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Keep Your Face to the Sun

11th Grade
Word Count: 1963

Keep Your Face to the Sun

My alarm beeped at 5:30 AM on my last day, pulling me from my dreams and into a world that wasn't a fairy tale. I hit the off button with a groan, then lay still for a few moments in disappointment. I could still hear Mom saying the words that had made me feel alive again, but the relief had only lasted until I had woken up and realized it was just a dream, like all the others.

Look who's back, Mom had said.

I should have known it was just a dream.

Sighing now, I pushed myself out of bed and quietly got dressed, being careful to tiptoe and softly shut my drawers so that I wouldn't wake Max next door, a notoriously light sleeper. I had set my alarm this early for a reason; this was a morning where I didn't want to face anyone, a last moment that was entirely mine. This was something I had to do alone.

Once I was dressed, I carried my shoes while I walked quietly through the house, being careful not to step on a creaky board. I unlocked the back door silently and swung it softly open. Breathing in the cool air, I grabbed a jacket off of the hook near the door, pulled it on, and went out, closing the door behind me.

It was dark outside, especially since we lived far enough away from the city that the sky didn't have the unnatural glow of light pollution. In fact, I could still see some of the stars that had always been my friends, even though they were beginning to fade.

I sat down on the porch steps and pulled on my shoes, watching the stars as I tied the laces. I remembered all those warm, summer nights when we would just pull out our sleeping bags and pillows and sleep on the ground under the open sky, Dad pointing out the constellations until we could find them on our own.

I closed my eyes, feeling the familiar, terrible ache again. My eyes pricked, but I had cried so

much the fast few months that now my eyes remained dry. That didn't help the ache any, or the ever constant feeling that I was in an extended dream, that all I had to do was wake up and the nightmare would be over.

That feeling was perhaps the worst part of all, because every night when I dreamed Dad was still alive, I had to wake up and realize that that was the dream, and this was the reality.

No matter how much I wished for life to be the other way around.

I got up and walked down the porch steps, past the tree with the swing that Dad used to push us in; past the flower garden that Dad had planted, which was only alive and in order today because I couldn't bear to see it fall into neglect; past the baseball bat Dad had given Max, right before things started to go wrong. I remembered he had spent a whole afternoon teaching Max how to swing it, tossing him balls and whooping every time Max managed to hit one.

I went past everything from normal life, and into the forest.

Despite all the memories of Dad that were attached to every single thing in our house and yard, it was the forest that seemed to contain the most precious memories. If my home had been a sanctuary created by him, the forest had been a shrine.

Dad had loved the forest. My first memories were traveling through the woods on his shoulders, listening with rapt attention while he pointed out each bird, tree, and bug. Then, he would set me on a log or on his knee, and he would tell me stories. Little stories, playful ones that you might read in any kid's book. I remembered one about a ladybug who decided she didn't like her red and black colors and made a blue and green dye out of mashed up mushrooms to paint herself with. I loved those stories.

When I got a little older, he began to tell me the names of everything, from the trees to the shrubs, to the birds. Even now, when I ran my hand along the bark of each tree I passed, I could name them in my mind. *Sugar Maple. American Beech. Black Oak. Sycamore.*

The sun was beginning to come up as I walked down the familiar path. Birds were warming up their morning songs. As I listened like Dad had taught me, I named each one. *Wood Thrush. Blue Jay.*

Cardinal. Mockingbird.

It was the time when the world was just beginning to wake up, the air was cool, everything was fresh, and the day was full of promise. This was my favorite time- or, at least, it had been. It had held more promise for me before, but now...

I walked down the path, until it came to an end, just before it hit the creek that bordered our property. It was a decent creek- I had always been strangely proud of it. It was over six feet wide and perhaps two feet at the deepest, and right now because of the rainy beginning of the summer season, it was bubbling and frothing over, its banks higher and deeper than normal. I watched the gurgling water flow past for a minute, then climbed up a large, jutting boulder and sat on it, legs dangling over the creek. I could remember all those times her dad had sat just like that with me. My hand could even trace the exact spot.

I looked around the woods, just beginning to be lit by the sun, and couldn't help but feel as if life was moving on without me, just like the creek, while I sat rooted to the same spot forever. Sometimes I wondered who had died that day in the hospital- me or Dad. Whatever had happened, it had been an end. Now, I was stuck in the past, not able to live in the present or see into the future.

I knew Mom thought moving would help me, that it would let me get through the past and start living again. But moving was the worst possible thing I could imagine now. This was my *home*, this had always *been* my home. It was where I had been happy. What's more, it was where there was a part of Dad in everything. If we moved, even that connection to him would be gone, and I would be left stranded, like a fish on a bank. Not able to move forward, like Mom thought. Stranded. Lost. Trapped.

That was why I had come here this morning. Today, we were leaving. I had come searching for some kind of answer, some kind of way to keep breathing, and not become stranded the moment I left these woods. Some way to say goodbye. But so far, in the gilded stillness of the woods, I had found nothing.

I slid off the rock numbly. There was one last place I had to visit. Not that I expected to find any

answers there, but I couldn't leave without seeing it one last time.

I skillfully jumped from slippery stone to stone across the creek, and landed on the other side. Then I began my trek into the deeper part of the woods.

There had been one time, while wandering through the forest with Dad, when we had stumbled on a tree with roots that stuck so far out of the ground that they formed a large cavity underneath. The next time Dad brought me there, it was my tenth birthday. He surprised me by showing me that he had placed a small, watertight film canister underneath the roots, in the cavity. When I had opened the canister, I pulled out a small, gold chain with a gold pendant in the shape of a tree, with branches curling upwards in pretty, symmetrical patterns.

“You're like a tree, Kayla,” Dad had told me, helping me put the necklace on. When I'd asked what that meant, he said he would tell me when I was older.

Well, when he lay dying in the hospital seven years later, that day came.

He asked to speak with me alone, and when Mom and Max had left, I stood by his bedside. He asked to see my necklace, and I took it off to show it to him.

“Trees are wonderful things, Kayla,” he said, holding the pendant in his hand. “They grow so tall and so strong. They survive drought, and darkness, cold, and storms- almost anything life can throw at them. Do you know how?”

“How?” I asked hoarsely, trying not to cry.

“They have roots. Roots that reach deep into the soil, anchoring them firmly to the earth, where they were born. You have roots, Kayla. But it isn't enough just to have roots. You have to keep pushing upward, keep growing and reaching for the sun. Things will be different soon, but different is not necessarily bad. Trees lose branches and they don't die. They keep reaching upward. You need your roots, but you also need to know how to keep reaching for the sun. You need to know that these kinds of things are not the end, not for you.”

Her dad took her hand weakly, and put the necklace back in it, closing her fingers over it like a

fist. “Keep your feet on the ground, Kayla, but keep your face to the sun.”

I wore the necklace now, as I had every day for the past seven years. I clutched the pendant as I walked along the faint trail, feeling my heart pound. Ever since the necklace, he had left surprises and messages in the small container under the roots of the tree. I hadn't been back there since he was put in the hospital. I hadn't had the courage, and besides, there didn't seem to be a point. But now, I couldn't leave without visiting it at least one more time.

I reached the tree. For almost a full minute, I simply stood in front of it, warring with myself. I half hoped for there to be one last gift inside, but the other half tried to quench that hope.

Finally, I knelt and pulled out the canister, popping the lid open. At first, my heart sank sharply when I saw nothing inside, and tears stung my eyes.

But then... I saw it. A little scrap of paper. I pulled it out. It was a small, simple drawing of my tree, with the branches curling gracefully upwards. And a few simple words underneath.

Kayla,

Keep your face to the sun.

I stared at the piece of paper numbly, at first unable to think. How could he have gotten that message here? The days before he had been brought to the hospital had been hard, difficult ones. There wasn't any way he could have brought it then, and he couldn't have sent anyone else, because this spot was our secret. Not even Mom and Max knew about it.

Unless...

Unless he had somehow known the end was coming, long before those last, difficult days. And he had come all this way to tell me that this was not the end.

Not the end of my days, anyway. I still had a life to live.

The tears came freely now, and I cried harder than I had in a month. But I also cried better; because, with some difficulty at first, this time instead of bowing my head, I lifted my face up to the sun.