

Dust on Barbie Hair

by Scarlet Crystal

Mothers Day is coming up, but Sophia doesn't really know what to put on her card. Her mother works a lot, and she and her dad seem to connect more than she and her mom do. But can Sophia figure out what to do when the day sneaks up on her and taps her on the shoulder?

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Chapter 1 of 1

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My mom is away on a business trip, so I get to walk home from school. I say good-bye to Joanie and set off.

Before I turn the corner and leave the schoolyard, I check my backpack one last time to make sure I haven't forgotten anything. Happily, my spelling book and my math sheet are sandwiched between my lunchbox and my Homework Folder where I left them, all crumpled and comforting. I touch the bending corners of the Folder once to make sure. Joanie forgot her Folder last week, and Mrs. Roberts took away two of her gold stickers.

I march down the uneven sidewalk. In a garden across the street, an old lady grunts as she pulls weeds like the tangled locks of my hair in the morning. I coil my hands securely around my backpack's straps and walk the last block home. I turn right and trudge up our driveway, angling my head and squinting away from the sun.

Dad stands up from the kitchen table when I climb the steps to the porch. He takes my backpack from me with a smile. The skin next to each brown eye crinkles slightly and reminds me of the picture Roger drew of a scarecrow. He was trying to color the straw in its face but got bored after coloring the top half. I wanted to ask him to please color the rest, but Mom says things like that are impolite.

"How was my girl's day?" Dad asks.

I sip my orange juice thoughtfully before answering, "Good."

"Good is good," Dad says seriously. He holds up a piece of paper covered with small writing on both sides. "I'm writing your mom a letter for Mothers' Day."

I nod, pressing my lips together like Mrs. Roberts does when somebody raises his hand and answers a question.

After dinner, the phone rings. It's Mom. Dad asks her about the trip. It's going better than expected. She says the weather in Boston is abysmal.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Sophia?"

"When is she coming home?"

"In three days. Do you want to talk to her?"

I shake my head and carry my plate to the sink. It clatters over the surface of the counter.

"No, Margaret. She doesn't want to come to the phone right now." I stand on my tippy-toes and turn on the water. I run my plate under the cold stream several times, inspecting its surface every few seconds until I'm positive there's no trace of mashed potato left. "Don't say that, Margaret," says Dad quietly into the phone. "You know it's because she's busy washing her plate."

I set the plate back on the counter and turn off the water so that the handle and faucet are perfectly in line with each other.

It is the Thursday before Mothers' Day. Mrs. Roberts announces to us that we're making cards. Haley doesn't have a mom, so she gets to write one to her grandma. I watch with interest as our teacher lays a few pieces of white paper, some pairs of scissors, and crayons on each table. Joanie, Roger, Sarah, and I each take our share of the supplies. After nobody can think of anything to do besides drawing scarecrows, we agree to decorate our cards first.

Mom returns late that night. I hear the front door close with a snap while I brush my teeth.

"Hello?" she calls, tossing her keys on the countertop. "I'm home."

Dad's footsteps pass the bathroom door and descend the stairs. For a moment, I don't hear any sounds other than the soft, slow rhythm of bristles and toothpaste on teeth. Finally, Dad speaks.

"How was the flight?"

"All right. They remembered to put me in business this time."

"That's a relief."

"Where's Sophia?"

I dry my hands slowly and slide into my slippers before welcoming her home.

I feel a little guilty for not talking to her on the phone, so I bury my head in her stomach for a second longer than normal. Her pants are black and crisp like they always are when she works. Her shoes stick out in a pointy way, almost like the claws of a large bird. Maybe an eagle...

"How is school?" she asks. I shrug and examine her left claw's shininess.

She sighs. "You see, David? She's even shy around her own mother."

Dad says something with his eyes. He calls it using the Mom and Dad Channel, so I don't try to intercept his meaning.

"I'll put her to bed," he says a moment later.

On the Friday before Mothers' Day, we finish making our cards. I bring mine to the teacher's desk. She reads it quickly.

"This is beautifully decorated," she remarks. "Very symmetrical."

It must be a compliment. "Thank you, teacher."

"But you barely have anything written on here," she continues. "You followed the assignment, but couldn't you come up with a bit more?"

I stare at my card. It reads,

Dear Mom,

I like it when you read books to me sometimes. I like it when you and Dad take me to the park. I like it when you wear nice black shoes. Happy Mothers' Day!

Love, Sophia

I shrug. My teacher sighs and waves me away. I shove my card into my desk and leave it there when we go to lunch.

After school, I get to play at Joanie's house. Just when Joanie's Barbie is about to buy new shoes at Ken's Shoe Store, her mom calls us the kitchen for snacks.

Joanie's Mom likes baking. My chocolate chip cookie tastes gooey and delicious, but I pretend it tastes like dust on Barbie hair and only take one.

On Sunday morning, Mom prepares to leave the house to eat lunch with her mom. From the top of the stairs, I watch her brush her thick, brown hair and appreciate her frilly white blouse, mustard yellow pants, and rounded white sandals. The shoes remind me of the ones I get to wear to the beach.

Dad and I feast on grilled cheese sandwiches. I eat it whole, including each crumb on my plate.

"When Mom comes home, let's have a little gift ceremony," Dad suggests. "But first, I want to finish the last part of my letter. You made a card, right?"

"Yep."

"Great."

I open my backpack and reach inside for my card, only to realize with horror that I'd forgotten it at school! My stomach sinks to my knees, and I pull my hand quickly out of my bag.

"Did you wash your plate, Sophia?"

I feel my face grow hot.

"Sophia?"

"Not yet!"

When Mom doesn't know what to do about something, she sits outside for ten full minutes and thinks. She thinks very hard about everything and decides what the right choice is. Then she gets up and goes back to whatever she's been doing.

A soft May breeze tickles my folded arms. Today is Mothers' Day and I have no card with beautiful crayon decorations or sentences beginning with "I like it when you..."

I know what Dad would say if I told him. He'd smile, and his eyes would crinkle like Roger's scarecrow. Then he'd say, "It's all right. Your mom won't mind if you give her the card a day late." But I mind! When she goes away, I never talk to her on the phone. When she comes home, I don't usually have much to say to her besides, "Will you

read me a bedtime story, please?" or "Can we go to the park?"

When ten minutes have gone by, I decide to go to the park.

There are several families walking happily in the park. I see Joanie holding hands with her parents from across the grass.

Whoever is in charge of the park planted a few rows of petunias underneath each tree. Because they are so small and unhealthy, they give the park a humble look. I bend down on one knee and examine the flowers. They are purple with a few yellow spots near their centers. Mostly, they are all wilted. Some look as though they've been plucked and trodden on since their planting.

I grasp a petunia's stem on the far end of the flower bed and pull. It stretches and snaps. My hand jerks back to reveal an uprooted flower stuck inside my fist. The petals appear unharmed, so I gleefully repeat the process several times.

Things are going well until I notice the "Do Not Pick Flowers" sign. My conscience bombards me, and I guiltily step away from the bed.

My little bundle is not as spectacular as I would like, so I decided to freshen it up with a short drink. The little pond in the park has no fish in it, so I don't hesitate before dipping the thirsty heads into the cool water.

I am not knowledgeable in the way of flowers, so I am unsure as to how long I should keep the purple petals submerged. After several uncertain minutes, I remove them.

They are even limper than before. All four of them have petals that look like they'd rip if I touched them. I test one of them. My finger rips a hole neatly through its center.

With three flowers left, I set off toward Grandma's house, which is not far from the park. I hope desperately that the other petunias will last, but I soon disappoint myself. Before I am halfway there, I can't stop myself from testing the strength of another petal.

After realizing that plucking the ruined petal only makes the flower look wrong, I abandon the whole petunia and continue with the final two.

I pause on Grandma's front lawn and examine my gifts. They had been two of the better buds, but now that I have nothing with which to compare them, they reveal their true selves: they are two sad, old, sick, faded, drowned petunias. My throat feels as though somebody stuffed a wad of pathetic old flowers in it.

Instead of turning around and going home or even sitting down and giving up, I march to the front door and ring the bell. I didn't spend ten minutes deciding on my plan for nothing.

The sing-song blare of the doorbell startles me. Grandma must have gotten a new one since I last pressed the button.

Mom swings the door inwards and open. For a brief moment we stare at each other. Her eyes dart to the flowers in my hand and back to my face.

"Come in," she says.

"Who's there, Margaret?" Grandma calls from the next room.

"It's Sophia."

"Oh, lovely," Grandma cries.

"Do you want to come in?" Mom asks, a suppressed smile on her face.

My lip trembles as I thrust my fist towards her.

"H-H-Happy Mothers' Day," I choke.

She takes the flowers and holds her to me. I wrap my arms fiercely around her middle and hold on for dear life. She pats my head warmly. When at last I let go, she bends down so that we see eye to eye. She touches my nose fondly.

"Thank you for the flowers," Mom says. "I always loved petunias."