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## Hammered Heart

*Samantha Howard*

As I fall into a deep sleep, I do not see “sugar plums dancing in my head.” In fact I can see nothing, but I hear something. The sound is distant but grows louder; it’s as if someone is banging a hammer against a wall. As I open my eyes, I can still hear the hammering, and my heart is thumping so wildly I feel as if anyone looking at me would be able to see it popping out of my chest. It’s not a hammer! Someone is beating on the door. I jump out of bed, tripping over my sister’s scattered toys, and finally reach the hall. I yell for my Mom to get up. “MOM, HURRY!” I yell. With a hurl of her blanket she is right behind me, pounding down the stairs, as the banging on the door continues. She walks to the door and puts her hand on the lock.

Who’s there?” she asks.

It’s ME!” the voice on the other side of the door says.

Who is me?”

MIKE!” my Uncle says.

Fighting with the dead bolt and finally winning the battle, she hurls the door open. My Uncle Mike is barely in the door before she asks “What’s the matter?” He looks at his feet and then back to my mom and me before saying, “Dad’s dead!”

What...?” she stops. “Oh God, oh God,” she kept saying, “NO!” She drops, her legs giving way, and I barely catch her before she hits the ground. Finding her feet, she looks at me. Tears now flowing down the three of our faces, she hugs me, and whispers in my ear, “I’m so sorry Sammi, so sorry!”

It’s okay,” I say. “Go!”

As she puts on her shoes and walks to the door, I stand in the kitchen sobbing. With a final “Bye, I love you” and a kiss on the cheek, my mom and uncle are out the door. I sit down on the couch, crying even harder. I hear a cough. I look up; it is my youngest sister who, until now, I believed to be asleep on the love seat. In between sobs, I say “April... are you awake?” She hesitates, and then says yes.

Did you hear what Mikey said?” I ask her.

Slowly she sits up, “Um... I don’t know!”

I know she has, but I repeat the horrible words anyways, “Grandpa’s dead!” She gets up and tries to comfort me, wrapping her scrawny, eight-year-old arms around me, and together we cry. For a while we sit there holding on to each other, not saying a word, just crying, knowing that we have to tell Katie. Climbing the stairs I feel as if the steps will never end. I flip the light switch as I walk through our bedroom door and see my little sister lying in her bed, so sweet, so peaceful, and for a moment I think of not waking her, but I do anyway. Softly, I shake her tiny body and she rolls onto her back, crumpling her face as the light hits her eyes.

What?” she asks.

Kat... Uncle Mikey was just here, um... Papa’s dead!”

What?” she says again, but I do not repeat myself. She has heard what I said, she is just processing it. Katie looks at me, and in her face I can see she is replaying my words in her head, she hugs me, and I start crying again. The three of us walk down the stairs with our pillows and blankets, crying and breathing so deep, reaching for air that doesn’t seem to be there. Together we curl-up on the couch, and I rub my two little sister’s heads until they fall asleep. I sit there, with

tears streaming down my face, and finally my eyes close. I am asleep.

I hear my mom in the kitchen, and it feels like I have just fallen asleep, but I know she has been gone for hours. I can smell the freshly brewed coffee she has made, and I hope that this has all been a nightmare. I lie there until she comes in the living room and kisses my head. I look at her, her eyes swollen and red, and I know this has not been a bad dream. Papa is gone! Leaning over me she rubs my forehead, leans in for another kiss, this time on the cheek. She whispers in my ear, "Happy Birthday, Sammi." I can hear her voice cracking the way it does when you're about to cry. I look at her and I try to smile. I sit up, trying to hold back my tears, and hug her. We hold onto each other for along time.

"Go get dressed," she tells me.

"I don't want to go, Mom."

"There is nothing to do, we have to get things ready, and I will be at Uncle Bobby's all day, so just go...please," she says.

I get up, and grab my clothes off the back of the couch. As I walk into the bathroom the heat turns on. It always does. No one else seems to notice, but it is as if the heat knows that I'm coming and turns on just to spite me. The little room gets so hot, so quick, but the floor warms my cold bare feet and for once I am at peace with the heat. I stare at the pile of clothes on the floor next to the toilet. I look at the sink, "why don't they know how to put the lid on the tooth paste?" I think to myself, looking at the blue gel all over the stainless steel. I sit my clothes on the back of the tub, and look into the mirror. My face is pale, and I can feel the tears burning my eyes again, "I don't want him to be dead," I have so many thoughts racing through my head, and the tears sting my face as they roll down my cheek. Why didn't I go see him yesterday? I go with her every day to see him, and the conversation replays in my head, "Are you going to Papa's?" my Mom asks. "No, I don't want to," I tell her "Tell him I love him and I'll see him tomorrow." My heart hurts. I feel like I can't catch my breath, and I know that these words will never leave me.

My Mom opens the door, she knows, and I hug her. "Why didn't I go see him?" I say, crying harder than I was before. "Now I can't." I feel her shoulders moving up and down and I know that she is crying too, "Its okay" she says, "he knows." She squeezes me tighter, she is my rock! I pull away and wipe my eyes, and she does the same. I reach for my shirt, and she shuts the door. I pull on my clothes, put my hair in a hair tie, and brush my teeth. I screw the cap on the tube, fighting with the dried toothpaste to get it on.

I walk in the living room. My sisters are awake but quiet. Then at the same time they say "Happy Birthday Sammi," and I know that my Mom has put them up to it. "Thanks" I say, as I push my foot into my shoe. We grab our book bags and walk to the car in silence. Everything's different, no running down the steps, racing to the car screaming "FRONT SEAT!" like always. They let me have it.

As my mom pulls up to the side of the school, she gives my little sisters a kiss on the head. "Your going to Dad's after school" she says, "so look for his car when you get out." She tells them. Then, like always, she says, "Bye, have a good day, eat all your lunch, I love you!"

Bye, love you, see you after school," says Katie, April's voice repeating the same words a few seconds behind hers. She waits for the girls to get in the building and then she pulls away.

Silence fills the car again, and I want to cry. My Papa is dead, he is gone, and the same questions keep repeating in my head. How did he die? Why didn't I go see him? I don't know what to say to her, and I start to cry again as she pulls up to my school. She reaches in the back seat and grabs a box.

Sammi, I know that today is a sad day, but it is still your day. I was going to give this to you tonight but you can have it now. I open the box and inside is a bunch of N\*Sync stuff. I smile at her and give her a hug and tell her thanks and that I love her.

"Try and have a good day, eat your lunch, I love you," she says, and I know she is about to cry again.

"I love you too, see you after school!"

As I walk up to the doors, I wipe my eyes. I walk to my class alone, avoiding my friends so they will not ask what is wrong, but it is inevitable, I know this. I walk up to Cresha at her locker, and immediately she says "Happy Birthday Sam!" I say thanks and she knows something is wrong, she can hear the change in my voice. She looks at me, and I can tell she is afraid to ask. "What's wrong?"

I don't want to say it again! I don't want all these people to see me crying, I pause for a long time, and then I say the words again. "My Grandpa died." My heart hurts again and she hugs me, and I cry. I can't do this all day, I think to myself. We walk to math and I sit there quiet. I hear people ask what's wrong, and Cresha tells them what happened. Each class I just sit there, and think over and over, "Why didn't I go see him?" and my heart hurts.

The bell rings and finally I can leave. I walk to the car slowly, I see him, I haven't talked to him yet. As I open the car door I see a flower box, and my sisters sitting in the back seat. He knows, but still he tries to make me smile. "Happy Birthday Sam," my Dad says as I shut the car door. He hands me the long, white box and I slip the red ribbon off of it. I open it and inside are roses, yellow and orange, my favorite colors. I look at him, tears streaming down my face. "Where did you find yellow and orange?" I ask him.

"I called all the flower shops until I found them," he said.

"Thanks" I tell him. "Where are we going?"

"To your Uncle Bobby's," he says.

As we pull in the drive, I see all their cars. All my uncles are here, Bobby, Mikey, Tony, and Stevie. I feel sad as we walk up the back steps, he's gone, he's dead. I walk in the kitchen and they are all here, pain shoots through my heart as I look at them. Everyone is here, and I'm mad. I want to scream at them "Why are you all here now, he's DEAD!" but I don't. Why didn't I come see him? I always come see him. I walk into the front room and I see Mama's chair, the chair that he has sat in since she died. He's not there; instead there is a white sheet over it and I don't understand.

All of my family is here, little cousins running around. "They don't get it" I think to myself, "he is gone." I walk back into the kitchen and my Uncle Bobby points for me to go outside. We walk to his car and he pulls a little white envelope out of his shirt pocket, he hands it to me. "This was on the table beside his chair." He says, handing me the envelope. I see my Papa's small handwriting; it's my name in cursive. I open the envelope and pour its contents into my hand. The tears are burning again. I hold the tiny charm in my hand as I hug my Uncle. He walks away and I look down at the little charm. It's a heart.