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Dust of the Earth

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I waited for my husband in the fading light outside of my work. *I have some bad news,* he said over the phone. But he wanted to tell me in person.

The blood oozed around the crook of my left elbow, purple and green shadows forming beneath my flesh as I heard the rattle of our car coming into the parking lot. The hot pink wrap felt too tight as I bent my arm to pick up my backpack. After years of donating blood regularly, I’d never bruised. Bad news, I thought, my jaw tight. Bad news. Cameron didn’t say anything as I climbed into the passenger seat—he just looked at me for a moment, then started driving. I glanced at him, stretching my elbow. *What’s wrong?*

*Taleah died.*

I froze, staring past his face at the lights of evening, the houses, the Utah Mountains. I held my breath, certain I’d misheard. *What?*

*She died this afternoon. She was on the floor near Ethan and Natalie. They were all watching* The Little Mermaid.

I shook my head. I couldn’t speak, my throat suddenly thick, the mountains blurring into the browns and purples of dusk. But I thought she would live into her twenties, I wanted to scream. I thought she would write or paint, dazzle the world with her gifts. I could not say goodbye, I could not picture her face, and the mountains disappeared as I covered my eyes with my hands and sobbed. My elbow ached, but I didn’t care. Cameron squeezed my shoulder.

*You want to go see her? She’s in the hospital.*

I swallowed and nodded, once, the weight of the mountains pressing above and beneath. My eyes were still closed, my elbow still bent, and all I could see behind my lids was red.
I squatted near my three-year-old niece, pressing pictures of her mother, her father, her brother and sister in the damp earth. Clay flecked under my nails and onto my knuckles as she lay on her side in the grass, grinning with a quiet delight. Born with Spinal Muscular Atrophy, a disease that makes it impossible for her to walk, sit up, or even swallow on her own, she saw the earth with more patience than I ever will. She often froze, listening, her ear pressed against the very flesh of the land. But at that moment she watched me as I wrote her name. Look, Taleah—my fingers are all brown. Not like your pretty hands. Is that pink nail polish? She sucked in air with a glare. It’s not pink—it’s red! Her face was ferocious, her eyes scrunched up and lips drawn in tight. I could only blink. Definitely red, I agreed.

I sat near Taleah as blood rushed through my cheeks, my eyes, my fingers, a hot and hidden crimson flow. Crimson, too, was the blood that seeps through the land, melting edges of rocky flesh and pooling in the scalding bellies of the earth. I felt fascinated by mountains, from the cutout peaks cupping Provo like a hand to the jagged blue-white fist that forms the volcanic Mt. Rainier near my Washington home. I couldn’t see the blood building deep, dried igneous rock or magma or metamorphic swirls crusted beneath earthy nails, but I could sense a sheer weight, and I caught myself peering up and up as I wondered: Is this what it means to be the dust of the earth? I felt strong as I saw my hands moving, a thousand tendons and veins and bits of dust working together to brush my niece’s cheek.

People always talked behind Taleah’s head in high-pitched voices. Taleah rarely responded, and I didn’t blame her. Still, I never remedied the situation. I felt afraid to kneel down next to her and really talk, talk enough so that she would talk back. I could see in her eyes secrets I couldn’t hope to capture, secrets involving hours of silence and stillness, and I felt a fear that I wouldn’t
understand her. And then, one Sunday, I brought a ball and jacks early to the weekly family dinner. I walked into the kitchen. Taleah stared at me from the top of the table. Cameron went into the living room to discuss basketball with his brother John. No one was really watching. Maybe in the quiet I could try to talk. I could try to listen.

I took a breath and sat next to Taleah, who lay limp on a cloud blanket. Hi, I said. Taleah didn’t respond, watching in silence for a time as I dropped the ball, snatched, and dropped again. And then, after my third bad miss, my hands dropping the ball and snatching only air, she looked at me and smiled. I like red, she said. And the pink jacks.

I jumped, a little. I hadn’t really expected to listen, or to do much other than say hello and struggle with jacks. After all, Taleah’d been watching me spin and giggle and hide from other nieces and nephews for nearly six months, always with her lips puckered and upcurved. But never, when I knelt at her side and asked her a question, would she respond. She responded to her mother, her father, her mother’s sister and brother. Never any uncles or aunts on her father’s side of the family. Until that day.

I gave her the red ball, and we discussed the merits of color. We often discussed color after that Sunday. Her cheek pressed against the table, against the grass, against the blanket as we chatted about purples and reds and greens. I imagined in her stillest hours she could hear the whisper of magma, the rustle of rock grinding against rock, and so I listened carefully day by day for a bit of wisdom she might say. Mostly she talked about red, or about how she hated mosquitoes, or how she wanted to be Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz for Halloween. At three years old she could spell her name in peas with her arm in a sling—she couldn’t swallow, couldn’t stand, but there was never anything wrong with her mind. I could see her becoming a great artist, fire in her brush, fire beneath her concaved belly. A writer or a painter, a genius who would never swallow pizza, who would never sit up or walk all on her own, a little girl who called herself Super Tia while dressed up in a towel cape on the stair, a little girl who could die any time of a simple cold. Children with SMA often die young, most before the age of one. Due to the efforts of her mother, Monica, her father, John, and several dedicated doctors, Taleah lived nearly four times longer than expected. I knew about the air flights to the hospital during flu and cold season, about the long waits in white rooms for her lungs to recover. Still, with Taleah’s imagination, her ability to see color and listen in silence, I believed she would live forever.

I’ve believed in a lot during my life, but never did I believe in two deeper truths: God is good and Taleah will live. The mountains fill with magma, the
plates ever-shifting, God watching above—I know without seeing, a powerful bit of faith.

I believed in Santa Claus until I turned nine, I believed my Big Bear and my Troll dolls could whisper, could move, but I never knew an imaginary friend as a child. I never discovered a family living in our cupboards or in the attic that only I could see. I didn’t know the likes or dislikes or habits of any Hallelujahs or Moses Dees. But on days when I could smell the dusty earth and the damp Washington pine, walking and listening to the wind, I felt I could see God.

I knew I couldn’t really see him, solid as Mount Rainier or my own livedust hand, but I imagined He wore a white shirt and a tie, always, He drank milk and the occasional root beer (but never real beer), and He often walked by at my side on the early morning path to school. I talked to Him like an old friend, often listening for responses in my head, responses which I only really felt but never heard. We chatted and we laughed: He forgave me when I whispered the word hell in gym class, just to see what swearing would be like, and He smiled, His eyes colored brown-red as the bricks on my elementary school, the afternoon in fourth grade when while walking to the bathroom I shut my eyes and silently prayed. Heavenly Father, if You really are listening, if You really do love me, please help me to get a piece of candy. Amen. I’ll bet His smile grew huge when Ms. Kimball, the biggest, meanest teacher in the school, rounded the corner thirty seconds later. She looked at me and winked. I froze, holding out my hall pass, my eyes huge. Ms. Kimball towered over me, enormous as a mountain as she opened her palm. You look like a girl who needs a piece of candy, she said with another wink. I gasped, grabbed the Snickers bar from her hand, walked slowly out to the courtyard and looked up at the slate blue sky. Sun flashed off Mount Rainier in the distance. I could hear God grinning in the wind.

I sat with Taleah on a grassy hill, an hourglass cupped in her palm. I half-hummed a snatch of Judy Garland’s “Over the Rainbow,” the song soothing and smooth as chocolate until Taleah frowned and glared at me, her voice fervent. If it runs out of sand, Dorothy will die! Taleah looked worried, but I almost always managed to flip the glass over just in time. Once I missed, and as the last grain of sand trickled to the bottom I pointed off in the distance. Look—the witch is melting! Dorothy’s saved! Taleah frowned, then just as quickly laughed.

There’s no witch here!
Oh. Sorry. Maybe she melted so fast you didn’t see her.
No. Silly.
I grinned and flicked a leaf off her cheek, and we sat in the wind for a time, my eyes on her and her eyes fixed on the distant mountains, bright with the fire of the sun.

Geology holds a special power for us creatures of grace and truth. God knows. He pushes the plates together, raises mountains with an invisible hand. His breath in a rib and the dust, in the very blood of the earth, a pillar of fire forever. Even now I can see God hiking among the Uintas, Taleah whole and strong in the crook of His right arm, one hand on the raspy earth, one on a child He loves dearly. He feels His own creations warm and cool, red blood pooled beneath each of His palms.

Two days before Taleah’s fourth birthday I touched her cheek and felt the coldness of clay and the mountainside. This is what it means to be the dust of the earth. I stood in the hospital for hours, heat flowing through my bruised elbow and behind my eyes until her parents leaned against the cold metal table, exhausted, and I finally took a step toward Monica. I can’t say I’m sorry, for I believe for the first time Taleah must be able to dance. She must dance, she must run, she must feel the grass under her feet, not her cheek, for otherwise God is a lie and I knew in my heart that the real lie lurked in thinking a pale face and limp body is all that remains. So I can’t say I’m sorry. All I can think of to say is thank you. Thank you for fighting so hard for Taleah. I’m so glad I got to meet her, her grin for a moment mine. My arms pressed Monica so close the heat seeped in. I could feel her shoulders shaking, my flimsy words swallowed in a fire more profound than the mountains and more stunning than the grave.