

I was standing beside Mama's bed, holding her hand up to my face. The house was quiet except for the doctor downstairs preparing to do the operation. I could hear his instruments banging against the ancient wooden table below me. Looking at Mama's sleeping eyes, I imagined her walking and laughing through the fields with me like she used to. But now I knew she would never walk again. The doctor was taking her leg off. He said that it was the only way to let her live; he said she would still be the same person. But I knew that my mama wasn't the same if she couldn't run and skip. While I thought of this, Mama had woken up and begun to shake fiercely. I covered her with a blanket and laid my head down in her lap, trying to warm her. This was my mama, and no one was going to take her away from me. I would make do with her one leg. I'd support her. I'd stay with her. I'd love her. A voice called me from below. As I rose to answer, Mama grasped me. I rubbed her hand. Then, with tears in my eyes, I kissed her and closed the door.

I ran down the stairs to answer Father's call. He pushed the baby into my hands and went up to help the doctor prepare Mama. Exhausted, I collapsed into a chair and rocked my sister back and forth. The doctor had decided to operate on Mama at night. My father agreed because the kids would be sleeping. I desperately missed Mama as I sat downstairs in the dark. So after I had laid the baby in her crib, I opened the envelope Mama had given me on my birthday last year. The note was written on beautiful paper with her best pen; I had carried it around with me since she fell ill because it helped me remember when she could run and laugh. It began, "Dear Lovely, I am so grateful for what you have given to me, such gifts of love and happiness. You mean more to me than anything else in the world. It is a well known fact that our family couldn't survive without you. Thank you for the work you have done. It is another one of the gifts you have given me." Those words were special to me, and I needed them now that Mama was ill. They encouraged me. But the end was what would always bring me to tears. It said, "Dear daughter, I need you to remember this. When I am gone, you need to continue to be yourself. You need to move on with life. But please, dear, never forget me as I will never forget you. You are my love." I knew Mama wasn't leaving me now, but her words comforted me.

Hours later the baby's crying jolted me awake. I stretched and stood to get her. As I picked her up, Benny ran into the room. "Benny, what is it?" I asked, as he buried his nose in my skirt. "Benny, please tell me what's wrong."

“It’s Mommy,” he sobbed. “The doctor... he hurt her. She has gone to sleep and Papa said she isn’t ever gonna wake up.” I gasped and dropped the baby on the bed, ignoring her screams. I ran up the stairs as fast as my legs could and threw the door to her room open.

“Mama!” I screamed. Father tried to grab me, but I fell onto Mama’s bed and wrapped my head in her hair. I remember nothing else about that night.

Days later my father, Benny, the baby and I attended Mama’s funeral. Before hand, my aunt was in my room helping me get ready. I had on the black dress Grandma had made me for my grandfather’s funeral last year. It was a bit short, but Grandma let the hem down and added a lace collar to the neckline. I hated it; it was too tight and too sad. Hours after her death, my father told me that the operation had gone wrong. That was why Mama hadn’t made it. As my aunt pulled on the dress over my head and fussed with my hair I scowled at myself in the mirror. The dress made me look paler than ever, and my usual braid was replaced with a formal up due that made my ears look big. Oh well, I had an ugly outfit for an ugly occasion. Breathing slowly and steadily, I stepped out of the house and into the carriage. It was black like everything else in the world today. We rode an hour to Mama’s favorite garden for the burial. Her casket was lowered into the dirt where she would lay in the black forever.

People practically ran to the shade after the funeral because it was so hot outside. Everyone had been dying in their formal, black attire. Food was brought out. Carts and carts of turkey, potatoes, pudding and layers of cakes and cookies were brought to the tables. People ate and ate. I watched as Benny ate three turkey legs, a pile of roasted vegetables, strawberries, heaps of pudding, a piece of cornbread, cranberry sauce and many slices of cake. I tried to eat also, but I didn’t feel right. After the eating, the wine was brought out and my father toasted to Mama. All the food had been purchased by father’s sister, Katherine. She had offered to pay for the whole funeral production, but father had refused. In compromise, she had funded the meal which turned out to be quite grand. The children ran outside while the adults talked and drank, but I just sat and enjoyed the day on the porch.

After the funeral, my family adjusted well. We got used to Mama being gone. She had been sick for so long that I was used to doing her work. The days sped by while we worked my aunt played with the kids. My aunt was my father’s other sister; her name was Hanna. She was

highly inconsiderate and I could tell she hadn't cared a bit for Mama. I did not speak to her often and she didn't try to involve me, so we didn't get know each other. But no matter how much I hated her, I admired her beauty. She had a perfect complexion and dark, wavy hair. Every time I saw it I would finger my own mousy braid and sigh. I had Mama's hair; it was her only flaw. One day my father left with Benny and I was left home with Aunt Hanna and the baby. "Dear niece," Aunt Hanna said in a voice like dripping honey. Her perfectly pink lips curled around sparkling teeth. "Let's do something enjoyable. It's nothing but work here now. I am quite sure you are bored of it."

"No," I replied flatly. "Never could I tire from doing Mother's bidding." Sometimes I talked strangely when I was angry.

"Of course, but let's have some fun." She yelped and ran upstairs. She was acting very odd, but I crept up the stairs slowly to see what she was doing. In my room, Hanna was tearing sheets off the beds and knocking pictures off the wall. Dust was flying everywhere.

"What are you doing?" I yelled.

"Oh, just cleaning. I thought we could change your room up a bit"

"Yes, alright then." I replied as I cautiously started picking up my clothing. Together we took everything out of the dresser and dressing table and off the bed. Then we started moving around furniture. After the room had a new and sparkling arrangement we began to put everything back. Aunt Hanna's face was aglow and her hair was escaping her bun. She must have enjoyed that kind of thing. After the clothes were folded and put away told me to run downstairs and check on the baby.

"I'll just be up here throwing out this garbage." She said, gesturing to the pile on the wood floor.

"Ok," I answered. "Just don't throw away anything important."

"I won't. I promise." Then, she smiled at me, and I smiled back. Maybe Aunt Hanna did care and could be my friend. I wouldn't complain to anyone out loud, but I was lonely.

Days later I went up to my room to get something. I had been so busy lately that I hadn't had much time to spend in my newly decorated room, but now I sat on my bed and admired it. It really did look clean. Aunt Hanna had helped me nail the pictures I had drawn onto the wall and they smiled at me. She had also moved my bed under the window. Now when I sat on it I could watch the birds flying back and forth outside. I went to a pile of paper on my desk to find the letter from Mama. I had really missed her today, and the letter always comforted me. I went through pile three times, but the letter wasn't there. Quickly I rushed to my apron and looked through each of the pockets. It wasn't there either. Frantically, I searched the whole room—under the bed, in the chest, on the floor, in the dressing table, on the desk—but it was nowhere. I sank to my knees and started to cry. I didn't know where it could possibly be, and I was scared it was lost forever. I heard my father call up the stairs and I knew I had to pull myself together and get back to work. But, I just couldn't. I was so terrified that the letter was gone. I lay on the cold floor weeping.

For the rest of the day I had been upset about the letter. I hadn't told anyone, though. Father was too busy, Aunt Hanna wouldn't understand and Benny and the baby were too young. At dinner Father asked me if anything was wrong, but I just shook my head and stared at my plate. I didn't want to worry him. Finally, after days of searching and sulking, I decided I really needed to tell someone. I went to Aunt Hanna, maybe she would understand after all. After breakfast the next day I invited her to do the washing with me. "Of course, I'd love to. I bet you could use some company." She said. Together we walked outside carrying the laundry; there was a lot today which would give me a lot of time to tell her. We washed for a while before I finally got up my courage. "So, Aunt Hanna, I was wondering...well, I wanted to... well, to thank you for helping me with my room." I stuttered, unable to tell the truth.

"Oh, no problem at all, I enjoyed it." She replied with a smile. I breathed in and out; it was time. I really had to do this; I needed to find Mama's letter.

"Aunt Hanna, can I tell you something about Mama?" Hanna's face lost its smile for a moment and twisted itself into a concerned frown. Then she found her voice.

"You can tell me anything, Elizabeth. What is it?"

“I have a special thing from Mama. It’s a letter that she wrote to me. I love it so much; when I read it I can feel her arm around me and I can remember what she smelled like and her voice—” I broke off because there was another lump in my throat. It felt like a huge rock, and it hurt. “It’s just that... that I can’t find it.” The tears in my eyes started pouring out, and the lump in my throat exploded into sobs. I covered my face with my hand, but the sobs escaped and I was crying. I sank to the ground. “And now, I have lost her.” I cried in between each sob. My aunt reached down and touched my back.

“Elizabeth, I need you to tell me what that letter looked like.” She said nervously.

“It was written on a cream colored paper with roses on it, and it was in a matching envelope.” I hiccupped. Aunt Hanna’s face turned white and she drew in a quick breath.

“Oh, Elizabeth,” she said in quavering voice. “I think I threw it out with the rest of the garbage in your room.” She was looking at me with so much fear in her eyes.

“What? Where is it? We can still get it back.” I said with relief as I started to get and wipe my eyes. It was alright. The letter was just in the pile with the old magazines and newspapers to be burned all together next month. My aunt grabbed my skirt and looked at me with shocked eyes.

“Elizabeth, it was already burned.” She whispered.

“That’s impossible; we aren’t going to burn the paper for weeks. You must be mistaken” I tried to pull away.

“I burned your papers in the stove because the pile was already so big.” Aunt Hanna said. “I’m so sorry—” But I was already tearing away from her. That awful woman, how could she do something like that? I ran and ran until I got to the in the house and I tore apart the pile of papers one by one. It wasn’t there. It was gone. She was gone. I ran back out of the house, my tears blinding me. I stumbled into the meadow, over the hill and into the grass where I lay, head down and wept. I cried until my dress was wet and my eyes so swollen that I couldn’t see out of them. When I had finally cried out every ounce of energy in my body, I fell asleep in the grass.

Days later I was still upset, but I went about my work. I wouldn't talk to Aunt Hanna or look at her or listen to her. I completely ignored her. Even when she offered me food at dinner I would ignore her and get the food myself after she sat down. I had never hated a person so much. My father tried to get me to stop. He comforted me and yelled at me, he even tried leaving with the kids so it was only Aunt Hanna and me in the house. But I just locked myself in my room. Life went on, but without any comfort from Mama's letter. I felt so alone and scared.

One day my family went out. I was holding the baby, and Aunt Hanna was walking with Benny. Cheerfully, we all went up the hill for our picnic lunch. I was the eating hard-boiled egg and bread and cheese that Aunt Hanna had packed us; Benny and I were having a great time counting ants. We were laughing and having fun. But when Aunt Hanna joined in and began laughing with us, I stopped and turned my back. "Come on Elizabeth, please. I am so sorry, will you forgive me?" Aunt Hanna asked. She sounded so upset and sincere I almost gave in. But instead, I sat up straighter and kept eating my sandwich.

"Answer your aunt Elizabeth." Father ordered coldly. "I am tired of this game."

"Weather's nice today!" I said, smiling at my father. His eyebrows glared at me ferociously and he began to rise.

"I said answer your aunt, NOW!" He roared. My smile faltered, but I wouldn't give in.

"Don't you think the weather is nice, Father?" I answered meekly. My father did not think the weather was nice. He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the blanket. Then looked at me, "Elizabeth, we need to work this out," he said. I just stared back at him. His eyes weren't flashing in anger any more. They were sad. I knew it; I knew that I was hurting him with this, but how I could I forgive her. She lost Mama. My father stared back for a moment. Then his face hardened and he grabbed my arm again, pulling me towards the house.

We got to my room where he pushed me onto the floor. "Your impertinence is not acceptable. You will stay in your room. I do not care what your aunt has done to you. Your behavior is not excusable. Stay here until you learn some respect. You hear?"

"Yes, I hear." I whispered back to him.

“Good,” Father said. “Now start thinking about how you can forgive you aunt.” He gave me one last sorrowful look before he slammed my door shut and locked the bolt. I sank down to the floor and cried a little. I didn’t know how I had gotten into such a mess, with so much pain. Now I hadn’t just lost Mama and hurt Aunt Hanna, but I had hurt my Father. He was special to me, and I didn’t want to lose him too. I sat on my bed trying to remember Mama. I tried to hear her laugh in my head and feel her arms around me again, like I had. But nothing was there. Now she was really slipping away from me. As I sat there thinking, something popped into my head. It was an image of a smile, a really gorgeous one that made you warm all over. It was Aunt Hanna’s. It was the smile she gave to me the day we were my room. That smile said that I love you and I care for you. Why was I blocking her out? She was trying to help me. She could help me in her own way. She wasn’t trying to take Mama away from me. But now I had to do something hard. I had to ask to her forgive me. I didn’t think she would or even could forgive me for accusing her of something so awful. The way I had treated her, and Father, was unspeakable. But I would do it for me, for Mama and for my family.

I stepped off my bed and sat at my desk. Picking up a cream-colored paper, I began to write with Mama’s best pen. “Dear Aunt Hanna,” I wrote. My hand moved swiftly over the roses on the paper wording an apology. “I want you to help me. I want you to be a part of my life because you are my family. I love you. And I really want you to love me back. Please, will you forgive me?” I finished. But, before I folded the paper I added one more thing. “I feel like I am forgetting Mama. How can I bring her back?” Then I sealed the letter in a matching envelope and penned Aunt Hanna’s name on the front. Crouching down, I slid the letter under my door.

Early the next morning I was awakened by my door opening. A package was set on my floor and then the door closed again. It was from Aunt Hanna. Curious, I tore off the paper. Inside was a beautiful book. It was covered in leather that was stamped with flowers and leaves. The paper inside was cream-colored and smelled sweet, like a flower. The package also contained a new fountain pen and a jar of ink. There was a note on top of the book. It was from Aunt Hanna. “Elizabeth,” it said. “Your Mama was an amazing woman. She loved and cared for everyone, especially you and your family. She was the nicest person I have ever met. I don’t want you to forget her.” Tears welled up in my eyes as I read this. It was all true, so true. I took a deep breath and continued. “I want you to use this book to remember her. Writing something

down can make it as true to life as reality. I love you.” That was all it said. I thought for a minute. Could writing something down really help me remember? Carefully, I opened the book from Aunt Hanna again. As I turned the pages something fell out; it was a photograph of my Mama. I outlined her hair and her smile with my finger, thinking about the fact that she was gone. But what Aunt Hanna said was true, I couldn’t forget her. I just couldn’t.

I spent all day in my room writing. At first I didn’t know where to begin, but once I started I could hardly stop. I wrote about Mama and me running through the flowers, and about dipping my feet in the stream with her. I wrote about everything—baking with her, the smell of her dress, games we played together, the way she cared for me when I was sick, the day she gave birth to Benny,—and somehow it made me feel better. As if having all those things down in writing brought her closer to me. After I had written for hours, I stopped. My hand ached, I was exhausted and my stomach rumbled. But now Mama was here again, and I couldn’t stop remembering her. She was close to me again. Slowly, I closed the book and picked it up. But before I set down in my chest I hugged it close to me. It was a warm hug, like the ones Mama had given me long ago. And the whole time I was hugging, I was remembering my mother.