

He Lived for Sundays

By Robbie Cox

It was a Sunday ritual. He carried her flip flops with the tiny butterflies fluttering around the strap and she carried her pretty pink pail with matching shovel. He wore the same outfit every weekend, dark brown board shorts with a yellow stripe down each side and a hole in the back pocket, brown T-shirt with some faded saying about rednecks, and an ancient ball cap with a faded Corona logo on the front. She, on the other hand, always wore a different bathing suit, her mother's way of showing off her new-found money. Today, she wore a peach one-piece with a mesh tutu. Perched on her tiny face were sunglasses too big for her and his old Army cap, which covered her ears and kept falling into her eyes, rested atop her head. It was just the two of them, week after week for quite awhile now, longer than he wanted to contemplate.

She walked him down to the water still afraid to venture in herself with the ruthless waves that crashed hard upon the shells she loved to collect. He walked beside her, holding her hand and relishing this Sunday. Tomorrow, she would be gone, returning to live with her mother and that new boyfriend of hers, Johnson. At least that's what he thought the guy's name was. It didn't matter.

“Can we go into the water, Daddy?” his little two-year-old asked.

“Only a little ways, Princess. Hold onto my hand. You know how the water tries to pull your feet out.”

In the cold water, shells bit at his heels and scraped over his feet as the ocean called the water back to the salty sea. Her small fingers only wrapped half way around his big palm, but he

held onto her with all his might, her safety line against the riptide. She belonged to him in this life. On this day.

“The water’s cold, Daddy,” she giggled, her voice like wind chimes.

He smiled down at her. “Do you want out?”

“Can we build a sand castle?”

“Of course, Princess. We can do whatever you want. This is your day.” This day was his life.

A wave crashed around her ankles, sending her squealing as the icy water splashed up her legs to her waist. He hoisted her a little into the air by her arm as she laughed, spinning and dangling.

“Again, Daddy!”

His smile shaded the noon sun that washed over them. He waited until another wave broke around her pink feet, sucking the sand out from under her, then he pulled her up into the air just enough to allow her to dangle. He smiled even more. Her laugh made his world.

He set her back down just as the foamy part of the wave washed out to the sea. She turned, her pink tutu spinning outward, and challenged the waves to return to get her again. “My Daddy’s stronger than you!” With her hands planted firmly on her tiny hips, she used her sternest two-year-old voice. “You can’t get me!”

Then a wave about four times bigger than the first started to build, aiming at the shore. He watched as her eyes grew to half dollars before she spun and ran back up to the dry sand, squealing, “Daddy, save me!” the whole time.

He followed her up the sand to where she felt safe again. Reaching down, he tousled her

head underneath the old Army hat she had stolen from his closet. It fell down past her ears, covering her eyes when she ran, but she carried it everywhere. He loved the way she smiled up at him from underneath the bill, her head tilted back as far as she could in order to see him. She never thought to push the cap back up on her head. It was her piece of him for when he wasn't around, which was six out of seven days. But that wasn't his fault. He wanted more time; wanted to be near her more than anything. No, it wasn't his fault.

After less than ten seconds of running, she spotted her pink pail and the wave was forgotten. She squatted down over the sand, not wanting to sit in it, pulled the shovel out of the pail and began to fill it. He sat right down, not caring about the gritty feel of sand on his legs. It was all about her. He hated the beach. Always had. It was hot. The sand got into places that should never have sand and rubbed like steel wool against his skin. The salt made him feel sticky and all gummed up, a feeling he dreaded.

But she loved the beach.

And so they came the first day of every week. It kept him going Monday through Saturday. He lived only for Sunday. Only for her.

"C'mon, Daddy. Let's build a giant castle." She dumped the pail over and banged on the bottom before lifting it a little too fast into the air. Most of it stayed in its cylinder shape, but parts of it crumpled and fell back to the ground. She immediately started filling the bucket with white sand, stopping once in awhile to examine a new shell that came up with the grains of earthly heaven. Some of those she set carefully to the side while the rest, she carelessly tossed over her shoulder. Once the pail was full she dumped it over right beside the other pile, taking part of the first one with it. She paid little attention to the destruction it did to part of her castle.

He stared down at the crumpled chunks of sand, remnants of a house that had never fully been finished. Little heed was paid to the destruction of the home until it was too late to bolster it up. The support timbers of marriage seminars and counseling were not erected quick enough to halt the termites that ate away at the structure.

And so now he lived for Sundays.

The little girl took some of the tinier shells and decorated the castle with them while she sang some song she had learned from a television show about pets who rescued other animals. He watched it every day, as well, knowing she was watched the program at her mother's and, in his mind, it kept them connected, giving them something she liked to talk about when Sunday came his way again. People would ridicule him if they ever knew he watched it alone. He didn't care. It didn't matter. Nobody ever visited.

“Look, Daddy. The people can see out because the house has windows.”

It was the people who looked in who worried him, though. People were not content to peer out their own windows, watching the world pass by in front of them. No. They sneaked peeks inside other homes to make them feel better about their own pathetic lives. They wanted to watch the destruction without ever wanting to help prevent the chaos from happening. They would rather record the tragedy on their smart phones, as opposed to rescuing the victims. Just two weeks prior while they played in the water, they watched as a thin dark haired man hauled an older, heavier man out of the water where he dumped him unceremoniously on the wet sand like a beached whale. People gathered around the unconscious man as some college kid started CPR in an attempt to save the old man's life. The rest of the crowd just stood looking on, tut-tutting their shock over the older man's active life or admiring at the young kid's heroics.

“A man of his years really should know better.”

“They do say the riptide is worse this time of year.”

“Look at how blue his lips are.”

“He’s coming around. Good job, boy.”

“Are there signs posted? There should be signs up telling people of the danger.”

But no one did anything except peer through the window at another life, waiting to see if it survived or not.

“That looks very pretty, Princess,” he said, smiling at her as she pressed more shells into the sandcastle.

The tide started coming in, inching closer to where they sat, encroaching on his time. She adjusted the over-sized sunglasses on her nose, pushing them back in place, ignoring the persistent waves. The sun had moved from the Atlantic and was heading west. Soon Sunday would be over. He didn’t want it to be over.

But he lived for Sundays.

Sweat began to bead up on his forehead but he wasn’t hot. He stared out at the enlarging waves trying to slow his breathing. He would talk to himself. “It’s okay. Don’t panic. Not in front of her. You’ll scare her. You can do this. There will be more Sundays.” He talked to himself every week.

He picked up the pail and began to fill it with sand to get his mind onto something other than her leaving soon.

“Are you going to build a house, Daddy?” She was watching as he just scooped the sand into the bucket.

He stopped and glanced at his little girl. Could he build a house? No. It was too late. He only had Sundays.

The day wore on into evening and he heard someone call his girl's name. He closed his eyes, fighting back the urge to scream. "No! It's too soon. I want more time! Please, I need more time."

"Mommy!" The little girl squealed, pail and sand castle forgotten as she ran to the weather-beaten stairs, glasses falling to the ground. "Mommy!"

He watched the little girl climb the steps, her little legs stretching for each one as she held onto the railing. He waved to the woman at the top of the stairs, the one he had spent so much time loving, the one who told him he couldn't see his little girl anymore. The woman ignored him.

But the girl, his girl, didn't. She turned and waved, her arm seeming to almost fall off with the energy she was exerting. "Bye, Daddy! I love you!"

"C'mon, Little One. Time to go." The woman said, as she extended her hand, fingers wiggling.

The little girl took her mother's fingers. They were a better fit. "I love Sundays, Mommy," she said, as they walked off.

So did he. He lived for Sundays.

He bent down after they had disappeared and scooped up the pail, shovel, and her sunglasses, stuffing the last two into the first. Holding the pail in both hands, he turned toward the ocean and took in the gray horizon. He wanted to just walk out into the salty water and keep walking. The weight of Monday was already pressing on him. He took a couple of steps toward

the water, the chill shocking him to a standstill. He could just swim out. If he swam far enough out, he would be too tired to swim back, and then this life would be over, his misery relieved, the noises in his head screaming at his incompetence would be silenced.

He took two more steps. The cold bit into him again and the pretty pink pail slipped from his fingers, splashing into the water.

“No!”

He lunged for the pail, which still cradled the sunglasses and shovel, as the sea tried to suck it out into its hungry maw. He snatched them back before they floated too far away. He must keep them for her. Her happiness depended on the tiny odd assortment of toys, and she entrusted them to her dad. To him. She expected to see them next Sunday.

Next Sunday.

He stared back out at the enticing waves. Next Sunday. He turned and made his way back up the shore to the dilapidated steps. He kept her toys safe. They existed for her and must be ready. Next Sunday. He lived for Sundays.

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