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SWEET NOTHINGS

EVER SINCE DAD DIED, THE sweet nothings stayed in Douglas's room. He didn't know how to make them go away.

When Mom came in after lights out, the sweet nothings hid under Douglas's bed. He wished they would go under Arthur's for a change, but they didn't like the way Arthur smelled. Arthur thought that soap was some kind of Martian plot to make his skin hurt, so he usually didn't use it.

Mom had always made Douglas use the soap. She used to make Arthur use soap too, but since Dad died Morn just wasn't on top of things the way she used to be.

Mom would come in and say good night to Arthur and Douglas, and the whole time the sweet nothings would be whispering somewhere just below Douglas's ear. The worst thing about it was that he could almost understand them. He was sure they were talking about things no ten-yearold should hear.

They had first appeared one night when Dad was whispering to Mom on the sofa while Arthur and Douglas were sitting on the floor, doing a puzzle and watching The Simpsons. Arthur didn't seem to notice anything, but Douglas saw Dad's head close to Mom's, and saw Morn smile a secret smile that said she was thinking about something Douglas couldn't understand. Dad whispered some more and Mom let out a little giggle that made her sound like someone in seventh grade.

Small bouncy pink things showed up in the corners of the room as Dad and Morn whispered and giggled. It made Douglas feel creepy. They looked like soft rubber bunnies, but they had no eyes or ears. They had chubby hands, bigger than their heads, bigger than their feet. And the hands were reaching toward Morn and Dad, fingers curved to clutch. The wide little mouths always stretched into toothless grins. Sometimes tongues came out of their mouths and licked -- licked their own faces, or each others'. Their tongues were way too long.

Douglas nudged Arthur, and pointed toward the pink things. Arthur looked. Then he looked back at Douglas, his eyes narrowing. "This some kind of trick?" he whispered.

"What?" Douglas whispered.

"What'd you do? You steal a piece of the puzzle when I looked away?"

"What?"

"What are you up to?" Arthur's whisper was mad now.

"The pink things," Douglas whispered, "don't you see the pink things?"

"What are you talking about?" Arthur peeked over his shoulder at Morn and Dad. Douglas looked too. Mom and Dad were staring at each other. Masses of pink things sat along the arms and back of the couch, reaching out, opening and closing their too-big hands.

Arthur punched Douglas in the shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

"The pink things," Douglas said, his whisper fading. He rubbed his arm where Arthur had punched him.

"There are no pink things. Shut up."

The pink things hopped around, flexing their fingers, gripping nothing, as long as Dad whispered. Later, when Dad and Mom sent Douglas and Arthur up to brush their teeth, the little pink things disappeared.

"What was Dad whispering to you last night?" Douglas asked at breakfast the next day. Dad had left for work already.

"Sweet nothings," Mom said, and smiled, staring at the wall.

Douglas hoped Dad would never do that again, but it happened. Douglas made a study of the little pink things. They never actually did anything. They smelled like burnt sugar and butter and hot milk. Their grins reminded him of little devils, even though they didn't have horns or a tail.

Douglas actually started to look forward to the nights when Mom and Dad were fighting. No jigging little pink things with clutching fingers those nights. But whenever Mom and Dad made up Douglas took to staring straight at the TV when that happened, but he could still see bouncing pink from the corners of his eyes.

Arthur told Douglas he was being weird. "What's the matter with you? You sick or something? How come you're not eating your desserts?"

Douglas didn't know what Arthur was complaining about. Douglas usually sneaked his dessert to Arthur later. Arthur was meaner and madder than he used to be, though, no matter what Douglas did.

The fights got louder.

Douglas remembered the biggest fight. He and Arthur had hidden in their room with the lights out while the shouting was going on.

Douglas was thinking very hard about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Michelangelo was Douglas's favorite, and Douglas was trying to talk himself out of this. Everybody knew Michelangelo was the stupid one. He liked to party, but he was stupid. So why did Douglas love him the best? Leonardo was obviously smarter and stronger and braver; he was the leader. Douglas decided from now on

he would like Leonardo the best. You couldn't like Raph. Raph got mad a lot. That wasn't good. Getting mad just hurt people. Donatello was the smartest, and he loved playing with his machines, but Douglas didn't like machines. Once Arthur had set up the toaster to give Douglas a shock. Arthur was good at machines. He could make the TV go to channels that weren't even on cable. No, Douglas didn't really like Donatello.

But Leo. He could like Leo.

Deep inside he knew he would always like Michelangelo the best.

The door slammed downstairs, louder than Douglas had ever heard it. Douglas closed his eyes and thought about Michelangelo's face, grinning beneath his orange headband. Michelangelo had the best grin.

Mom was crying. Arthur and Douglas sat on their beds in the dark and waited. Douglas didn't remember falling asleep, but he woke up and it was light outside and his neck hurt.

He never saw or heard Dad again.

Dad went to the Next Place -- that was what Mom said, anyway, as though he had moved to another town and sooner or later they would all catch up to him. Aunt Ruby, who took care of Arthur and Douglas while Mom went to say good-bye, said, "I'm sorry, but I just don't hold with keeping you boys in the dark. You have to know, and if Hazel doesn't tell you now and you find out later what she's hiding from you, it's going to hurt you. Children, your father is dead."

Arthur turned pale. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the floor. Douglas thought, just for a second, no more sweet nothings, no more yelling. Good. Then he hit himself in the head so hard it hurt, and he started crying. He couldn't get himself to stop. Aunt Ruby kept saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and tried to get him to sip from a cup of water. Nothing helped. His head fogged up after a crying while and Aunt Ruby put him to bed. Arthur never said a word.

The sweet nothings didn't show up again until a couple weeks after the funeral. Douglas and Arthur were watching TV on the floor, like they always did, and Mom was sitting on the couch hugging a pillow. She was sad a lot. Douglas never knew what to do about her being sad.

Sometimes Douglas was sad himself, remembering the way Dad used to rub his hair, or make special pancakes the shape of his initial on Sunday mornings, or the way on Douglas's tenth birthday he was allowed to stay up really late and he just sat with Dad on the front porch looking at stars and talking, and nobody had been in a hurry to go anywhere or do the next thing; it had been as if they had all the time in the world.

That was the day Dad had finally allowed him to have a pocket knife, too. Douglas kept the knife in his pocket all the time, closing his hand around it

often during the day. If he found a piece of string he would open up the knife and cut through it. The blade was very sharp. Dad had promised to show Douglas how to sharpen the blade on a whetstone, but now he never would.

The night the sweet nothings came back, Douglas and Arthur were watching some nature program. Mom always seemed happier when they were watching some nature program. This one was about cats and it talked about how the father cat sometimes came in the barn and killed all the kittens that weren't his. Douglas thought it was creepy. He reached into his pocket for his knife and all he found was a little hole in the bottom of his pocket. His stomach twisted and hurt him. He couldn't believe it. It was like he lost Dad all over.

Before he started crying -- he was afraid he wouldn't know how to stop again, so he had never let himself cry since that one night with Aunt Ruby -- he looked up, looked all around, hoping that if the knife had fallen out, it had fallen out right here at home so he could find it again.

That was when he saw the sweet nothings. They were sitting in front of the couch, their blind faces aimed toward Mom. She didn't seem to notice them. She just sat there hugging the big orange pillow, with tears running down her face.

The weird thing was the sweet nothings weren't reaching out and opening and closing their fingers the way they used to. They just sat there like little rubber bunnies. They were almost...cute.

Douglas forgot about his knife until the next morning, when he searched the whole house for it and couldn't find it. He asked Mom if she had seen it, and she checked inside the washer and dryer for him, but the knife wasn't there. "I'll get you another one, sweetie," she said.

"But it --" Douglas said. He could tell that the hurt place inside wouldn't disappear until he found his own knife. "It isn't..." Then he looked at Mom and saw that her face had its right-before-tears look. "Okay."

Everywhere he went -- to the school, to the store -- he still kept an eye out for his knife.

When the sweet nothings came back the next night, Douglas watched them out of the corner of his eye. The third time they came back, he actually edged over and touched one. It felt smooth and warm and sort of wet, and he liked touching it, but he thought he shouldn't like touching it. He let go of it right away.

That was the night they followed him up to his bedroom after Mom made him and Arthur turn off the TV and go to bed.

The sweet nothings moved right into Douglas's and Arthur's room that night and they only left when everybody was downstairs watching TV. Douglas was always scared when he had to pee in the middle of the night. He was afraid he'd step on one, or that they would all crawl into his bed while he was gone and be waiting there to grab him with their chubby clutching hands when he slid back between

the covers. Usually he just took the covers with him to the bathroom so that the bed was bare when he got back and he could see its clean white surface by the nightlight and make sure no little pink lumps huddled there.

After a little while Arthur stopped punching Douglas in the shoulder; or maybe Douglas just stopped noticing it.

"You're getting too weird," Arthur told him. "Stop it."

But how could he stop it? The sweet nothings were there. What was he supposed to do, step on them? Let them grab him?

Douglas had seen Arthur step on one and not even shiver. The sweet nothing got up afterward as though nothing had happened.

Douglas wished he could get rid of them somehow.

Sometimes Douglas thought about putting the sweet nothings in a sack and throwing them in the Dumpster at school.

No, that probably wouldn't work. Dad had gone to the Next Place, and the sweet nothings had found their way back from there. They could probably come home from anything.

He thought about drowning them, but he wasn't even sure they were alive. How could you kill something that wasn't alive?

If he could only find his knife, maybe he could -- but Dad had told him the knife was only for cutting string or scotch tape, or for whittling. "Never hurt anyone with this," Dad had said.

The best thing would be if he could get a steamroller to run over them, but maybe they'd pop back into shape like Judge Doom in Roger Rabbit.

One night he decided to do something even though he didn't think it would work. He took the big fuzzy orange pillow cover off the pillow that Mom was always hugging on the couch and he caught the sweet nothings -- they didn't try very hard to get away, and when he picked them up, they snuggled in his hand and some of them licked him. It made him feel good in an icky way.

He put them all in the pillow case and zipped it shut right before the Sunday evening nature show came on, and then he brought the pillow downstairs. The sweet nothings made a pretty lumpy pillow. If Morn noticed something different, Douglas wasn't sure what would happen. He was tired of things being the same, though.

He noticed right away that the sweet nothings didn't ooze out of the pillow cover and reappear on the floor the way he had been afraid they would. Mom hugged the pillow. The TV talked about the lives of ants. Arthur colored in pictures of Muppets. Douglas took a blue crayon and a piece of paper and started

coloring a sky in a big picture. He did short lines very close to each other and worked across the top, then moved down and worked the next stripe, leaving no speck of white page behind.

When he peeked at Mom, she was crying the way she usually did, but she had her cheek pressed against the pillow and there was a little smile on her face. She didn't even seem to notice how funny the pillow was. When she went to bed, she took the pillow with her.

Douglas looked at his picture the next morning in the wake of the first whisper-free night he'd had in a long time. A solid blue sky the size and shape of his piece of paper. He had been concentrating so hard on making the white blue that he had forgotten to leave room for anything else.

He decided that was okay. Sometimes you just had to look at the problem and not anywhere else. He got out a new piece of paper and spilled the crayons out of the coffee can onto the kitchen table, and there was his knife.

He held it in his hand a long time before he picked up a green crayon. He opened the blade of his knife and sharpened the crayon, leaving little cuffs of color in the middle of his paper. He sharpened the pink crayon and the brown crayon and the silver, and then he wiped his knife off on his jeans, closed the blade, and set the knife right on the table next to where he was working, so he could see it.

He closed his eyes. He opened them. The knife was still there. He smiled and started a new picture.