

Horace

by Tyler Koch

The young boy sat on the swing, hearing sirens in the distance. The tops of his shoes were dirty. His fingers as well, where he drew stick figures of people in the dirt. His socks were several days old though they didn't yet smell. His hair grew over his ears, down the back of his neck.

If there was one peculiarity, however, it had nothing to do with his shoes, nor his fingers, nor his hair. It was his shirt. On an average sized man it would have been too large, and on the boy, he could curl up in a ball and use the shirt for a sleeping bag if he wished. When a breeze rolled through the park the shirt billowed, giving the brief impression that the boy would be lifted and carried away, like wind filling a sail. Of course, this was only the size of the shirt. The appearance was something altogether different. Worn. That was the easiest of the descriptions. Moth-eaten at the collar. The print on the front faded into illegibility. A shirt used for yardwork, or to mow the lawn, or paint. The sort of shirt that wives complain to their husbands about. It was light grey in color, nearly white, washed so many times it felt soft as tissue paper.

Other than the occasional squirrel that darted through the park he was alone. But he liked it that way. That's why he'd come. He hadn't been left alone for the past week. There was always somebody there with him, his mother, or grandparents, or aunts and uncles, or other adults he didn't know. One night he had a bad dream and when he woke he felt his mother sleeping next to him. She wore sunglasses most of the day yesterday, to hide that she was crying.

But he didn't cry. Not yet. He was aware that he was supposed to. His mother said it was alright if he wanted to shout and yell and be angry. But he didn't feel like doing any of those things. He only wanted to be alone.

His mother didn't know he was here, nor did his grandparents or aunts or the other adults. They didn't know he had

this shirt, either. He'd taken it when nobody was looking and hid it beneath his pillow. He tried to take a picture but his grandmother saw him and told him to put it back.

A car passed by the park but the boy didn't look up. He knew his mom was probably looking for him. He didn't want to stay here forever, only a little while longer. Then he'd return. He wasn't hungry yet but he would be soon. And his mother said something about more family coming into town. His cousins. He liked them, really he did. Normally they had lots of fun together. They came to this park once and had a competition to see who could swing the highest. But the boy didn't want to see them today. They wouldn't be allowed to come to the park. Instead he would have to sit and listen to everybody tell him they were sorry, and then smile, and then hear his mother cry again.

Behind him he heard a branch snap and he turned, seeing a young girl his own age walking toward him. She had on a black dress, with white tights, black shoes, and a black flower pinned to her hair. She stopped several feet away from where he sat on the swing.

"Hello," she said quietly.

"Hello," he answered just as soft.

Her lips formed a frown, not that she was upset, more uncertain. But before she had the chance to say anything a car pulled into the parking lot. The young girl's eyes widened in surprise and she ran toward the long yellow tube that connected one end of the park to the other. She crawled inside.

A man exited the car and walked to where the young boy sat on his swing. He too wore black, just like the girl. They had the same color hair.

"Excuse me," he said. "Have you seen my daughter? She's about your height wearing a black dress."

The young boy did his best not to look at the yellow tube.

"She's not in trouble," continued the man, taking a step forward. "She's run away—well, not run away. She's just gone missing. I'm trying to find her. Have you seen her?"

The young boy shook his head.

"Oh." The man frowned, the exact expression he saw the young girl make. He glanced around the park. "Are you sure? She's been coming here a lot recently. She sits right where you are and swings."

The young boy shook his head again.

The man walked around the park, looking at the slide and the rock wall and the wooden bridge. He put his hand on top of the yellow tube and drummed his fingers.

"Well if you see her tell her . . . " The man trailed off and wiped his hands over his face. He suddenly looked very sad. "Tell her that her father wants her to come home, okay?"

"Okay," said the young boy quietly.

"Thanks."

The man started to walk away, then stopped.

"Do your parents know you're here?"

The young boy nodded.

"You should get home to them soon, okay? Let your parents know you're alright. It's important, even if it doesn't seem like it now. They worry about you when you're gone."

The man got into his car and drove away.

"Is he gone?" called the young girl from inside the tube.

"Yeah."

She crawled out and pulled dried leaves off her dress. She said, "Thank you."

The young boy didn't reply.

"That was my dad," she continued softly. "He's looking for me."

When the boy remained silent she bit her lip uncertainly and asked, "Do you mind if I swing?"

He shook his head, and she sat on the swing next to him. The tops of her shoes brushed the dirt. She gripped the metal chains and looked at the ground.

"I'm going home soon," she said. "I only wanted to be alone for a little bit."

She looked out of the corner of her eye at the young boy, but he said nothing.

"Do you come here a lot?"

He nodded.

"Do you usually sit on the swing?"

"Yeah," he said, surprised by the sound of his own voice. "Sometimes. I like swinging."

"Me too. So does my mom—"

The young girl stopped suddenly. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the chains.

"She used to," she said, barely louder than a whisper. "We used to come here together and swing. Every Saturday morning. Afterwards we would have a picnic. Sometimes my dad would come too, but usually it was just me and her . . ."

She turned away from the young boy, but not before he saw a tear trace a line down her cheek.

"She died last week," she said.

The young boy didn't say anything. He grabbed a piece of his oversized shirt and held it in his hand.

"I've been coming here every morning since then, so I can remember her. This was our favorite spot. Today we had the funeral but all I wanted to do was come here. That's why I ran away from my dad. He didn't understand. I don't want to remember her like she was at the funeral. I want to remember her swinging next to me."

She turned so the young boy could see her again. Her eyes were red and watery. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"Thank you for not saying you're sorry. Everybody says that. Everybody wants to know how I'm feeling, or if I've eaten, or if

I'm sleeping. I don't want that anymore. I want everyone to leave so I can be alone."

"My mom asks me that too," said the young boy quietly. "Sometimes she sleeps with me at night."

The young girl wiped her eyes, nodding.

"My dad did that. He slept in the same room with me. I heard him talking in his sleep."

"My mom does that too."

She looked at him, at the oversized shirt he wore.

"Is that your dad's?"

The young boy nodded, wrapping the shirt around his hand.

"He died too," he whispered.

The young girl turned to look at him, but he didn't look back. He kept his eyes on the ground, tracing lines in the dirt with the tops of his shoes.

"When?" she asked.

"Two weeks ago."

"When was the funeral?"

"Yesterday."

"Oh."

The young boy said nothing. He rubbed the shirt between his fingers.

"Did you come here with him too?"

The boy shook his head.

"You just wanted to be alone?"

"Yeah."

The young girl nodded.

"Do you think about him, even when you dream? I think about my mom so much sometimes I forget what she looks like." The young girl trailed off, sounding uncertain. "I don't know what that means. I have to look at her picture to remember. Do you forget what your dad looks like?"

"No."

The young girl looked surprised, then sad. "Oh."

The boy covered both hands with the extra shirt bunched in his lap. He continued rubbing his fingers over the material, remembering how his dad used to do the same, rub the bottom of his shirt when he was thinking. The young boy remembered his father's hands most vividly of all. How they were calloused around the fingertips, how, no matter how many times he washed, dirt remained beneath the nail. The scar on his pinky that healed lighter than the rest of the skin. But most of all he remembered how his father's hands felt when he touched them. Rough, but not coarse, like old sandpaper. The young boy used to trace his fingertips over the callouses.

"You're thinking about him, aren't you?"

The young boy nodded.

"I'm thinking about my mom too. She always wore dresses when we came here. Usually they were bright colors, and some of them had flowers. I liked her dresses."

The young girl fixed her eyes at something in the distance as tears collected in her dress.

"We were going to buy some before she died. She promised she would take me shopping."

She went into the pocket of her dress and held out a picture for the boy to see. A woman in her early thirties, brown hair, with highlights, as though she spent long hours in the sun.

"She had a pretty smile," said the boy.

The young girl nodded. "She did. My dad said that was his favorite feature about her. He said I have her smile."

She smiled as she said it, and the young boy saw the truth for himself.

"You look like her," he said.

"Did you look like your dad?"

The young boy nodded.

"Maybe one day you'll be as big as him, then you'll fit into the shirt. Just like I hope I'll be like my mom so I can wear her dresses."

The young girl wiped her eyes and stood from the swing, smoothing the wrinkles on her dress.

"I think I'm ready to go home now. Would you walk me? I don't live very far, only two streets that way."

He stood from the swing and they walked together. A young boy in a shirt much too large and a young girl in a black dress and white tights. They stopped when they reached the house.

"Now that you know where I live you can come over to visit. I can share my dad with you if you want, since you don't have yours anymore. My dad won't mind. Would you like that?"

The young boy held the shirt in his hands but said nothing.

"Not that my dad will replace your dad," she said. "Nobody could ever do that. But maybe if you're lonely and you really want someone, maybe my dad can help."

"Okay," he said.

She smiled at him, and for a moment the young boy saw the woman in the photograph.

"You can come over too," he said. "My mom has lots of dresses."

"She wouldn't mind?"

The young boy shook his head.

"Okay."

She walked up her driveway and paused at the front door, turning to look at the young boy.

"What was your dad's name?"

"Horace," he said, feeling a lump in his throat.

"My mom was Nancy, but everybody called her Nance."

The young girl looked at him sadly before entering her house.

The young boy stood there a moment looking at the vacated space where she just stood. And for the first time since his father died, he began to cry.

