

The Folded Handkerchief

by Victoria Cooper

She was nervous about the future. She had only experienced the death of a hamster before now. Her stepfather climbed out of his pickup as she poked leaves with a stick. His feet were planted on the driveway, no leap or resounding thud.

The air between them felt thick like a sponge pudding and she wondered if this was how it was supposed to feel. She watched him cry. Loud painful sobs that made her want to cover her ears. His chest heaved underneath his shirt and she slid the zip on her jeans pocket back and forth to take her mind off it.

His bifocals steamed in front of him and he turned to her imploringly. He told her his son had died in a motorbike accident. She stared down at her T-bars, thinking of what to say.

She was nine years old, a potential road accident herself. She had nothing to give. No words to offer. Nothing to soothe. She continued to stare mutely at his hands and that unspeakable pain that lay between them, like dirt beneath his fingernails or the tremble in his lip.

If this was death, or grief, or even loss, she had imagined it bigger. She thought she would know it when it came. This was not big; this was not sign-posted. This was a middle-aged man wiping his wet face with a worn-out striped handkerchief.

She had seen that handkerchief on top of folded laundry, how was she to know that its purpose was for something so harrowing? That unfolded it could protect them both from the pain writhing uncontrollably inside him. Where was her handkerchief and where was her mother? Why did she not come out of the house? She needed someone to take charge. She needed someone with words. She felt rooted, unable to turn away or tell him about the Hawkmoth butterfly she had just seen in the woods.

She was not allowed to go to the funeral. Her mother told her children should not go, they got upset.

Now Martha stood with her back to the congregation in the hushed quiet of a chapel she wondered if her mother was right. The pain she saw indelibly imprinted on his face that day was far worse than now, and it was the first thing she thought of when she was told her father was dead.

That and a folded striped handkerchief.