daddy stopped and looked up

at all the rocks. It was that part of the day where the sun starts to go behind the top of the mountain and you remember you're going to be alone again.

"Ready Soph?" Daddy asked.

I nodded and he took my hand and we walked to the rocks, then we let go of each other's hands because we had to start climbing. Mom was better at climbing the rocks than Daddy is. She had long legs and she always kept moving, like she trusted more. Daddy stops and figures out where to go. Mom used to just go.

I can remember the path Mom would take, so I tried to climb that way. Mom used to go in front of me and the sun would be in front of her so she'd be dark and I'd follow her outline and it would feel like we were climbing into the sun. She knew my legs weren't as long as hers so she'd stop a lot and help me and she'd do her happy laugh and kiss my forehead and her freckles looked like mine and you'd see the shine of the sun on top of her hair.

"Looks a little easier this way, Soph." Daddy called over to me from a little way's away and he looked up toward the top of the rocks.

"I'm okay," I said.

I kept climbing and I could see Mom's hair fall down her back and her body was long and her shoulders were thin but strong and she looked like she came from the Earth and she moved like water does. I got on top of a big rock and there was no good way to go. I stopped to figure it out but then Mom looked back at me and I didn't do anything but my feet and legs and hands and arms knew the way and we all moved together toward the top of the rocks. Then I got to the top of the rocks and remembered Mom wasn't there.

Daddy came to the top and he was out of breath and he was smiling at me but at someone else too and he took me in his arms and we looked out at the mountains and the falling sun, and we breathed without saying anything.

Then Daddy took off his backpack and set it gently on the ground and got on his knee and opened it. He dug through sweatshirts and jackets and pulled out the vase that Mom made one time for flowers and Daddy made a top for it and now the vase held Mom. He put the vase on the ground and reached in another pocket and pulled out an envelope.

"Mom wrote you something, Soph," Daddy said. "She wanted you to read it up here."

I looked at Daddy and Daddy looked at me.

"You want to read it?" Daddy asked.

"Okay," I said.

Daddy handed me the envelope then he went and sat and looked out at the mountains with his back to me. I opened the envelope and recognized the paper Mom had made with her hands before they got covered in spots and her handwriting looked tired but it was still hers.

*To My Sophie,*

*I hope you're standing where I imagine you're standing — where we've stood, where I've asked Daddy to let me go, and where I hope you'll return and return often.*

*I write you this letter to thank you for something and also to ask you for something.*

*First, thank you for the light you are and the light you've always been. I hope you keep this letter, and hope there will come a day when I'm writing to you not as a remarkable little girl but as a remarkable woman. And to that remarkable woman I say this: when you look back over the course of your life and consider the days and years, when you look back and reflect upon what you've done and failed to do, where you succeeded and where you stumbled, where you loved and where you kept yourself from loving, please never forget the joy you've brought into my life and continue to bring even in these last moments. The gift of you has filled a dying woman's days with a gratitude deeper than any feeling I can ever recall. Here, now, as I feel myself nearing the end, your love means the world, and for your love I will be forever thankful.*

*And now for my request, which I hope is simple enough.*

*I ask that you continue to come to these mountains, regardless of where you're living, and regardless of whether you feel like it or not. I ask that you come to these mountains and give yourself over to their wisdom and beauty, take comfort in their stillness and endurance, and open yourself to their spirit and energy. I ask that you come to these mountains in times of both happiness and sorrow; when you feel grounded and strong in yourself, and also when you feel weak and lost and maybe even broken, for you'll surely feel both in this life. I hope that you'll think of me, and of your father, and of loves you've had and loves you've lost, and of the decisions you're glad you made and those you regret and those you're yet to make. But more than this, I hope you come here and feel. Feel yourself as nothing. Feel yourself as but one thread in an infinite tapestry. Feel the connection between you and all, the love between you and all. For in the end, as best I can tell, that's all that matters.*

*I love you and always will.*

*Mom*

I put the letter back in the envelope and walked over and stood next to Daddy. He looked at me then reached for the vase then we both stood together and looked out at the mountains, and they looked like rows of jagged shark teeth with vanilla ice cream on top, and the sun was way off in the distance saying a long goodbye.

“Ready?” Daddy asked me.

I nodded.

Daddy’s lip started to shake again and his eyes filled with tears then the tears started to fall down and I watched him and it was the first time he ever let me watch him cry. I put my arm around his leg and told him I loved him and he told me he loved me too. Then we breathed for a little.

“Okay,” he said.

Then Daddy kissed the vase and opened the top and we let Mom out. We said goodbye as she flew away and disappeared into that place where mountains meet sky, and I felt something touch my face, something more than air but less than wind, and I could see Mom, and I could see me but I couldn’t remember what I looked like, and I felt sad, but I felt something else too, and it made me feel a little better.

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