

A Smile for a Penny

By Laurel Belby

I find it funny how you never know what's going to happen until it happens. Or how adults hide things from kids when the kid is going to find out anyway. Especially hard things to hear.

I was walking down the sidewalk to school one morning. I could smell the freshly bloomed flowers as I skipped to school. Today was a special day. Today was the day I could finally see my mother again. It had been six years since I got to feel the warm, cozy hug of her. My mother got drafted into the military when I was three. She was drafted to fight in the Iraq war. My father told me she probably wouldn't do much fighting—just planning and helping others get ready to fight. I don't remember her much, but I remember her holding me crying on the day she left. I remember her warm arms wrapped around me. I remember her corally pink flowered blouse she wore all the time. I remember her soft smile. But, most of all, I remember her loving bright blue eyes.

On my seventh birthday, she sent me a copper penny and a note that said, "Keep this, you might need it one day. My grandmother gave it to me when I was six and said, 'A smile for a penny.'"

My father always tells me I look and act more and more like her with every day that passes. I hope that's true. I've always heard of her as a beautiful woman that was as kind as one could be.

The day felt like it was going to go on forever. All I could think about was how I would see my mother tonight. I wasn't even listening to my teacher, Ms. Violet, when she called on me in math.

"Julie," she said sweetly, "Can you please tell me the answer to the question?"

"Uhhhhhhh," I looked up to see everyone looking at me and instantly turned a bright shade of scarlet. I whispered, "Can you repeat the question please?"

Later that day Ms. Violet came up to me and asked, "Is everything alright? You always pay attention in class."

"Yeah, just tired," I lied. I don't know why but I don't want people to know about my mother. I guess I'm kind of embarrassed about it.

She looked at me suspiciously for a moment. Then she shrugged and said, "If you need to go to the nurse, just tell me."

"Of course," I nodded.

I spent the rest of the afternoon staring at the clock on the wall and anticipating the sounds of school bells ringing and kids rushing through the halls every which way. Finally, after what seemed like years, I got to run home to see my mother.

I expected to be greeted by her at the door, but instead I was hit with the sight of my father sitting at our old rustic coffee table. His head was in his hands and I could hear the faint sound of crying. As I stood there watching him, I suddenly realized that if my mother was here she would be comforting him. This is when it hit me that something had happened to the woman with beautiful blue eyes that looked like the Pacific Ocean.

"What happened?" I whispered, barely able to breath.

My father's head shot up when he heard my voice. He wiped his tears away and put a smile on his damp face. His eyes were puffy and red from the sobs he tried to control.

"Julie! You gave me quite a fright. Nothing happened, your mother just won't be able to come tonight," he said with a small shrug.

I didn't understand, so I screamed, "But this was the night! This was the night I would have a mother! We were supposed to go shopping tomorrow and have a slumber party and do our nails and braid our hair and bake cookies and...and..." This sentence ended with tears and screams of, "It's not fair!"

"Honey, calm down," my father said sweetly. "She'll be here in a few weeks."

The sobs slowly came to an end when I heard that, but I was still confused why she wasn't coming home.

I got an answer a few months later when my father sat me down and told me he needed to tell me something.

"Julie, I need to explain why your mother is still not home." He could barely say the words as he pushed back tears, "She died in the Iraq war."

I couldn't move. My whole life felt like it had ended. The chair fell out from under me. I was falling off a one hundred story building. I didn't want to believe it. The tears didn't come rolling down my face until I realized it wasn't a dream. My eyes were scrunched close. All I could think of was the penny my mother had given before she left. I rubbed it with my thumb just to make sure I still had consciousness. As sad as I was, the penny made me smile and remember the great memories I had with my father. I opened my eyes and slowly walked over to him.

"Thank you," I whispered in his ear as I sat down next to him and gave him a hug.

For my seventeenth birthday I applied to be in the military. When I looked in the mirror I saw the reflection of the brave woman who risked her life for me. We all should always remember the people who risk their lives just so we can go to sleep without fear. And the people who make us who we are. We might not realize it, but we make an impact on people we barely know.

I looked down and rubbed the penny with my thumb. I smiled at the thought of my family.