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Natalie Holmes was the 2015 Paul Engle "Glory of the Senses" Essay Contest top prizewinner.

Beneath a Green Sky

I awoke groggily to Papa standing above me, flashlight in hand. He attempted to shield my eyes from the light, but a burst of harsh yellow escaped, slicing through my ordinary dream. "Come down, there's a storm," he whispered.

I coiled tighter in my sheets, not wanting my beauty sleep disturbed. When my eyes reluctantly flickered open, I glanced out the window into the sliver of evening that I could see through my heavy periwinkle blinds. The hazy green sky was emptied of clouds and ominously still. I peeled back the covers, my thoughts a blur, following Papa from my cupcake pink room. I clutched my baby and blankie in my arms to keep from shivering. I was past annoyance at being interrupted and onto worry about the approaching storm and the possibility of a tornado.

I hurried downstairs, following Emma with her blonde hair in frizzy disarray. Our eyes drooping, feet bare and cold on the carpet. Adam was carried by Papa, still mostly asleep as we entered the basement. I envied his youth while fear began to seize my stomach. The only windowless refuge was a small bathroom with sandy walls and a lighthouse printed shower curtain. Soft yellow glow hummed from a delicate nightlight, also of nautical theme. Mama did her best to cushion the space for us, dragging in pillows, blankets, and sleeping bags to comfort our detour from sleep.

I sat on the edge of the bathtub, stroking Adam's hair to lull him back to sleep. My imitation motherly instincts kicked in when I needed to be less afraid than my baby brother. However, tornado warnings were usually calm affairs. Not much blubbling from us children; worry was clouded by weariness and excitement at being up past our bedtime.

The bathroom was small and cozy for the four of us. We found temporary homes in the confined space. Adam drowsily held onto a pleasant dream in the tub. Mama took her seat on the toilet. Her white nightgown with delicate purple flowers and lace brushed the bathroom floor. Emma and I leaned against the vanity, cushioned by pillows and blankets. Papa stood in the bedroom across the hall. The door remained open allowing the metallic blue light of the TV to spill out. I found myself nervous, hearing the disjointed speech of the various weather programs he flipped through. In a low announcer voice, Papa called out once in a while, informing us of the latest news on the storm. "Quarter sized hail'll be here in fifteen minutes..." If I craned my neck, I could see the little window above the bed flashing with light and bubbling from the downpour behind the curtains and glass.

Papa went out to catch hail, standard proof of male temerity. He opened the sliding glass door to the backyard, the gale chaotically whipping our forest. Outstretched hand, he caught his prize and returned to admire. He brought us two wet spheres shrinking in his palm. I was interested but shocked at the simpleness. Falling from the sky like ghostly stars, the hail made me uneasy. The sensation crept into my skull, uninvited.

Papa plotted the path in his head. The tornado touched down on a street near a river. It hopped around downtown, hitting locations Papa mentioned vaguely to us. All the while it was wandering towards our street, our house, our little bathroom in the basement. I tried desperately to remember where my friends lived. Street names left my head. The storm became very real; my piano teacher, my old house, the park I explored, all within reach and all in danger.

The thoughts wouldn't stop. I needed comfort and distraction. Mama knew we wanted a story to soothe our nerves. "Let's go visit the Magic House," Mama whispered playfully. Emma and I immediately shared a look of eagerness. Safety was always found in Mama's stories. "Alright then. What level did we end on? Let's see, we visited the Magic House two nights ago.." she began.

"Thirty-five I think," interjected Emma.

"Yeah," I echoed, "Thirty-five, with the door made of chocolate!"

"Oh, I remember now," Mama replied, wheels turning to create a new adventure for us. I pulled my legs up to my chest, all swallowed under my nightgown, and leaned into Emma beside me.

"Alright then, let's see," Mama began with a contemplative smile. "We are standing in a long hall of mirrors. As we walk along, we see our reflections aren't quite right. In one mirror, Natalie is really tall. In another, Emma's head is huge! Only one mirror shows our true reflection so we know this is the door. We all touch our hands to it and the door magically swings open to reveal a blue path with daisies along the way."

Our eyes were fixed on Mama, her vocalizations mesmerizing us. We were overwhelmed with desire for the next words to come. Every sentence slowly slid from her brain into our waiting, absorbing ears, our heads generating rich images to accompany the story. We contributed of course, a rainbow here, a treat there, Mama weaving our fancies into the Magic House world.

That night's story led us deep into a sparkling forest of trees, blooming in all the colors we could imagine, bearing the sweetest candies and fruits. Upon approaching a bush, it burst into a shower of purple butterflies fluttering about, tickling my nose and twirling the skirt of my nightgown. In the Magic House, we could catch the butterflies; our hands, for an instant, held the delicate creatures for our selfish gaze.

"We continue along the path until we see-" The power went out. Mom clicked on her flashlight and the transistor radio, scratchy and soft. The static was more unnerving than the TV. I nervously wrung my worn yellow blankie, wanting to quickly return to the story. Emma and I held flashlights in our laps, off for the moment. We snuggled together, attempting ignore the stiff weatherman voice crackling from the radio.

Once we were again immersed in the world of the Magic House, Mama sent us down a gentle slide to the base of a mountain covered in exotic flowers. We encountered a taffy apple tree with plump treats covered in assorted toppings for the choosing. We crossed streams in one graceful leap, whistled with the birds, and twirled umbrellas painted like the sunset.

Outside, the rain pounded and the hail grew in size, persistently echoing through the house. Mama told us in the Magic House, the wind sang and the rain was the most pleasant lemonade we'd ever tasted. We skipped, flew, and danced along that blue path to the end, devouring Mama's words all the way.

Emma and I didn't fear the tornado. We were comforted knowing the Magic House would shelter us. We remained safe in Mama's imagination, Papa's strength, and our own wide-eyed willingness to believe we would not receive the storm's wrath.

At the end of our journey we found a door to leave floor thirty-six of the Magic House. "It's the end of our time but we know we will be back. What's that in your pocket Natalie?" Mama inquired in dream world. "Is that a key? I think it is. Looks like it goes to the next door, level thirty-seven. We'll save that for another night." Her last words hung in the air clearly, despite the storms attempt to drown them out.

My eyelids were heavy with weariness, and eventually, there was no tornado. The downpour was a magnificent waterfall. The hail hitting the roof and windows was candy, descending towards my open mouth. The gale was a choir, belting and whispering with simple purity. The darkness from the power outage was filled with luminous galaxies behind my eyes. My mind was consumed by imagination.

I simply slept. Mama's words washed over me and the storm left my thoughts. I escaped to the world Mama and I created, the world I wished to return to when I woke the next morning.

The carnage frightened me when I explored my altered town in the following days. A church I'd seen from the street was partly deconstructed like a half-eaten gingerbread house. A sorority had its innards exposed, the unmade beds on the third floor almost comical, a dollhouse with the back missing. A pizza place was destroyed, trees fell dramatically, brick crumbled, and a dozen streets with neat houses were hollowed out and littered with debris. I had leaned on Emma's shoulder, giggled at Mama's jokes, and marveled at the innocence of Adam. We were all innocent on our little island. I did not like waking up to a hundred ravaged lives. But in that moment, I gave into the innocence because I was too exhausted to let my childish, selfish mind stray from sleep.