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please, small child

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I was slumped in my seat, nose almost touching my desk, carving hearts and the initials of boyfriend number three when Mrs. Coldgrove returned and called me aside.

"Your mother called. You're wanted at home."

I couldn't imagine what had happened. The only times we went home before noon were during tornado warnings, a snow storm, or Good Friday. But then the whole class was excused, and this was only me.

"What can it be, what can it be?" I asked myself every step of the way. Dad's '48 Chevy was parked in the driveway. What was he doing home? He never took off work. I was afraid to open the door, as if this next move would be as disastrous as Pandora's opening of the box. Mother was watching for me and I practically fell through the door and stumbled on the rug when she nervously jerked the door open.

My dad's body was vibrating in the grey chair. He held his head in his hands, not looking me in the eye. No "How's my favorite girl?" to greet me. He just sat there. I didn't dare ask what was the matter; everything was in a dull, deadly silence. I imagined that my father was crying. But that was silly -- men don't cry, especially not my father. It wasn't until after I'd taken off my boots that I noticed all the other boots standing on the newspapers by the door. Then I heard the muffled sounds of crying and the low voices of my aunts and uncles from the two bedrooms and the kitchen.

Finally Mother spoke, "Your grandfather's dead."

The sobs became more audible. But I didn't cry. Perhaps I was too young, but the whole concept of death was incomprehensible to me. My relatives came
cautiously into the living room, wearing varying degrees of sadness. They all looked at me as if they expected me to raise Lazarus from the dead. Maybe I didn't believe Grandfather was really dead -- I didn't think they would lie to me, I just didn't understand. I could see him in my mind's eye soaking his warty thumb in some concoction he called witches' brew telling me funny stories about this place and that place in da 'ole country. How could people die if I could remember them? I made up my mind. Grandpa wasn't dead, and I wouldn't bemoan his fate in a cup of tears.

We visited Gramps lying in his casket, eyes closed, hands folded, stone cold. Grandpa would have arched one of his bushy grey eyebrows -- the way he did when I told an unbelievable fabulous reality -- to see such a ridiculous display of emotions. And the medicine cabinet smell of that cell was a far cry from the sweet scent of his favored lilac bush. I was barely tall enough to peer over the top of the casket, but I pulled myself up the side, nearly climbing into the large basket with him, and placed a red rose in his hand and planted a juicy, slobbery kiss on his lips. Then I knew he wasn't alive. Clammy coldness rushed through my body and I couldn't ever remember anything as creepy.

My parents spared me the official funeral orgy, but I was waiting in a car outside. We all hoisted our death flags and made the long procession through town. We slowly entered the cemetery gates. All I could see were dead marble head stones -- big ones for Big people, little ones for Little people. The black shadows got out of their cars and huddled around the freshly dug hole. The minister's monotone
voice droned on until he managed a few sniffles and damp handkerchiefs from the crowd. I watched them lower Grandpa's coffin down, down into that pit— not knowing, just feeling, that dying was a real scary affair.

I couldn't stand still listening to the whimpering of old women who hardly knew Grandpa, so I wandered around the cemetery carrying my handful of daisies. Behind a tree covered with moss stood a small cross with the date and name hardly discernible. After scraping away the green foliage, I discovered it was the grave of a girl just about my age when death called her away (that was how the preacher had phrased it about Grandpa). I dug a hole in the dirt, cramming my fingernails with Mother earth, and planted my picked flowers hoping they would take root for the little girl. My mother missed me and I heard my name called. I ran back into line.

Mother questioned me, "Where have you been? What did you do with your flowers?" I told her my story, but she wasn't at all pleased. I guess it was Grandpa's day, and I shouldn't have been trotting all over the cemetery, but I really didn't think Gramps would have minded. We returned to the cars, everyone suddenly remembering some little tidbit about Grandpa. The eerie atmosphere lifted, and the same people who had been most fervently crying laughed now and then.

I dreaded going to bed that night. Maybe I wouldn't wake up. Instead of giving death a chance to creep up on me, I'd keep my eyes open all night— at least I would have the chance to look it right in the face. I thought that there must be some other way to die, just leave, disappear, evaporate without
telling a soul.

Suddenly I remembered Carol Petersen's father. He was cremated in World War II, and his ashes sat on their fireplace mantel. Carol, seemingly not at all envious of my father, never failed to parade her father's chemistry tube around boasting, "This is my father." One afternoon after school, she started the whole song and dance over again, and I grabbed the plastic bottle out of her hands. The tube fell to the floor. It didn't break -- the cap just flew off and there were bits of Carol's father lying on the floor.

She screamed, "I can't touch him! I can't!" It was as if she expected the ashes to manufacture a hand that would reach out and spank her for being disrespectful to her father's memory. It wasn't easy to slide a perhaps leg or potential arm into the one inch diameter, round-mouthed tube simply by sweeping the ashes with a newspaper. To tell the truth, I wasn't able to fill the bottle all the way to the top, so I borrowed some wood ashes from the fireplace and shook them up with Carol's father. Carol covered her eyes with her hands, occasionally peeping through her plump fingers, mumbling all kinds of penitent prayers. I felt guilty and a little ashamed, but there was nothing to do except perch him back on his reserved seat on the left corner of the mantel. Then I stepped back, gave a dignified bow to the old war hero, and ran out the door.

At five o'clock in the morning I had trouble telling time but more trouble deciding which death was worse, Grandpa's big, lead box or Mr. Petersen's plastic test tube. Either way wasn't my way. Too tired to sleep, I drew the drapes and stared out my
window. Dandelions with green buds, yellow-gold flowers, and white down dotted our lawn. My lids closed.

When I die I want to go like the dandelions. Please, small child, pick my green-milky stem, make a wish, and then blow my downy seeds to the air.