

# At Peace

I have always been afraid of dying. And with the sound of gunshots, police sirens, and the news of burning buildings, it is a relief to still be alive at the end of each day. My mom has homeschooled me ever since my elementary school burned down. Police confirmed that the unfortunate event had not been an accident, and Mom refused to let me go back even after it had been rebuilt because it was too risky.

My most vivid memory of school was in third grade when everyone had to tell the whole class what they wanted most. When it was my turn, I said, "I have two wishes. I wish that there was world peace everywhere and that my dad would come back." The whole class was silent, then one of the boys yelled, "Isn't your dad dead?" He was sent to the principal's office and my mom picked me up early.

The truth is, I don't know if my dad is still alive or not. He was in the army and we haven't heard from him in four years. Every night I pick up the photo of him that always rests on my nightstand and hope that he is okay. He was the best at making jokes and telling stories. I miss him even more than I miss the time I could walk to the park without glancing over my shoulder every few minutes and my phone ready to call 9-1-1.

"C'mon! Wake up! Wake up!" My mom woke me up, a huge smile on her face. It was the first time I'd seen her smile like that for a long time.

"What happened?" I sat up groggily, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes and looking around.

"It's movie day." Mom grinned, her eyes sparkling.

We hadn't had a movie day since Dad left his job to volunteer for the army. We always had lots of fun watching a new movie (It was a tradition to never watch the same movie twice on movie night) while laughing and eating popcorn.

"You got one? Really?" I stared in disbelief at the DVD she was waving in her hand. "'Star Wars'? Wow." We ran to our small couch, racing each other. I won and my mom made a pouty face and laughed. I made the

popcorn as she fixed up the TV. I heard dramatic music and saw yellow words depicting a story receding into the stars. Mom began reading aloud just as the popcorn finished. We sat down on the couch and I pulled up a blanket around me. As the movie played and the popcorn disappeared, I began to feel warm. I pulled the blanket off but it was still unnaturally hot.

“Does it feel warm to you?” I asked my mom. She frowned, thinking.

“Yeah. Maybe the A/C is broken.” She paused. “But it isn’t nearly this hot outside, is it?”

And then it happened. We saw the orange flames licking the sides of our house. They seemed to seep up from the floors, leak in from the windows and shower red sparks over our belongings. We had no warning as the fire alarms had been disabled by my mom because they would suddenly go off for no reason, and we never expected there to be a fire in our own house.

My mom and I stood up at the same time, preparing to run out of the house when I remembered the special picture of my dad lying on the night table.

“I’ll be right back,” I called to my mom. “I have to get something.” I ran off down the hallway, ignoring her shouts of warning.

The fire had already engulfed my bed and was heading towards dad’s photo. I ran as fast as I could, trying not to feel the heat on my face. I picked up the picture and hugged it to my chest before turning back to the door. But there was no door. Fire was closing in on me, every exit blocked by spitting red walls. I clenched the photograph tighter and realized that the only way out was through the flames. I ran towards the door and turned the handle. It didn’t open. Something must have blocked it on the other side. I pushed as hard as I could against it, aware that fire was slowly crawling up my legs. It burned. Burned so hot, it was agony. Smoke flew into my stinging face and tears started filling up my eyes. I knew that I would never get out of this. I would die, right here and right now, my burning body slumped against the door of my room. I looked into my father’s frozen face, the last thing I would ever see. His comforting smile and twinkling eyes faded away. It vanished into the light. The dark. The death. And I knew, that even though the rest of the world couldn’t, I would finally be forever at peace.