



Alina Gonzague

most minute and insignificant detail. He saw Lila standing by the shelf Rita was at, smiling, holding something fragile in her hands. His heart, he thought, and smiled. She'd been telling a joke, something about how to get her dear old dad to laugh on a Thursday.

"I'll pick you up at four this afternoon."

"Thanks, appreciate it, Frank."

Mac closed his cell phone. He had a few hours, then. Dressing in front of his mirror he exhaled slowly, thinking, if Frank couldn't tell, he was okay for a little while.

The day was bright and warm; Mac heard the harsh cry of seagulls and the surf that had been the soundtrack to his existence for over thirty years. As he walked, he unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. He knew Lila loved the trinket stores closest to the water's edge. He'd start there first.

"Hey Mac, back again?" Rita called. Her face appeared from behind the stock room door when she heard the entrance bell chime.

"Hey, Rita. It's Lila's birthday. Do you remember what she was looking at the last time we were here? Some sort of figurine, I think."

"If memory serves, I believe it was a glass figurine of two giant tortoises." She moved to the section of the store where they'd been standing a few weeks earlier. Mac followed behind. "I'm almost certain someone bought it soon after the two of you left, though."

"Was hoping to get lucky on my first try. I don't like shopping much. It must have been turtles though; Lila loves 'em." Mac went still for a moment, trying to recall that Wednesday. He'd been doing that since the doctor told him—weaving whole scenes from the past, down to the

Rita. It's Lila's birthday. Do you remember what she was looking at the last time we were here? Some sort of figurine, I think."

"Tell him a joke on Wednesday!" Lila and Rita laughed together.

Mac frowned. "I'm not all that bad.

Anyway, let's not waste Rita's time, she's got tourists waiting." He waved vaguely behind him, knowing no one was there.

"Don't worry, he'll laugh tomorrow," Rita said to Lila, not bothering to whisper. The two women smiled.

"You know you'd laugh at yourself a little easier if you spent more time with people, Mac. How about I make you dinner sometime?"

"That's a great idea, Rita. Dad lives off frozen foods and old groceries."

"I can live off of water and sunshine; I'm doing just fine."

"Well, I can't," Lila said, placing the turtles carefully back on their shelf. "Let's grab lunch, Dad. Oceanview-side."

"What do you think? Maybe dolphin figurines? Mac?"

"Never mind, Rita. We're going to lunch."

"We?" Rita smiled.

"Yeah, Lila and I'll be around in a couple weeks, I'm sure. Thanks all the same."

"Oh. Sure." Rita searched his face. "Have a good one, Mac."

Mac looked around for Lila. She was

standing right in front of him a moment ago. She's probably outside already, he thought. When that girl gets hungry... But she wasn't outside. She'd have waited for him, he knew. He frowned, looked back inside the store windows. He could see Rita looking at him, eyebrows raised. He shrugged slowly. Suddenly his pants started buzzing. He took out his cell phone.

"Frank?"

"Hey bud, let's make it five o'clock instead of four. My wife said C & O Trattoria isn't as far away as we thought." Mac was silent, his mind working frantically.

"C & O..." He breathed out, determined to understand. Like lightning, it struck him. "Oh right, right. Five is great. Better, even. Thanks Frank. Tell Nancy hello for me."

"Will do. See you soon."

Though a little shaken, Mac composed himself. He was there, he thought, really truly there in that memory. He could even name the color of Lila's blouse. He looked sideways at Rita, turned and left.

He headed towards the pier. He could see the Tilt-a-Whirl and bright canopies ahead. Every summer the city set up a fair there, and it had been his and Lila's tradition to ride the Ferris wheel at least once. When he got closer, he remembered the last time he'd brought Lila. She'd just turned sixteen. He thought back to that day. She'd been so embarrassed by his reaction; he always figured that was why their tradition died that summer. Walking slowly down the pier, his eyes rested on a young girl as he thought back.

He bought cotton candy for he and Lila to share, but when he turned around he

couldn't see her. He groaned inwardly. Was it really so unbearable to be seen with him?

"Dad, all my friends are going today. Can't we go together tomorrow?" she'd pleaded that morning.

"Lila, you know I'm not on summer vacation like you are. I have to work. We'll ride the Ferris wheel once and I'll wait for you at Sydney's. Just make your dad happy, please?"

But it seems she had taken off without him. Suddenly there were too many people around. Some of them looked crooked; some were wearing clothes too heavy and dark for the weather. Mac's brow creased and began to sweat. He looked around, calling behind stores and into restrooms. Minutes passed. An hour? It felt like too long. Mac made his way behind the half-enclosed Tilt-a-Whirl. Four young men were smoking lazily, laughing. He heard his daughter's voice call out from behind one of them.

"Jake, you're so mean! Give me my hair band back, will you?" He heard laughter in her voice.

"Lila!"

The boys went silent, hastily stamping out butts and waving at the air.

"Save it." He grabbed her arm. "Where have you been?" He eyed one of the boys, Jack or Jake. "Did you know her father was looking

for her? What are you idiots doing back here, anyway? Get lost." They were out of sight in a moment.

"Dad that was so—" Lila started to whine.

"Don't start with me, Lila. You knew I'd be looking for you. What were you thinking? Those boys aren't up to any good, you know that."

"Dad, they're just boys from school. I was coming right back to you." She kept looking down.

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"Lila, I had no idea what happened to you. You could have been hurt or taken—"

"I was fine! I was right here! Why do you have to be like this? I'm not a little girl anymore! That was beyond humiliating, you've ruined everything!" She broke away from him, tears in her eyes. He was left holding vapor.

"Hey, old man! Lay off my girl! What's your problem?"

Mac's eyes focused on a young man, hair heavy with gel, tan skin interrupted by fresh acne. Directly in front of him was a young girl, staring at him icily. He realized his hand was on her wrist. He jerked himself back as if burned.

"I'm sorry, young lady," he stammered. "I thought—I thought you were someone else."

"Save it," he dimly heard the boy say. "Get lost."

Mac, shoulders slumped, left the fair.

His legs felt like lead, he moved slowly toward the sand and shore. He stared wistfully at children playing games, being tossed high into the air by fathers who would not forget their names, their faces. He fell crumpled at the water's edge. He took off his shoes and felt the sand crunch between his toes. At least he'd always have this, he thought—fleeting and nameless sensations on his bare skin, the warmth of sunlight on his face, the sound of echoing laughter. If he could live in his memories, it might not be so bad. He heard a child's voice call out, "Again, Daddy!"

"Again, Daddy, again!" Lila cried. Mac lifted his daughter high over his

head, released her and caught her in front of his chest. Her swim suit was made to mimic a ballerina's tutu, and it fluttered as she moved. She ran to the edge of the tide and shrieked happily as the water moved over her feet. She dug her tiny hands into the muddy sand, giggling. Running back to Mac she held her fists out to him. "I'll get you, I'll get you!"

"Oh no!" Mac jogged away from her, stopped, turned on her. "I'll get you, I'll get you!" She squealed, fists and sand thrown into the air, little legs wobbling. He caught her again and threw her high.

"Daddy, I want that one." They were in a trinket store now. Lila was pointing at a porcelain keepsake box shaped like a turtle. Carefully, tenderly, she lifted the shell and revealed the compartment beneath. The store clerk coughed noticeably.

"We'll take this," Mac told him.

The clerk rang the purchase. "Would you like it gift-wrapped?"

"Please." Mac bent low and spoke to Lila. "Remember, your birthday isn't for another week, so even

though you know what it is, you can't open it until then, okay?"

"Okay!" She hugged him then, pressing her soft cheek to his, and Mac knew he'd do anything to keep her there. "I'll always be here for you," he wanted to say, and, "I'll always protect you," and a thousand other promises he'd commit to her all made him believe that his life was given him simply to fulfill them.

"Sorry, Mister."

Mac looked around. There was a ball at his feet.

"No problem, Chief," he said to a small boy. He tossed the ball to him.

Mac couldn't remember what he'd been daydreaming about, but it didn't matter. He knew what he would get Lila for her birthday. He put his shoes back on and headed for the strip of stores. Soon he came to Mogu's Honus. He searched the clothing racks and found what he wanted. It was a little big, but Lila would probably grow into it. He held the skirt in front of him, appreciating the pattern of swimming turtles at the hem and waistline. It was bought, wrapped, and home within twenty minutes.

Frank showed up right on time, and the two men headed for the Italian restaurant.

"Amazing how fast they grow, huh?" Frank said in the car.

"No kidding."

As they got closer, Mac grew nervous. How old was Lila turning? He knew the party they were headed toward was for her, but how did she get there without him? Had his sister flown in? Why couldn't he remember? He struggled inwardly. He was missing something, he knew. But Frank seemed unaware that anything was wrong, and Mac slowly began to relax.

He didn't realize he'd been gripping Lila's present until he felt his fingers unclench. They pulled into the parking lot.

"Frank!" he heard a young woman call once they were inside.

"Happy birthday, goddaughter! This is for you." He handed her a wrapped package.

"Thanks Frank, you didn't have to. Hi, Daddy! Come sit by me."

Mac only stared at her. Who was this young woman? Where was Lila? He looked at Frank.

"What's wrong, man? Stunned at how grown-up and lovely she is?" He laughed. "Don't worry, Lila. I cried at my daughter's twenty-fifth birthday."

Lila smiled slowly and walked to Mac. "Is that for me, Daddy?" she said softly. "Can I open it now?" Mac only stared at her, surrendering the present weakly. Lila's smile faltered only for a moment when she opened it. "It's a little too small..." She tried to laugh, and looked at Mac with a puzzled expression.

His eyes were filling with frustrated tears. He realized he was supposed to know this girl, and somehow he knew the Lila he thought would be here was gone forever. He felt helpless, and began to sob when he looked in her eyes and finally saw his daughter.

"It's a joke," his voice broke. "Just trying to persuade you to stop growing up."

He saw the compassion on her face. "Thank you, Daddy."

Mac was silent throughout the dinner. Lila was surrounded by her friends. He kept staring at his hands, wondering how much he would forget, how many details would be ripped from him until eventually all was a blank void. He tried to hold his memories, sparkling like ocean water in his hands, knowing the

next time they passed before him they will have changed.

He looked at Lila and saw the dying Sun cast a ripe orange ray of light against her cheek. Her laughter floated to him on a breeze. It was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

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