

Mom's Turtles

Excerpt

After our mom dies in the spring, Dad starts going out every morning and finding dead turtles. He tells us this story at night sometimes, as he sits at the foot of our bed, smoothing his pajama bottoms. He leans forward when he speaks, as animated as we ever see him. Every morning, early before dawn, he feels a tremor in his spine, he tells us, and his teeth grind and grind and grind. It wakes him up, even out of dead sleep, and he isn't able to roll back over. Instead, he walks the house, maybe makes a pot of coffee. Dad tells us it's always better to accept the weird stuff, the stuff you can't explain, than to fight it.

This is the very first time he ever has this feeling, he tells us. He doesn't know what it means or what it wants him to do. So he paces in the kitchen for a while, drinking coffee and watching the alley cats and raccoons go at it in the early light.

He goes for a walk outside, and the tremor makes his legs weak, and he follows it, follows the weakness that grows stronger in his body the further he walks. Eventually, he comes across a small dock, hidden from the path by low bushes and prickles. He pushes through, and there in the water, are turtles. He's used to seeing so many at once, we all are, he says, that's what it means to live here, but then he notices they aren't moving. They sit in heaps in the shallow water, some cresting the surface, and others sitting on the sand, mostly submerged, water lapping at the edges of their shells. They aren't moving, and the moment he bends down and touches them, the tremor in his spine stops, and he falls to his knees in the soft, sandy bank.

He doesn't use those first ones for food, of course, he doesn't know how they died. He's afraid to give it to us, he says, afraid it might hurt us. When a week comes when the food is low, and the turtles favor the other side of the island, our father tries it himself one day, turtle soup made from these mysterious turtles. He suffers nothing, and the next day he gives it to us. We haven't had a hungry day since. And whenever the tremor comes, he says, whenever his jaw tightens and he can't help but grind his teeth, he goes to that spot and finds them there. He tells us it's mom helping the only way she can.

On summer afternoons when the air is too still and everyone walks around holding their breath for something, anything to happen, Monti, the crazy lady who lives on the corner, comes over, and Dad sends us outside to play. Naturally, we congregate

at the playground at the end of the cul de sac, hidden behind a protective line of small trees and garbage. Watchful parents keep an eye on its entrance, and every so often one will come close, count how many kids there are, and go back to their home. Barely a playground, it houses only a swingset, some monkey bars, and a weakly constructed jungle gym. Our fragile knees are protected by soggy, molding wood chips, now essentially dirt. To the left of the playground is a small patch of asphalt, once used for basketball, and now only used for hopscotch and drawing.

There are many kids there when we arrive, and when they notice us, a few wander over. We aren't sure how to play with them. We have never known how, or at least not since Mom died. Three of them, two girls and a boy, crowd around us, looking for something marking us as the kids of the turtle man. Dad is famous to these people, or at least to these kids' parents. We're special, but we look normal enough, we're pretty sure. If anything, we're only different in that we don't have a mother. We have only Dad, who is the best Dad, we know, but still, he isn't Mom.

"So you got anything interesting?" Henry asks, a big kid with eyes the color of dead worms. He snuffles and wipes his nose with the back of his hand. A snot boy.

"What do you mean?" we ask. We left all our toys at home. Dad kicked us out so quickly we didn't have time to grab anything fun. We're reliant entirely on the good graces of our neighbors, these kids we've known since diapers.

"From all the turtles," Fay says. She's tall and ginger, her glasses huge.

"We know what your dad does," Charlotte adds, her blue eyes staring us down.

We consider this. Our dad does a lot. He works at the only diner in town. He goes to our school things, and helps us with our homework. He tries to garden in the backyard, and each spring we watch him start the rows of seeds, and by each summer, everything is dead. These things we know about him. What did these noisy, boring brats know?

"We know how he gets all those turtles," Henry corrects.

"He finds them in the water," we say. "He goes early in the morning. You don't eat turtles?"

"Everyone eats turtles, stupid." This is said by all three of them. Of course everyone eats turtles, it's the only thing we all have so many of. They come in droves onto the beaches and in the rivers and ocean around and through the island. It's good luck, the oldest people say, to have so many turtles willing to jump up on land. Without them, there wouldn't be enough food to support us, and we would have all died out years and years ago. All we have is what we can grow and what floats up onto the beaches. In short, everyone eats turtles.

MORGAN ELSWICK – WRITING SAMPLE

“We meant we know he’s a witch.” Henry smirks at us.

This is followed by a moment of silence as the group assembled realizes if our father is a witch, that makes us the witch’s children, touched by magic, and therefore different from everybody else. They shift away from us, a sudden dangerous ripple in the air. We’ll never be like everyone else. Before, when Mom was alive, no one called Dad a witch. Now, without her, kids say there’s something wrong with him, and us too.

“So what if Dad’s a witch?” we say, struggling to find the words that will make us innocent. “He just knows when they’re going to be there.”

“No one else finds them dead like he does,” Fay says.

“He kills them with spells, we know he does.” Charlotte delivers the final blow, and they disperse, leaving us in misery at the foot of the jungle gym.