

Cups and Such

Andrew-Taylor Troutman

Greg felt his body shift as his wheelchair was halted. Then his wife's face loomed in his view like a full moon with bright red lipstick lips.

"How's this, Hon?"

Emily's steel blue eyes were wide open, her forehead wrinkled like always. Greg blinked, as slowly and deliberately as he could.

"Yes? Ok. Well, can you can see her below?"

He blinked once again.

"Yes? Ok. But I worry it will be too cold on this hill."

Their daughter, Poppy, had just crushed her paper cup underneath her brightly polished patent leather shoes, which were one of her many birthday gifts. She was graced with her mother's eyes from birth and, now seven years old, Poppy possessed what had been her father's energy. Her gulp of lemonade was a mere moment's reprieve from her dancing among the fireflies, squealing with laughter. Greg watched until she twirled out of his line of vision.

Greg suspected that Emily had never quite lost hope, but he had long resigned himself to life without kids until that magic Saturday morning. Dark storm clouds had been rolling across suburban development. Racing against time, he had stepped up the pace on his customary 10K and jogged in the back door with the first rain drops pelting his shoulders. He filled a plastic red cup with water from the sink and drank deeply. His hands had been twitching lately for no accountable reason. When Emily entered, the kitchen was darkened but, years later, Greg swore to Poppy that her mommy's face was shining as she held the pregnancy test in the air like a trophy.

Even after checking and re-checking the wheelchair's break, Emily never let him get too close to any edge. Greg wished he could be closer to Poppy.

"Honey? I'll be just a moment over here with Linda. Ok? Yes."

As her retreating steps whispered across the ground behind him, Greg strained his hearing ahead, carrying his mind down the hill like a firefly. And it was as if he could see Poppy rolling down the hill beside her giggling friends. How could she be seven years old? For years now, Poppy had been in the habit of announcing her age and then bowing deeply, as if to acknowledge a thunderous applause.

If only Poppy were in his gentle reach, if only he could use his hands! He would cup her chin like he used to do and plant a kiss on top of her shiny chestnut brown hair.

Instead thoughts came to Greg of cups and such: glittering glass, a faded Bugs Bunny, and the smiley Kool-Aid man, all cups that had slipped through his shaking hands and dashed upon the floor, those fragile shards never to be put back together just like his body, betrayed by gravity and disease.

“Are you cold? You must be cold.”

Greg blinked twice, deliberately.

“No? You’re not cold. Ok, ok.”

Greg could still see his only daughter’s discarded trash on the grass below.

“Jesus, that wind! You must be cold, yes?”

The day Greg was told he had ALS was bright and sunny. Not a cloud in the sky. Poppy had just turned two and, though she had been sleeping through the night for at least a year, she began calling for her daddy long before sunrise. He would fumble down the hall and climb into bed beside her.

“Daddy, get close to me.”

He would snuggle under the covers. Her icy feet would burrow underneath his calves. He slowed his breathing to match her rhythm.

“Daddy, hold my hand.”

Poppy’s four fingers closed around his thumb.

Emily’s face again rose into his vision once again. She had walked around his wheelchair and stood swirling red wine in a clear plastic tumbler. Greg wished for more morphine, all other tastes forgotten. He looked beyond his wife’s left shoulder and caught the light slanting upon Poppy’s grass-stained knees as she raced by. He knew he could no more cup her chin than he could hold time in his concave palm, preventing the hours from leaking away.

“Greg, I’m taking you inside. It’s cold. Really cold.”

Emily gulped the final third of her wine and held the cup in her teeth to free both hands. As she spun his wheelchair, Greg caught one last sight of Poppy. She caught a lightning bug in her hands and, for a shining instant, all was whole again and saved.

Andrew Taylor-Troutman earned a certificate in Narrative Healthcare from the Thomas Wolfe Center for Narrative through Lenoir-Rhyne University. His recent essays have been published online at Mockingbird (<http://www.mbird.com>) and his poetry at Bearings (<https://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings>). He is a Presbyterian pastor serving a congregation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He and his wife have three children.

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