

The Heart Comes First

by  
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An emotionally-detached 3rd grader learns a valuable lesson from her dying father.

FADE IN:

INT. ABBY'S BEDROOM

A third-grader, ABBY, dresses in her school uniform, her face unseen. She slips her sweater over her white button down shirt, taking care to precisely pull her white cuffs out to her wrists and straighten her crisp collar. She checks to make sure her braids are flawless and hang neatly on each shoulder. She takes a shoe brush to her shiny, black Mary-Janes, meticulously erasing any hint of a scuff. Reflected in her full-length mirror, she looks like a catalogue model for school-girl uniforms. She gives herself the nod of approval.

She picks up a man's leather attaché case before she steps out into the hall.

INT. HALLWAY

Abby steps into the hall and pauses. She looks down the hall to a door that is closed, taking several deep breaths before walking out.

INT. KITCHEN

ABBY'S MOM puts a few finishing touches into Abby's lunch as Abby enters. She hands her the lunch bag as Abby gives her nod of approval.

CUT TO:

EXT. ABBY'S SCHOOL

INT. ABBY'S CLASSROOM

The class is quietly working at their desks. Abby is focused on writing on her worksheet when her pencil breaks. Without even the slightest reaction, she looks at the broken lead, opens her desk, places it inside and pulls out a sharp pencil and continues as if nothing happened.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND

The playground is busy as would be expected during the lunch hour.

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There are children playing and eating in various groups. Abby sits alone on a bench with her bento-style lunch box on her lap, neatly organized so no foods are touching. As she munches on her sandwich, she observes the groups around the playground.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - BASKETBALL COURTS

A group of boys play 3-on-3 basketball. They are young and clumsy but enjoying themselves. One of the boys trips and falls on the blacktop, badly scraping his knee. When he sees the blood streaming down his leg, he hugs his knee to his chest and begins to CRY.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - ABBY'S BENCH

Abby's sees the boy with the scraped knee crying. She gives a slight shake of her head in disapproval and looks down at her lunch.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY AREA

In a play kitchen set up next to a building, a group of girls play "restaurant" together. Some wear aprons and mix in bowls, there are some tables set up with a few customers and one girl is pretending to wait on them. They are being very imaginative and playful. The girls burst into LAUGHTER.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - ABBY'S BENCH

Abby has been watching the girls play. When she hears their laughter, she remains deadpan, simply closing her eyes for a moment then takes another bite and looks away.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - A HIDDEN CORNER

In a corner a bit further off from the blacktop, a small group of children huddle, talking in hushed tones. What they are saying is not heard, but it is clear that one little boy is being intimidated by the others in the group. He looks fearful and worried, almost on the brink of tears.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - ABBY'S BENCH

Abby sees this group and watches with interest. She almost has a look of concern, but instead shakes her head and begins cleaning up her lunch.

CUT TO:

EXT. ABBY'S HOME

INT. KITCHEN

Abby sits at the kitchen table looking over some worksheets. Her mother prepares a snack at the sink. She puts some blueberries in a bowl and offers them to Abby.

ABBY'S MOM

Here. Take these in.

Abby looks at the bowl and at her mother without a response.

ABBY'S MOM

Go on.

Abby takes a breath and obeys. She gets up and takes the bowl into the hall.

INT. HALLWAY

Abby looks down the hallway as she did earlier that day, but this time the door which was closed is now slightly ajar. She takes a moment to steel herself before she walks down and pushes the door open.

INT. DAD'S ROOM

The room is set up for home hospice care. There is a hospital bed, a small table with pill bottles, water and other medical paraphernalia on it. Next to the bed stands an oxygen machine with tubes running from it to the person lying on the bed. ABBY'S DAD lies in bed, somewhat propped up, with oxygen tubes in his nose, a glare of sunlight from the window shines off his bald head. He is sleeping, his chest gently rising and falling as he breathes.

Abby stands at the end of the bed with the bowl of blueberries in her hands. She is absolutely still.

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As she looks at her father, it is hard to tell if any emotion is registering for her. She has mastered her emotions to the point of being unmoved by sight of her ailing father.

Abby's dad takes a deep breath and turns his head, waking. He looks up and sees Abby standing there, still. His face brightens in spite of it's paleness and he smiles.

ABBY'S DAD

Well, hello there. Are you my guardian angel?

Abby is cold.

ABBY

No. I brought a snack.

ABBY'S DAD

Well that was nice of you.

ABBY

Mom told me to.

ABBY'S DAD

That's nice too. Why don't you come over here to your spot next me?

Abby obeys and walks over to the side of the bed where she climbs on and sits at her father's side.

ABBY'S DAD

So what do we have?

ABBY

Blueberries.

ABBY'S DAD

Yummy.

He takes a berry from the bowl and carefully brings it to his mouth. He chews slowly.

ABBY'S DAD

So how was school today?

ABBY

Fine.

ABBY'S DAD

Did you get to play at lunch?

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ABBY

No.

ABBY'S DAD

Hmm. How about your lessons?

ABBY

Fine.

ABBY'S DAD

Ok. What about the girls at school? How are you getting along with them?

ABBY

Fine.

ABBY'S DAD

Oh wow, I hit the jackpot. Three "fines" in a row. What do I win?

Abby's dad gives her a gentle nudge. She keeps her head down, looking into the bowl of blueberries. The room is silent except for the WHIR of the oxygen machine. Abby's dad looks at his daughter concerned.

ABBY'S DAD

Hey, you wanna know something?

He picks up a blueberry from the bowl.

ABBY'S DAD

I remember a time when you were no bigger than this blueberry.

Abby looks up at her father quizzically.

ABBY'S DAD

You don't believe me? Look it up. It's true. All of us were once no bigger than a blueberry. Can you imagine someone as big as you or Shaquille O'Neil growing up from a tiny blueberry?

Abby twists her mouth and squints at him in disbelief.

ABBY'S DAD

True story. I remember seeing you inside your momma when you were that big. We could barely make you out, but there you were. Oh boy, were we excited.

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ABBY'S DAD (CONT'D)

You were the most beautiful  
blueberry I'd ever seen. And can  
you guess what the first part of  
you to start working was?

Abby looks at the bowl as if the answer is in there.

ABBY'S DAD

Any guess?

ABBY

I don't know. Maybe my brain?

ABBY'S DAD

That's a good guess. The brain is  
important too at that stage, but  
there's another part that comes  
first. It's the first thing we saw  
that told us you were alive.

Abby shrugs her shoulders.

ABBY'S DAD

Your heart.

Abby stares at the bowl.

ABBY'S DAD

Your heart was the very first part  
of you to develop and start  
working. It's the part of you that  
first experienced the world, even  
from inside your momma.

Abby looks down without a reaction.

ABBY'S DAD

Your mom and I have prayed for  
your heart most often, asked that  
it would be protected but also  
that it would thrive and  
experience all the joy that life  
has to offer. The heart is a  
tricky organ. It can be very  
strong but so fragile at the same  
time. It can be hard to know what  
to do with a part of you that can  
break.

They are both quiet for a moment. Dad turns a knob on his  
oxygen machine and takes a few deep breaths.

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ABBY'S DAD

And you know what else, Abby-my-girl?

ABBY

What?

ABBY'S DAD

The world needs your heart. There's never been a heart like yours in all of existence. I knew that from the moment I saw it first flicker. What would happen if the world didn't get all of that good heart of yours?

ABBY

I don't know.

ABBY'S DAD

It wouldn't be as bright. Or anywhere near as special. You and your heart have got a lot of work to do, helping people, bringing them happiness. People need your love, Abby. It's your power. Promise me you will use it.

Abby is quiet, deep in thought.

ABBY'S DAD

I know how difficult it can be to know what to do with your heart, especially if it hurts. But my love, the answer is not to turn it off. You need your heart. It has been with you from the very first flicker and it will be with you to the very last. You have to learn to let it be a part of your life. If you try to shut it off from the bad, you also shut it off from the good. And I don't want you to miss out on any of the good that awaits you in life.

Abby looks down at the blueberries. She nods her head very slightly. Abby's dad pulls her into him and holds her close with one arm. She continues holding the bowl in her lap with both hands and gently leans her head against him.

## INT. LIVING ROOM

Later that night, Abby and her mom sit on the couch in front of the glowing TV. Abby's mom laughs gently at the program, but Abby is far away. She looks as if she's trying to make a decision. She lowers her head, then turns to her mother and crawls into her lap. She wraps her arms around her mother's neck and buries her head into her chest. Abby's mom is a little stunned but wraps her arms around her daughter and holds her tight. From within the embrace, Abby whispers.

ABBY

Mommy, I'm scared.

Abby's mom holds her tighter.

ABBY'S MOM

I know, baby. I know.

Abby cries into her mother's chest as her mother begins rocking her. Tears stream down her's mother's face.

CUT TO:

## INT. ABBY'S BEDROOM

The next morning, Abby dresses for school in her same routine, making sure every detail is checked, her collar is crisp, her cuffs are straight. She brushes her shoes and picks up her case.

## INT. KITCHEN

Abby's mom packs up her lunch and hands it to Abby. She kisses her on the top of the head as Abby takes the box.

## EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - ABBY'S BENCH

Abby sits alone on her usual bench with her lunch on her lap. She quietly munches on her sandwich as she observes all the familiar scenes around the playground.

## EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY AREA

One of the girls playing in the kitchen looks over and notices Abby alone on her bench.

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She looks around at the other girls playing "restaurant" and scrunches her face as if weighing options. She makes her way over to Abby's bench.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - ABBY'S BENCH

The RESTAURANT GIRL approaches Abby as she chews her sandwich. She stands next to her a little awkwardly.

RESTAURANT GIRL

Hi. Would you like to play  
"restaurant" with us?

ABBY

I don't know how.

RESTAURANT GIRL

We can show you. It's easy.

Abby looks down at a compartment of her lunch box. There is a bunch of blueberries.

ABBY

Ok. I'll try.

Abby quickly wraps up the rest of her lunch and walks over to the play kitchen with the girl.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY AREA

The girl introduces Abby to some of the other girls and someone hands her an apron. Abby puts it on as another girl hands her a spoon and she begins to play make-believe.

FADE TO BLACK.