



Family Reminders

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Charlesbridge

Family



Reminders

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One



The mine's shrill disaster siren ripped through the everyday noises of the playground. Silence settled on the valley as the mine's dynamite blasting ceased and the clanging, stomping ore press went still. All of us on the playground stopped what we were doing. Shielding our eyes against the sun's brightness, we looked toward the telltale pile of orange-gold tailings that spilled down the mountainside away

from the gold mine's tunneled entrance. We looked hard, carefully scanning the area, hoping to see something that would explain that screeching siren. But we were too far away. Besides, we all knew that the danger was inside the mountain, not outside.

My stomach lurched as I thought of Daddy inside that mountain. Usually I liked glancing across the valley, knowing that he was right there, busy at work. "Like a worker ant in an anthill," he often joked. But that day the mountain didn't seem friendly and forgiving: it loomed threatening and angry against the skyline.

My friend Emily came to stand beside me. She squeezed my hand and said, "Don't worry, Mary. I'm sure he's okay." Emily's father worked the night shift so she was spared the worry. "You know it always works out," she said. I nodded, but in my head I knew that it hadn't worked out for Matthew and Aaron O'Malley. A day after the siren went off last year, we found out that they were fatherless. Their daddy and uncle lay buried under a pile of



rocks. A week after the siren went off, there was a double funeral, and two weeks later the remaining O'Malleys moved away.

As the siren blurted out its bad news over and over and over again, I scanned the pale, scared faces of my classmates and wondered, *Is it your uncle? Is it your brother?* I didn't let myself put words to the real question that was rolling through my mind. *Is it my father?*

Finally the siren stopped. After a few minutes of silence, Miss Sullivan, white-faced and teary-eyed, gathered us up and ushered us back into school. "Let's try to keep busy, shall we?" she said as she started us on our regular afternoon lessons. Although we all went obediently through the motions, no one had thoughts of anything but what was happening in the mine across the valley.

Finally it was time to go home. Miss Sullivan helped us with our coats and sent us quickly out the door. I didn't even bother waiting for my friends. Instead I flew down the hill toward home, my feet

pounding the wooden sidewalk. When I reached my own block I slowed down, not wanting to rush into any bad news that might be waiting for me.

Deliberately, I opened the gate. Deliberately— one, two, three, four—I climbed the steps of the porch. I paused for a minute at the front door, took a deep breath, and walked inside.

Two



“Is it Daddy?” I called out before the door even slammed behind me. There was no answer, but I didn’t need one. There in the unlit kitchen was Mama, sitting motionless in a straight-backed chair, her hands grasped together in a white-knuckled grip in her lap, her eyes closed. My words startled them opened. I noticed they were red-rimmed.

“Is it Daddy?” I asked again, dropping my book bag to the floor and rushing to her side.

“There was an accident at the mine, Mary. Daddy was badly hurt,” Mama began, speaking slowly, as if saying it that way made it somehow easier to take in, to understand. “A boulder fell on his leg. It came loose during last night’s blasting and then—”

“But he’s going to be okay, isn’t he?” I interrupted.

“I won’t know more than that until I see him and talk to the doctors.” Mama punctuated the last word with a jagged breath. For the first time she reached out to touch my hand. “Aunt Hattie’s coming to stay with you, and Uncle William will take me to the hospital.”

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

Mama shook her head.

“I want to see Daddy, too. Please, Mama. Please let me come,” I pleaded.

“I wish I could, Mary, but it’s going to be a long night. Who knows what will happen? I don’t

want to be worrying about you as well as Daddy. It’s best for both of us if you stay here.” Mama pulled me into the cradle of her arms and rocked me like the little girl I hadn’t been for a long time.

We sat there like that for a few minutes, lost in our own fears, until a knock at the door brought us both to our feet.

Aunt Hattie, Daddy’s big sister, came in, fluttery and pale faced. “Don’t you worry about a thing, Liddie. Mary and I will be fine until you get back.”

“Thank you, Hattie,” Mama said, heading toward the parlor. She pinned on her hat and slipped into her coat. I noticed her threadbare overnight bag tucked in beside the chair.

“Please, Mama, can’t I come?” I asked again.

Mama said nothing, just kissed the top of my head and went out into the slanting late-afternoon light, pulling the front door shut, oh so carefully, behind her.



After Mama left I curled up on the prickly sofa and watched Aunt Hattie bustle around, trying with her busyness to put things right. She plumped cushions and straightened Daddy's piano music. She dusted the side tables and swept the floor and then rearranged the knickknacks above the fireplace, lining them up in a perfect row. Finally, she closed the heavy brocade curtains.

"Time to start dinner," she said with forced cheerfulness, making her way out of the parlor.

"Mama always leaves the drapes open," I said quietly to her retreating figure. Lying there in the dark, I remembered last Sunday afternoon when Mama came home from visiting a friend to find the drapes closed tight to the autumn sun.

"I might as well be a miner," Mama teased Daddy as she whisked the drapes open to the light.

"Now who in their right mind would want to be that?" Daddy asked with a smile, pulling her to him and swinging her off her feet.

"My point exactly," Mama sassed right back.

Mama's laughter rang out sweet and clear, while Daddy's was low and grumbly and sounded as if it bubbled up from the very tips of his toes.

Aunt Hattie's call to help startled me back to the present. "Coming," I called as I got myself up from the sofa and slowly crossed the room. Before I left the parlor, I pulled open the drapes to the last shreds of afternoon light. Standing in the warm puddle of sunshine, I felt a cold knowing grow inside me.



That night I didn't feel like eating, even when Aunt Hattie offered me the leftover pie. Aunt Hattie clucked disapprovingly, saying, "You haven't eaten a thing, Mary." I shrugged and pushed away my plate. No food would go down past the big lump in my throat.

After the dishes were washed, dried, and put away, I kissed Aunt Hattie good night and went to my room. Plopping down onto my bed, I closed my eyes for a minute, but the thoughts racing through my head forced them back open. I didn't want to think of Daddy lying in a hospital bed. I'd never been in the hospital, but from the outside, it seemed scary. Its tall, brick walls made it look like a fortress, and behind those strong walls lay the weak and the sick.

I turned on my side and reached over to pick up a small, carved wooden figurine from my nightstand. It stood about six inches tall and barely fit into my hand. It was one of many that Daddy had carved for our family. He called them his Reminders. This Reminder was one of my favorites. It was a carved likeness of Mama and Daddy on their wedding day. Daddy stood soldier straight in his best suit, his arm tight around Mama's shoulder, pulling her snug in beside him.

"We're a perfect fit," Daddy said every single time he looked at the carving. "A perfect fit."

I studied the Wedding Reminder, turning it over in my hand. Mama and Daddy looked so happy and so strong. "Ready to face the world," Mama always said.



“Daddy, why do you spend so much time carving the Reminders?” I asked one day as I sat with him on the porch, watching him carefully shape each tiny detail.

“Because when I work on them they remind me of good times. It’s like having a memory you can touch . . . or tickle!” he said, putting down the wood and his carving knife before he chased me, growling and laughing, down the steps and around the house. Daddy was never serious for long.

For the first time since hearing about the accident, I began to cry.

Three



I woke up the next morning to the smell of bacon sizzling and coffee brewing. For the briefest of moments it felt like any other day. All too soon, though, the memory of Daddy’s injury came rushing back, and its heavy weight settled into a twisted knot at the bottom of my stomach.

“Is Mama home?” I asked Aunt Hattie as I walked into the kitchen, still in my pajamas and grateful

that it was Saturday so I didn't have to worry about school and the endless questions that surely awaited me.

"No," Aunt Hattie said, "but she sent a telegram first thing this morning. Suppose she didn't want you to worry. Seems to me she better start counting each and every penny, considering the news. . . ." Her voice trailed off as she pointed to the telegram with a nod of her head, her hands covered with biscuit dough.

I picked up the thin yellow and black piece of paper. I'd never gotten a telegram before. I'd never even held one. I carried it into the parlor and folded myself into Mama's rocking chair, where I carefully flattened and smoothed the telegram against my lap.

DADDY WILL BE ALL RIGHT THE DRS COULD NOT
SAVE HIS LEG I WILL BE HOME TOMORROW

The rocker squeaked as I rocked back and forth and tried to take in the news. *Daddy will be all right. Daddy will be all right.* I said Mama's words

over and over again in my head, and as I did I felt a wave of relief wash over me as tears burned my eyes.

I even smiled slightly to myself as I thought about how Mama would never have allowed me to be here in the parlor first thing in the morning. The parlor was for company and for family evenings. It was definitely not for daytime use. "Might wear it out," Daddy whispered to me whenever Mama chased us out. Usually we didn't sit in here until after the evening dishes were done. Only then would Mama let us move from the hard kitchen chairs into the fireplace warmth and soft- chair comfort of the parlor. Sometimes, though, Daddy grew tired of waiting for our after-dinner family time.

"How about some music?" he asked. Swooping into the kitchen, he dragged Mama and me away from the sink, our hands still dripping with soapsuds.

"Daniel, please!" Mama laughed, wiping her hands on her apron and shaking her head. "I suppose you think the dishes will do themselves."



“I’ll help you with them later,” Daddy said as he escorted Mama and me into the parlor. Then he pulled the comfy chairs up to the fireplace and seated each of us with a bow. Finally, once we were settled, he took his seat at the piano and began to play. Polka music, Irish jigs—anything with a fast, toe-tapping beat. Pretty soon, as the music got under his skin, he couldn’t sit any longer. Still playing, he stood up, the piano stool pushed out of the way. “Piano dancing,” Daddy always called it.

“Plumb foolery,” Mama always responded.

Whatever they called it, whenever Daddy got to his feet you could be sure that Mama and I were laughing and clapping and singing along.

The banging of pots and pans brought me back to the telegram and the news about Daddy. Staring at the silent piano, I tried to picture Daddy piano dancing on one leg.