

In This World There Are Many Living Things And Lots of Dead Things Too

Fiction • Paul Bryant

“Do you want to see Benny?”

I nod my head. Benny is our pet tarantula. Mom is afraid of spiders, but I always wanted one. Dad gave Benny to me for my fifth birthday this year. I woke up and walked into the dining room and saw a terrarium on the table. Inside it was a brown haired spider crawling over fish tank gravel.

Dad taught me all about Benny. He said that Benny was a rose hair tarantula. He said that rose hairs are picky eaters like me, but are the most docile spiders on Earth, unlike the Goliath bird eating spider he keeps as his classroom’s pet. I asked him what docile meant. He said that rose hairs don’t shout and argue about every little thing like Mom does, which I guess is true because I have never heard Benny talk.

I see a cricket under Benny’s fangs. Benny holds it there, every now and then shifting his teeth around the insect, feeling for taste. Benny slowly walks to the corner of the terrarium and I notice something thin and brown on the fish tank gravel. It looks like dead skin on the bottom of a sea floor. I point to it.

“What’s that?”

“That’s the shell of the last cricket he ate.”

I thought shells were supposed to be hard to break. They are the things that turtles and lobsters have, and as Dad told me, both these animals live for a long time. Shells shouldn’t be soft and papery.

I hear the chugging of the golf cart’s engine and realize that Dad is no longer in the shed. I hear his voice from outside.

“I thought you wanted to ride around the yard?”

Dad plops himself onto the seat and I sit on his knee. My fingers squeeze the steering wheel. Dad's foot on the gas. The rose bushes blur around me as I drive the beat up golf cart across the silver grass in our yard.

I glance up at Dad and smile at eyes wrinkled with laugh lines. I steer the golf cart past a dying plum tree, past our tin shed, past our above ground pool, into view of the cemetery past our backyard. Ghosts are supposed to live here. But on days like this, when the sun tickles the trees, and leaves brush against bark, the tombstones are beautiful. They look like little homes of gnomes. I want to sit beside one, and run the ancient stone through my fingers.

"Woah boy!"

A great tree trunk is a foot from my face. Dad hits the brakes. I lurch forward, and hands clamp onto my shoulders. I hear the denting of plastic. Dad picks me up and it hurts a little, so I squirm. He sets me down on the hard grass. I turn towards him to see a hairy spider on his balding head. I see fangs pucker up. They are knives with bristles. I can see that its fangs will expand and wrap themselves around Dad's body and Dad will start twitching, his boots dangling in the air. Then he will be still, and the spider will touch his body all over with its fangs. Dad's skin will sag to the ground, painting the lawn with flesh. His eyes will turn into liquid marshmallows, sleeping in the holes of his head. And Dad will be dead.

But Dad just sighs and wipes the spider off his head. It falls to the ground with a plunk and swiftly climbs back up the tree.

Dad looks at the dent in the golf cart. Then he looks at the tree. The tree is intact. The plastic is not. I start to feel blood rush to my ears and I hear my breathing. Fast shallow breaths.

I whisper, "Hey Dad."

He doesn't hear me. He crouches down and places his firm fingers over the crater where a brand name used to be. I am shaking now. It is summer, but I feel cold. More blood rushes to my ears.

"Hey Dad."

"Hm?"

He looks at me over the dented plastic. His lips are pursed and the hair he has left snakes in the wind.

"You could have died, Dad."

He stands up, brushing off his spotless black jeans. He laughs.

"Just make sure you keep your eyes on the road next time."

I look at the old gray lawn. I can't stand anymore. My legs lurch my body down onto the ground in crisscross position. My fingers pick at blades of grass.

"I could have killed you."

I hear his boots and then a huff. I look up to see him pull his legs into crisscross position.

“The golf cart wasn’t going fast enough to do anything.”

“But the spider.”

He smiles. A smile I’ve never seen before. A smile so wide it highlights every wrinkle on his mouth, cheeks, and forehead. He turns his torso back to the tree. I can see the spider sitting on the bark.

“That spider is a Bold Jumping Spider. It was probably scared to death when we hit the tree so it jumped on my head. It was a female too because it was about an inch. Might have had eggs up in that tree. Even if she bit, I’d only be itchy for a couple of days. Nothing life threatening.”

He grunts as he gets up. He reaches out a hand and I take it.

“Go on inside now.”

As I walk, I peek back towards the cemetery. The stones are chipped and some are jagged. One tombstone is shaped like a diamond and it seems soft. If I were to touch it, it would crumble. Ashes of dust in my hands.