

Short Story - CNF

The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi



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"The blue of her eyes and the gold of her hair are a blend of the western sky. And the moonlight beams on the girls of my dreams, she's the Sweetheart of Sigma-Chi..."

Six-year-old Meggy didn't understand the words, but Mama's blue eyes shone like a June sunset when their voices blended and Mama repossessed the college girl she'd once been. They sang as they pinched socks and shirts onto the backyard clothesline in the windy Kansas days or as they walked down the cracked sidewalk to Aunt Marge's, or as they drove the mint green Rambler to the store.

Not long after, though, when pumpkins and apples lined the borders of Meggy's classroom, scary unfamiliar words swirled among the grownups' long faces: "biopsy", "surgery" "mastectomy." Mama stopped singing after she returned from the hospital.

"Are we poor now, Mama?" asked Meggy, after another neighbor dropped off a casserole.

"No. Honey, why do you ask?" Outside, dry brown elm leaves littered the ground.

"Because people keep bringing us food. We take food to poor people at Christmas."

"No," mama laughed weakly. "One of my arms won't work for a while. I can't cook."

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Meggy accompanied Mama to treatments called “radiation” in the dimly-lit hospital basement. Brisk nurses scurried among rooms, outpacing stooped physicians. Later on, Mama needed even more treatments called “skin grafts” because the powerful radiation had seared her chest.

In the fitting room with Mama, the curtain drawn, Meggy perched on a stool and kicked her skinny legs. A foamy mound now occupied the empty side of Mama’s stiff bra. Mama’s blue eyes filled, and she muttered that she was “only half a woman now.” Meggy reached for Mama’s hand.

In the fifth grade, Meggy and Mama rode nearly every day to Aunt Marge’s in time for the four o’clock talk show. Meggy drank pop and threw a tennis ball for Marge’s poodle, Trixie, while Mama and Aunt Marge had cocktails. The silver jigger tipped into tumblers etched with boats. By the time they left, the two women laughed; their voices cackled high and strident like magpies.

Like a John Deere combine in a field of ripe wheat, time swallowed up years and Meggy entered high school and a busy life of homework, sports, and friends. Daddy scheduled a lot of meetings and golf games in the evenings. Mama sat in front of the TV with a drink until she nodded off.

At the school meeting, Meggy shouted, “We can have the fundraiser at my house! We can make popcorn balls to sell!” Days later, Mama assisted, purchasing ingredients along with cokes and chips.

Before Meggy’s friends arrived, Mama smiled, sipping from her coffee cup as she watched Meggy prepare. She sipped from that large coffee cup a lot these days, Meggy realized.

“Will Daddy be here?” asked Meggy.

“No, he has a counshel meeting.”

“Huh?”

“A council meeting,” repeated her mother, more carefully this time.

Soon, teenagers spilled noisily through the doorway. Randy, Meggy’s crush from Algebra, entered behind a pair of girls. “Hey, Meggy!” he smiled at her. Chatter and laughter filled the rooms. Boys nudged and kidded, girls responded, laughing. Meggy’s smile widened.

After a while, a quiet prevailed. Occupied with sticky hands, Meggy found herself in the kitchen with a few students she barely knew. “Where is everybody?” she asked a slight, freckled girl.

“A bunch of kids went downstairs to see your mom,” said the girl. Meggy wiped her hands quickly and bolted down the linoleum stairs. She stopped before reaching the bottom. Her mother’s shrill laughter peeled through the room. Mama stood unbalanced in the center of a circle of teenagers, holding court. She held aloft the sloshing coffee cup, swaying unsteadily and

sang, “and the moonlight beams on the girl of my dreams...” Wobbling on the note, she curtsied and stumbled. The kids roared and clapped.

Randy turned and saw Meggy. “Meggy, your mom is plastered. She’s a riot.”

Meggy’s stomach lurched as if she’d been horse-kicked. She looked up to see Mama take another drink. Liquid dribbled down her chin and onto her blouse. Mama raised her hand in a coquettish wave.

Shoving through the cluster, Meggy took her mother’s arm. “Mama,” she whispered, “come with me.” as she led her upstairs to bed.