

Catfish

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I know my daddy's gone. They think because I'm only five I'm too young to know what's going on. I may be little, but I'm smart. I know that dolphins are mammals, and aren't hatched out of eggs like fish; I learned that when Daddy took me to the aquarium. I know Aunt Rita was sad last year because something happened to the baby in her stomach. I know about Daddy, too.

I know what death is. Grandma Jones says Daddy's just sleeping, but that's not true. Death is when you lay down and shut your eyes and your heart doesn't work anymore. Like when the batteries in my toys run out: Daddy's batteries ran out.

Mama says Daddy went to live with God. She says there's a special window in God's house Daddy can see through, and we have to put on our best clothes and go say goodbye to him. We pick out my black velvet dress and white tights and shiny black shoes. Aunt Rita presses my hair and curls it, but I like when Mama does it better because she doesn't pull as hard. Aunt Rita gives me a black purse to match my shoes, and I put my candy lipstick inside and a dollar in quarters.

We go to a church. It's the biggest place I've ever seen. It's the only place big enough for God to live. It is so big that when Mama and I reach the front and I turn around to look, I can't see the back anymore. Everything is made of dark wood and there are colored glass windows, and it smells dusty and lonely like Grandma Burkhardt's attic.

There are lots of people: Grandma and Grandpa Burkhardt, and Grandma Jones and Uncle Tommy and Aunt Rita, and other grownups I don't know. Mama and I stand in the front of the church, and everyone comes by us to shake hands. Their faces smile but their eyes are sad. They say, "I'm so sorry about your daddy, sweetheart," and, "What a beautiful girl. Your father would have been so proud." They ask how old I am and wag their heads at me and pinch my cheeks. I

hate it when people pinch my cheeks. Aunt Rita says to be a big brave girl, so I keep smiling, but it hurts real bad.

After Uncle Tommy goes up to the front and talks for a while, Mommy and I get up to see Daddy. He is lying in a dark, glossy box and he has on Mama's favorite suit: navy blue with a blue shirt and a yellow tie.

Mommy picks me up to see him better.

"Okay, Bobbi," she whispers, "say goodbye to Daddy."

I lean over him. "Daddy? Hey, Catfish!" I whisper. I call him that because he has a mustache like the catfish at the aquarium. "I love you, Catfish." I kiss his cheek. It feels funny, like the leather seats in our car.

"Mommy, do you think he heard me?"

"Yeah, baby. I think he did." Then she starts to cry, quiet at first, then real loud. Then I start to cry. I know Aunt Rita said to be a big brave girl, but I can't help it. I've never seen Mommy cry; it scares me. Mommy hugs me real tight. It takes the wind out of me. I don't want her to let go.

When we get home, I eat ham and green beans and mac and cheese for dinner, and Grandpa Burkhardt lets me have two dishes of ice cream and we play Old Maid.

That night I dream about my daddy the catfish.

It is a sunny afternoon, and on sunny afternoons Daddy likes to nap on the couch. When it's time to get him up, Mama lets me wake him. I go over and pull gently on his mustache, and he reaches out to grab me and tickles me. We laugh and laugh.

But this time he doesn't move. I pull on his mustache, hard, but he doesn't move.

"Catfish?" I push him and then turn toward the kitchen. "Mama? Something's wrong with Daddy, he won't answer."

Mommy comes out of the kitchen and sees Daddy, and me pushing on him. The glass of ice tea in her hand slips out of her fingers, falls on the wooden floor and breaks into a million pieces.