**?**

Andrew Cusick

*“What’s happening?”*

She asks you her first question but not with words, just her eyes and her screams, how could she at five minutes old, and so you tell her a story about all the moments that had led to this one and how none of them were of compare and even if she doesn’t understand your answer, some part of her does as she drifts to sleep, like you were one of the two people on Earth that had the answers. Your wife cradles your daughter and tells you that some moments are magic, and she says that this is one of those moments. You name the girl Rose.

Three nights later Rose asks you to put her to sleep, three in the morning, and then she makes a habit of it, but you don’t mind, even on fifth cups of coffee and bleary-eyed walks from the diaper pail to the garbage, and you even tell her the story of how you don’t mind and never will.

She asks you to push the grocery cart faster. She asks you if she can have more Cheerios. She asks you to put on her socks. She tells you to politely go away, she can do it herself you know.

At four years old she tells you that her stomach hurts. The doctor says this kind of thing isn’t normal and that’s your first warning, and as the days and weeks and months go by, you and your wife ask yourself unaskable questions, and on the day that your girl dies, the deep breath before the priest offers an answer is all the answer you need.

*“What was the point?”*

*“What did she even live for?”*

*You volley these riddles into your dreams and the nightmares they send back scream indecipherable.*

You lock Rose’s door, christen it a tomb. You watch the television set decay into question with every swastika and Confederate flag and splash of blood on a city sidewalk, like the fabric of all things was just ripping and tearing, the muscles of the Earth’s heart straining with every breath, the way your girl had struggled to breathe near the end.

*“It’s five o’ clock somewhere,” your wife says, a little earlier as each week passes.*

Rose is on your lap in your dreams asking you to change the channel, asking you to push the swing higher, asking you in an unlived future if she can get married, if she chose the right life, if you were okay at the end—how you’d thought you’d known in those first early mornings that she’d be the one to shepherd you out of this life, and how unimaginable it’d become knowing it wasn’t even you that did that for her—it was a cavalcade of beeping monitors and H.R. Giger machines, monstrous things that you know, you just *know*, felt nothing like her mother’s embrace or her father’s shoulder at the end.

It takes a year to open the door—and inside the dust and the musty smell and the pacifiers still scattered on the floor, all of it levels you in the way that only shattered love can, the things we wonder about the place that our suffering has in collective hearts, the uselessness of young death, wasted life.

When it all passes and the tears dry out you find one of Rose’s notebooks on the floor with one of the stories she used to write: a dinosaur that comes from space and wants to attack a city but finds a frog that it likes and decides to go on an adventure with to Peppermint Land, a land that is only filled with peppermint. She’d come home from daycare once broken because she decided her story didn’t make any sense.

*“Dinosaurs don’t come from space,” she’d said with supreme confidence. “And there’s no Peppermint Land.”*

Your wife had stared at her for the longest time.

*“Stories don’t have to make sense. That’s what makes them beautiful.”*

Your wife gets home at midnight that night, and you show her the notebook, and she cries and cries and cries, and you remind her of what she’d said to Rose that day.

And so that night you scribble something inside of a notebook, just ramblings, disorganized, and over the next few days and weeks it becomes a story, a heartbreaker, but it’s the story of your girl’s life. It hurts, but she’s inside of the hurt too, all the light and all the beauty, the way her hair used to look in the light after a bath.

You spend a weekend that summer at the beach. You and your wife talk a little more, stay up a little later. The sun sets latest in July. You watch it from the deck, fall asleep together, her hands on a now-empty bottle of water.

When your son is born, he asks you more questions and they terrify you, because you had those answers once for someone else, and they weren’t enough. Your wife catches you sometimes crying yourself to sleep, but she whispers to you that we love, and we love until that love goes away, that’s all love is, relentless and boundless until the end, whatever end it may be.

*“But what…”*

You catch yourself before you finish, but you’re not even sure of what you were going to ask, that bottomless pit inside your stomach that no answer had ever quelled.

But inside the room you’ve repainted, your son is asleep. You watch him from the monitor initially, then you step inside quietly and stand over the crib, your eyes on his eyes, your mind on some day in the future, notebook in hand, your hands on his shoulder, hey, hey, it’s alright, I want to tell you a story…