

CASSANDRA'S PLAYGROUND

BY

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Cassandra's father peeked between the set of curtains drawn around the hospital bed. "You awake sweetheart?"

The little girl slightly turned her head. A tiny smile emerged. It had been awhile since she managed to show happiness. Cuts on her face stung as her lips turned upward. A breath of fresh summer air swept in from an open window near her bed.

The death of her mother affected more than her life, it affected her state of well being. She barely remembered the accident. Shattering glass, collapsing metal and the smell of gasoline dripping into their overturned car had been fuzzily etched into

her young, delicate mind. Since that day, Cassandra became less social than she was in her previous life; before the car slammed into the rock cut.

Past friendships really did become part of her past. She no longer saw a future. Life had become a chore not worth living.

"Look what I brought you," her father said, as he sat on the edge of the bed. Grasped in his hands were two plastic bags. One from Walmart, the other a Dominion store grocery bag. He opened the grocery bag and pulled out a handful of hand drawn cards and dropped them on the bed. "See, your classmates made get-well cards." One had been drawn in black and white, it had images of tombstones littering a skeletal forest. At its bottom, scribbled in crimson, were the words 'WAITING FOR YOU.'

Cassandra's puffy eyes drifted up to the Wal-mart bag. Her father smiled. "I thought you'd rather have this," he said. He opened it and poured the contents onto Cassandra's bed. The little girl's eyes lit up. "You knew I'd like them, didn't you?" she said, her voice wispy and raw.

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Cassandra partially zipped her jacket before she placed a wide sheet of tracing paper against the cold granite. She fastened it in place with masking tape, then slid her rear-end back over a mound of dying grass. She had to see from a distance if the paper

was hung just right. Smiling at a job well done, she then dug out different grades of charcoal sticks from her Ottawa Senators' duffel bag.

A cool breeze blew, pushing the sun's warmth away from her skin. Brightly colored leaves fluttered above her, cloaking the mossy surroundings with a layer of rosiness that seemed inappropriate for this place. A sensation of calm and the feeling of happiness dominated her soul. It had been awhile since she felt so much at home. Most of the summer Cassandra just felt plain ugly. Except here, she had no reason to feel misunderstood and rejected. She found that when she came to do the rubbings, her mind found solace. The last time Cassandra recalled feeling such joy was the preceding spring, as she and her mother painted a canvas for the last time. The scene portrayed life, a picture of melting snow with a stream threading through greening tufts of grass until finally pooling around a budding berry bush.

She closed her eyes. A memory flashed behind her eyelids. A picture of a funeral home, a portrait of a young woman laying silently in a polished casket, her mother's face emitting an ethereal glow. She opened her eyes. A cold breeze swept over her fragile shell. That and the freshly dug autumn graves sent a chill through her delicate soul. Lacy, tree-dappled sunlight glided over her.

She knew peace and serenity filled her now as much as it did before the accident. The only difference between now and then was her location and her mother's death. Today, Cassandra found herself kneeling in front of a headstone recording the moment of death rather than sitting in the middle of a spring field painting the dawning of life.

Cassandra quietly rubbed the wide charcoal stick over the paper until its image began to poke through. She felt delighted by what she saw peering back.

Suddenly, twigs crunched from the brush beyond the stone. Her hand stopped in mid-swipe. She strained to listen. Her imagination transported her to a thought that something unholy might be creeping through those bushes. She cautiously peeked over the marker only to see still strands of raspberry cane beneath the seasoned oak and maple trees. Their colorful canopies shadowed the graveyard from above. Nothing near her moved; everything stood as motionless as the ancient tombstones that freckled the landscape. She settled back down and looked at a partial shaded face which now stared at her through the tracing paper.

The thing smiled at her. Then a voice floated through the air. A dead branch snapped behind her back. She twisted around. Nothing there. She slowly returned to the rubbing. The paper-stranger's stare permeated her soul.

"Do you wanna play?" it asked.

The voice spoke no louder than a breeze tickling the autumn leaves. A specter's breath grazed the nape of her neck while the sun dipped out of sight. Cassandra shivered. She zipped up her jacket. She turned her head and squinted her eyes to see over the multitude of tall white stones. Her eyes locked onto the thicket behind the gravestone. An ethereal hand slipped into hers and gently tugged. Nervously, she looked at her hand. A grey shadow floated overtop. Without acknowledgment, she allowed herself to be led through the raspberry cane until she reached a clearing. A clearing where a number of small children frolicked in a spectral playground. They ran in circles, playing games of tag, playing hide and seek and kick the can. Cassandra could not contain herself; she had to join the kids. She wanted to participate in their games. She played with the little ones and talked about life with those closer to her own age. It wasn't long before daylight faded and as the shroud of night enveloped the grounds, each child gradually melted into the earth. By the time full darkness had evolved, Cassandra saw only tiny white markers dotting the neatly groomed lawns under a score of mature autumn trees. Loneliness overcame her again as she returned to the stone with the shaded picture. A ghostly presence materialized within the paper.

Cassandra recognized her mother's features. It was she who had led

her to the ghostly playground.

A gust of wind crinkled the paper. The specter bore a felicitous wrinkled smile.

Happiness filled Cassandra's soul once again.

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She had to go home before it became too dark. Cassandra packed her materials and walked down the deserted drive and out onto the highway. On the way home, she felt excited thinking of what fun and knowledge the next evening might bring. Maybe she could return earlier in the day. Just maybe she could come every day straight after school. She would ask the paper image of her mother tomorrow, if that would be at all possible.

Surely, her new playmates wouldn't mind.

Cassandra could hardly wait.

THE END