

**This is an excerpt from Short Stories of Love, Hope, and Laughter by Carlos Salinas due out in 2017. Thanks for reading!*

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Big Hands, Small Hands

The funeral had been a week ago and David still felt as if his world had ended. Nothing made sense or mattered; school was a drawn out lecture in a language he didn't care to understand, his friends were just bothersome, and everything he cared about before seemed pointless.

His grandfather approached him one evening when he was staring blankly out of the window.

"I know you miss your mom, I miss my daughter, I want you know that life goes on, and you can be happy again."

David's eyes watered from both grief and fury. *Why would I feel happy again? I lost the most important person in my life. And why isn't Grandpa sadder than he is?* The guilt from the thought of smiling, regardless of how long after the funeral it was, was a terrible weight to carry, especially on the shoulders of a 10-year-old boy.

"I have an idea of what may help ease your pain," his grandfather said as he sat at the piano. David had seen him tuning it earlier that week. "The soothing sound and feeling of playing will help distract your mind and soothe your heart."

David did not want to be disrespectful, as his mother always told him to mind his manners. He sat next to his grandfather on the bench, watching as the old man's fingers danced effortlessly over the keys.

After a short demonstration, the grandfather asked him to imitate his finger movements. David grew frustrated after failing for the fifth time.

"I can't—I can't!" David cried helplessly.

“Sure you can, just keep trying.”

“I don’t want to. My hands are too small; you can do it because you have big hands!”

The grandfather sat there looking at the keys and thinking about David’s frustration. “You know, a few years ago I had a little girl who wanted to learn piano but always complained that her hands were too small. After hours and hours of practice she was finally able to do that little thing I just showed you. If she can, you can, too,” he smiled.

Frustrated, David shot up from the piano bench and ran out to ride his bike down the street. He left in such a hurry and pedaled so fast that the driver had no time to react and swerve out of the way. The small car collided with David’s bike and sent the small boy flying for several feet.

II

The bright white light pierced David’s eyes when he awoke. He heard beeping, plastic objects being moved around, and people speaking indistinctly. Finally a nurse walked over to him and looked down on him.

“You’re going to be fine, but you gave us quite a scare,” she spoke softly and a sweet tone.

“What happened?” David only remembered the piano lesson and being on his bike.

“You had an accident on your bike, but you will be fine. Just a small fracture in your ulna, but it will

heal very quickly because you are so young. You'll be playing baseball in no time."

"I don't play baseball."

"Well, what do you do?"

"I don't like sports, really. My grandfather wants me to learn piano."

"I love playing the piano; it's very calming," she spoke as she checked his injured arm. "A long time ago, I had a great teacher for piano; he's the reason I can play well. He never gave up on me even though I always told him that I couldn't play because my hands were too small."

The River Dragon

There was once a river dragon that guarded the sacred Mountain of Paradise. The little people that lived there had no way of crossing it without the threat of being eaten by the river dragon.

The little people had many legends and stories about what lay over that mountaintop: rivers of honey, fertile lands to grow food, and never-ending beautiful weather. Others told tales of gold mines and endless riches.

One day one little man was brave enough to get close to the river's edge, as no other little person had.

When the river dragon saw this, he was very curious and amused by the bravery the little man had shown.

"It is the first time anyone had dared come so close to the water's edge, and to me," said the river dragon.

"What's on the other side?" The little man asked.

"Let's do this," began the river dragon, "if you can solve this riddle I will let you cross unharmed and that way you see for yourself."

The little man agreed.

"I weigh almost nothing but can bring about heavy things; I can be above and beneath you at the same time, and I can change shape and color, what am I?"

The little man thought long and hard.

Finally he answered, "A cloud?"

The river dragon smiled and let him cross to the other side unharmed, as he had promised.

When the little man got to the other side he could not believe what he saw. He also couldn't believe what he didn't see; there were no rivers of honey, fertile lands, nor beautiful weather; there were not any gold mines nor endless riches. The little man couldn't believe it! What would he tell everyone when he returned? And why didn't the river dragon tell everyone the truth he had known for so long?

When he returned to his village the people gathered around him and asked him about his

journey what the other side of the mountain held.

"Is it as beautiful as they say it is?"

"Were there rivers of honey?"

"Was it paradise?"

These were their questions. The little man saw the hope and wishfulness in their eyes and it weighed heavily on his conscience.

The little man thought long and hard about how to respond. He glanced back at the river and could see the river dragon looking, almost smiling, at him. He realized what the river dragon had done and felt grateful.

"It is just like that," answered the little old man and smiled.

One More Cup of Coffee

I remember the conversations with my mother over endless cups of coffee. Conversations about what the future held and how one person could make the world a better place. Conversations about what scared me the most and what made me most happy.

She always had her coffee with one spoon of instant coffee and two of sugar.

"More coffee?" That always meant more conversation. More exchange.

She always wore a beautiful summer dress with flowers on it when the weather was warm outside.

“What am I going to do without you, Ma?” I would ask her.

“Oh, you’re not going to lose me for a long time,” she would say, smiling. She was beautiful.

II

I felt sick all over. Nothing made sense except this agonizing heartache. Nothing made me feel better and the time finally came for the funeral. We were all there. In black. She had told me the day would come.

I finally got some sleep.

III

I could see her sitting there at the table, as I walked up from behind her. Her dress was flowing in the most perfect way I had ever seen. “Shall I pour the coffee?”

The Girl at the Bakery Shop

The cars hustled by on the narrow streets in Latin America. It was truly amazing for the observer to see how cars could move so efficiently, coming within a finger's width of touching another car and not doing so.

He waited patiently for the cars to move and, while keeping an eye on the other streets feeding into that one, finally crossed the street.

He had almost everything he needed; all the major necessities for living were in his heavy bags already.

He now stood directly in front of the bakery; the sweet smell of the pies and cookies made his already growling stomach roar even louder. This was the last stop before he would get home and make something to eat.

As he entered the bakery he noticed there was no one at the register. The smell was even more alluring inside! The sweet cherry tarts were whispering sweet enticements from behind the glass door! The cinnamon rolls were batting their eyes at him! Finally a girl came out from the back door and greeted him with a kind smile, "What can I get for you?"

"How much are those?" he asked pointing to small vanilla cakes in a glass display case on the counter. He was surprised by the low price. "Let me have three. And those?" he pointed to square cakes with an amber-colored jelly on top.

"The apple squares?"

“Yes,” he smiled. Again he was surprised at the bargain.

As he set his bags on the ground to get his money, he couldn't help noticing that she kept staring at the apple square cakes. He was not a wealthy young man, but there was no hesitation.

“Could I invite you to share an apple square with me?” he asked.

“Oh! No, thank you,” she blushed shyly.

“Please? Don't be shy!”

“Oh no, I couldn't,” she avoided his eyes.

“Well, then, for later,” he smiled as he took an apple square out from the bag she had packaged them in and placed it in front of her on the counter.

She looked down and smiled, “thank you.”

He nodded with kind eyes, picked up his bags and was out of the bakery. With that apple square he did not simply feed her for that one day, but fed her love for people for the rest of her life.

My Father and Me

I remember being nine years old and walking through the forest by our house with my dad. It was filled with adventure and seemed to go on forever. It was always an adventure! I always felt safe because I knew my dad was there if I faced any real danger.

“Why is grass green, dad?” I remember asking.

“Because it has something called chlorophyll. It helps plants make their own food.”

“Like we make sandwiches?”

“Ha-ha, similar in a way,” he rubbed my head.

I came across a dead bird and was very curious as to why he died and why the ants were all over him.

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“His life ended.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone’s life has to end sometime.” My father was very calm talking about a completely new idea to me.

“Us too?” I asked in a fearful tone.

“Everyone, son; you and me, that’s life. But it will not happen for a long time.” He smiled and hugged me.

I felt an ugly empty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

My dad was my hero and I had just learned that my hero would one day leave me. How was a child supposed to react to that?

I remember asking him questions about everything: why birds flew instead of ran, who named the animals, why were trees so tall and why they lived longer than us, why fish couldn’t talk, and why some animals died when others lived. I guess I was already thinking life’s most meaningful questions in a kid’s innocent ways.

My father took all these questions with noble patience explaining that each animal had a role in the world and they just knew what to do.

“They just know?” I asked.

“That’s right; just like you knew how to cry when you were little, and just how mom knew what to do to make you stop crying.”

“I love Mom.”

“I love Mom, too.”

I thought for a bit, just staring at the grass and the river. I saw a flower growing by the river bank and it reminded me of a girl at school that always wore a flower in her hair. “What about girls?”

He chuckled, “What about them?”

“Why are they here?” Looking back now I realize what a silly boy I was, ha-ha.

“Ha-ha, one day you will see why, but what makes you ask?”

“There’s a girl that always wears a flower in her hair at school. She is very...”

“Pretty?” he asked. My father had figured me out.

“Yes,” I said kicking rocks into the river, avoiding his eyes.

“So she’s pretty special, huh?” he asked kicking bigger rocks into the river with me.

“I guess,” I responded, trying to sound indifferent.

“How do I show her?”

My father thought for some time and kicked a few more rocks into the river. He finally spoke, “How would you show Mom?”

“Buy her flowers?”

“You can do that, or you can just pick ‘em,” he smiled as he answered.

I understood. Now, as a grown man, I can see all that my father taught me. I would not be the man –the husband and father – I am now if it had not been for him. The other day my son asked me what we would do together that day, to which I replied, “I know a forest that is filled with adventure and it seems to go on forever.”

I Love Dragons

“I want to love her, Grandma.”

“And you will! And she will love you back in a way that will make you very happy.” His grandma replied, with a confidence that only comes with age.

“What do you think she will be like?” asked Leonardo.

“She will be amazing- an angel just for you.”

An angel just for me? Leonardo thought to himself. Nothing would make him happier. Nothing would fill his teenage heart with joy than a girl to love. He would write poems, addressed to no one in particular, but always with some vague idea of whom she would be. His love existed only in his imagination.

As he lay in bed that night, attempting to sleep, his imagination was led by his heart. *What will her name be?*

He thought about his girl as he lay in bed, trying to calm his mind. Would she be everything he hoped she would be?

The next morning, Leonardo woke up with the idea of getting more books from the library. That was his passion-books. His best friend Paul joined him for the trip.

“What books are you getting this time?” asked Paul.

“You already know -dragons.”

Leonardo and Paul walked to the library in the cool breeze of fall. The leaves rustled and chased one another as they reunited on the edge of the street. The library was a short distance from the house and was always a pleasant walk, in any weather.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” They were greeted by a beautiful girl as they entered the library.

“Hey! How have you been?” screamed Paul as he reached out and embraced her.

“I’ve been fine, really busy,” she answered, smiling as she gave Paul a firm hug.

“We should get together and go eat or something,” Paul said, seeing the way Leonardo reacted to her presence. “This is Leonardo,” he pointed to his friend.

Leonardo smiled from ear to ear. She smiled, “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, that sounds like fun,” she said.

Once she walked away, the interrogation began.

“How do you know *her*?” Asked Leonardo, obviously smitten.

“Her mom gave me piano and singing lessons when I was younger,” answered Paul with a grin.

II

“Leonardo?” It was Paul on the phone.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think you should come to eat with us, it’s gonna be boring.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

Paul paused. His plan hadn’t worked; his excuses were futile compared to Leonardo’s determination.

“Look, she’s bringing her boyfriend,” Paul’s voice was flavored with guilt.

“Oh, ok.” Leonardo was confused, obvious by his staring at the phone for minutes after the call was over. He wasn’t angry; it was no one’s fault. He just found it curious. *Destiny? Perhaps. Now I at least get to start my books*, he thought to himself. A perfect evening; hot tea and good books.

Making his way into the kitchen he noticed that it had started raining. His grandparents had gone out for the evening and he would have the house to himself for some quiet reading. It was time well-spent for Leonardo.

As he stirred the tea packet into the steaming water, the doorbell rang. *Back so soon?* He thought. His grandparents must have changed their minds because of the rain.

When he opened the door, there stood a girl holding a colorful package in one hand and an umbrella in the other. She was smiling.

“Hi,” she started, “this came to my house by mistake, and it’s addressed to Leonardo, 2 houses up from us. Are you Leonardo?” Her eyes were a beautiful chestnut hue; a color only achieved after being roasted to perfection.

He nodded; a little embarrassed that his late birthday gift from his aunt was wrapped in colorful children's wrapping paper decorated with dragons. "I love dragons!" She said enthusiastically.

What These Old Eyes Saw

As I sat there feeling the warm vapor from the coffee caressing my face, I saw them walk in. They could not have been older than seventeen and were completely oblivious to the world around them. They quietly sat down in a booth near my table as I took a bite from my cake and watched them sit down.

They laughed and laughed. His eyes danced with hers in graceful steps, to a melody only they could hear. There was no doubt in my mind that it was beautiful music. His lips kept kissing her hand caringly as he whispered something in her ear, making her giggle.

They murmured things back and forth to each other, interrupted only by their laughter. Their tenderness with each other was something people much older than they could only hope to one day have.

I keenly observed them from my table for no other reason than sheer astonishment. How could two young people know how to love each

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