

THE QUARRY

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The Memory of Superman

Maria lived in the land of Giants. She was a giant too, of course. She could hold a car in her palm. But her parents were even bigger. Papa could lift her up and spin her around as if she was a baby. She wasn't a baby. She was seven. In those moments she became a bird, soaring high above the houses and driveways and cats on cars.

She had wild hair like twigs, flushed pink cheeks and hazel eyes. She ran around the house on her chubby little legs with a towel for a cape, covered in fluff from the hall carpet and a car held high. Mama and Papa didn't like her playing with boys, cars or superheroes. They wanted her to be a good girl, wear dresses and

brush her hair. They said Barbie should marry Ken, not Superman or the Flash or Wonder Woman.

She ran into the kitchen, socks whispering as they slid along the lino. Her parents were talking, voices low. Maria couldn't understand what they were saying. Papa wore leather shoes with scuffs on its toes. Mama wore flats with the pretty flowers falling off. They didn't know she was there. She hid behind the counter.

Papa stopped suddenly; he perked up his ears like a dog. He must've been listening for Maria, her usual bangs and giggles absent. He poked his head out to check the living room. Maria giggled and Mama found her.

Maria offered up the car to play with, but Mama took it angrily. She pulled the towel off Maria's shoulders and grabbed her arm, dragging her back to her room.

The pink beads on Maria's door handle jingled as Mama twisted it open. She marched over to Superman and plucked him from his wedding to Barbie along with his Best Men Green Lantern, the Flash and Hulk. She found Spiderman on the windowsill, the Bat Mobile racing around the nightstand and brave Buzz Lightyear sleeping on the pillow (he called out 'To infinity and beyond!' in surprise when he was picked up).

'You shouldn't have touched these!' Mama cried. 'Why did you go into his room? How did you unlock the door?'

Maria fidgeted with the frayed edges of her bright orange sleeve. She wasn't supposed to go in the Dark Room. But the door had been ajar and through the crack she'd seen it all: the bed with its spaceship blankets and bear-covered pillows; the rug that ran with roads and houses and stop signs; and all those toys! Maria had found the Cave of Wonders. All the toys she'd asked and asked for that Mama and Papa refused to buy, right there!

'I'm afraid that's my fault dear. I forgot to lock the door again after...I, uh.'

Mama stared at Papa while he stared at Maria's pillow. Mama looked like Peter Parker when Harry Osborn revealed he was the new Green Goblin.

'Why did you-' she croaked.

‘Because, Sarah,’ Papa strode forward and placed his hands on Mama’s arms, ignoring the pointy, plastic toys between them. ‘I wanted to see it again. Memorise it. Every inch.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I want to pack it up.’

Mama gasped and dropped the toys.

‘No,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘No, no no you can’t. We can’t- oh.’ She knelt and picked up the battered superheroes, a desperate note in her voice. With the toys in her arms, she rushed out of the room, Papa following.

Maria was alone surrounded by creamy walls, a purple bed and butterflies on her wardrobe. She was the only girl on the planet; an ant that got lost on the way home. She didn’t like being alone. Her eyes pricked and her face heated up and she knew she was going to cry.

‘Dear!’ Papa called out. ‘Sarah please, let me explain.’

‘No! We can’t forget him, Jamie. We can’t.’

‘I KNOW!’ Papa yelled. Then quieter, ‘I know. I just... It’s been three years. It’s past time we moved on.’

‘Past time.’ Mama spat, as if she ate her least favourite food in the world: Olives.

They fell silent. A door slammed and scuffling came from the Dark Room. Mama was putting the toys back. Maria didn’t know what they were talking about. But she did know Mama was upset that she took the toys. Maria moved to the door. Papa didn’t seem as mad as Mama. Maybe he would give her a hug. She really needed a hug.

‘We won’t forget him, Sarah.’ Papa said quietly to the Dark Room’s door. ‘It’s just, we need to let him go. Focus on Maria. Our *daughter*.’ Mama didn’t answer so he kept talking. ‘And if she happens to like the same things he did then we should support her. God knows why she thinks we don’t like her playing with action figures and boys.’

Maria pulled on Papa’s sleeve. Papa rested a hand on her head.

‘I’m sorry,’ came Mama’s voice from the depths. ‘I’m sorry. I can’t– not yet. I’m sorry.’

The phone rang. Mama opened the door and slid past Papa and Maria. She had replaced all of the toys except for one, his blue eyes and red cape gleaming. She answered the phone.

‘Mother,’ Mama said shakily. ‘Yes, I’m fine. How are you?...’

‘Papa,’ Maria whispered, ‘Why won’t Mama share her toys? Does she hate me?’ Maria’s tears finally fell, loud and messy. Mama winced from across the room, shaking her head. Her own gigantic tears fell on Superman’s face. Now he was crying too. A worried whine seeped through the phone and Mama stammered that everything was fine. Papa knelt before Maria and held her face in his hands.

‘Hey sweetie, hey, shush. It’s not your fault. Mama doesn’t hate you. Hey.’ Papa wiped Maria’s tears and hugged her tight. He kissed her hair and whispered, ‘Mama’s just in pain.’

‘Where?’ she sniffled into his shirt.

Papa pulled away and placed her tiny hand on his heart. ‘Here.’

Papa was warm. Maria ducked and put her ear to his chest, listening to the solid thump, thump thump. He gently stroked her hair and held her close.

‘Is Mama’s broken?’ she asked. ‘Does she need a doctor?’

‘A doctor can’t fix her. But, I think we can if we work together.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. If we both go over and give her a really big, long hug I bet we can make her smile. And if we give her one every single day her heart will get better a little bit at a time. Can you do that?’

Maria nodded. Papa smiled.

‘Good.’

Mama put the phone down and sat on the couch, head resting against Superman like a prayer.

‘What did your mother say?’ Papa asked softly, holding Maria’s hand and inching forward.

‘She’ll be here soon. She’s worried.’

‘I don’t blame her. You’re a *great* actor.’ Papa let go of Maria’s hand and gently nudged her towards Mama, mimicking a hug. She cautiously faced Mama, unsure. Maria placed her hands lightly on Mama’s knees, fingers curled to clutch the fabric. Mama looked up.

‘Papa said if I hug you, your heart will get better.’

‘Did he now?’

Maria nodded. Mama smiled weakly and held out her arms, still clutching Superman like she couldn’t let go. Maria flung herself forward, burying her face in her side. Mama’s hands rested on her back. Papa sat down beside them and placed his arm around Mama’s shoulders. Maria was the plant in the boot, kept alive and warm by Wall-E and Eve.

‘I’m sorry, Maria. These toys belonged to someone else. I miss him a lot and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.’

‘Who’d they belong to?’ Maria asked, curious.

‘Someone very special. You don’t remember, but he used to sneak into your room and take you back to his bed. Your papa and I would go to wake you, only to find you gone. We’d find you curled up sleeping next to little Carlos.’ Mama’s arms tightened around Maria and Superman. Maria could vaguely picture Superman pyjamas.

‘Is he your little Superman?’ Maria looked between Mama and the toy.

‘Yes,’ Mama said, Papa wiping away her tears. ‘He was my little Superman.’

‘And,’ Papa said, ‘You’re our little Supergirl.’

Maria wrinkled her nose. ‘I want to be Spiderman!’

‘Okay,’ Papa patted her head. ‘You can be Spiderman.’ Mama choked on her laugh, pulling Papa and Maria close.

‘I love you, Maria. Very much,’ she whispered. Papa gave them both a squeeze and Maria sighed contently even though Superman’s tiny hand was digging into her back.