

Kira Wolak

Head Underwater

The sky was bright blue and dotted with white puffy clouds. If Mum were here, we would have been making shapes out of them, such as fierce Chinese dragons or majestic flying horses. But Xander gave no notice to the clouds, or the newly bloomed spring flowers, or the happy families surrounding us. He just kept glancing at his watch and running his hands nervously through his hair. Xander was a good older brother. He tried to be there for me, he really did, but he could never replace Mum. No one could.

Xander stood up from the park bench, noticing my slight melancholy, and announced, "I'm going to get us some ice cream."

I faintly smiled. "Don't forget the rainbow sprinkles." Rainbow sprinkles were Mum's favorite.

He smiled back. "I could never forget the rainbow sprinkles." But he had already forgotten the clouds and the flowers and the people, and it would only be a matter of time before he would forget the sprinkles, too.

Xander left, and I watched a young couple with their toddler son. The father was swinging the boy around, who was giggling so hard he seemed to be choking, and the mother stood to the side, beaming at her husband and child. Dad had left when I was a baby and Xander no more than eight. I always wondered what it was like to have a father. Whenever I asked Mum about him, she just answered, "True family always sticks together. He just wasn't true."

A dark cloud came over me as I thought of that dark night. I told myself I wouldn't think of it, but lately it's been reoccurring in my mind more often. Mum had been snatched away from me unfairly. She was young, radiant, positive, and I still had so much more to learn from her. She deserved to be here with me. I deserved to have her. But I was all alone. True family always sticks together. That's what she had told me. If that were the case – if family truly did stick together – why wasn't she here next to me?

My focus turned to the pond in front of me as I noticed a mother duck and her six fluffy little ducklings. The mother led the ducklings around the edge of the pond, bobbing her head underwater occasionally for a snack, her offspring mimicking her movements clumsily. The mother duck would sometimes turn around to check on her ducklings, or pause to give them time to catch up, but other than that, she kept a steady pace. The tiniest duckling was in the back and had bobbed his head underwater to nibble on some grass, but had bobbed too far and capsized. I watched in horror as the duckling's orange webbed feet kicked frantically as he tried to right himself. The mother duckling and his siblings were far ahead of him now, and they wouldn't notice that he was missing. I held my breath, frozen, waiting for nature's course to kick in.

Out of nowhere, a simple human hand reached toward the duckling and lifted him out of the water. The duckling coughed and shook himself, and that simple human hand placed the duckling back into the pond, balancing him with care so he wouldn't tilt over again. The duckling shook himself once more and then swam off hurriedly to join his siblings and mother.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding and stared at the hand that had saved the duckling, acting like the hand of God by saving a life and keeping a family together. Where was that hand when Mum was taken away? Why couldn't *Mum* be the one who was saved, instead of an irrelevant duckling?

But I looked toward the happy family of ducks and couldn't help but smile. Mum had left to a place where she couldn't come back from, but it didn't mean I had to stand by and watch other families be torn apart.

I looked up in surprise as I saw Xander approaching and realized his hand was the hand of God that had saved that duckling. He smiled sheepishly at me as he held out an ice cream cone.

"I forgot the rainbow sprinkles," he admitted guiltily.

I laughed and shook my head. "No, Xander. No you didn't."