

Finalist, Fiction

Poppy and Me

By Nancy Armstrong-Sanchez

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So here we sit on the inner city bus as it rocks and hums to the rhythm of its own engine, Poppy and me, as we do every Friday because I'm afraid it's going to be his last. He chatters on about his brothers and sisters and about how older brother John used to steal their allowance money so he could hang out at the soda shop with his friends and play the juke box, a story he forgot he told me the day before and the day before that. He misses him now he tells me, but he knows he'll see him soon, up with "the good Lord."

I remind him that we have more movies to see, so the reunion will have to wait. Then I make a joke about boogers because it makes him shudder and laugh, unguarded like we do when we're kids without cares, and that's good I think.

The big clunky bus dips in a pothole and sends a mild tremor through my seat, but I don't enjoy it like I usually do because I drank too much cola and now my bladder is full. I wonder if I can wait and I worry about Poppy, too, 'cause he's never had real good control since the chemo.

The bus jerks hard and I come back. Twenty-eight and riding public transportation with my father; it seems ridiculous to me. Too bad I'm afraid of driving, too bad they cut that part out of his brain. But cars are expensive anyway, and we only have enough for the bargain matinee.

Poppy asks me where we're going and I remind him, then I make a joke so he won't feel so bad that he forgot. He laughs again and I'm happy, but I'm tired too because laughing is hard work sometimes.

Poppy rests his head back, closing his eyes “for just a minute.” He falls asleep straight away because he sleeps all the time now. I look out the window, trying hard to ignore the smell of the bag lady, and think about Poppy and me and all our troubles this year.

I remember I couldn't visit him at the hospital sometimes because the claustrophobia made me afraid of the bus. I remember he threw my laundry away 'cause he thought it was a sack of trash. I remember scouring through the three oversized garbage cans for more than a half an hour before finding my stinky clothes. I was late that day to my writing class, the class where many cancer daughters came to try to make poetry out of words like tumor, biopsy, mastectomy and radiation.

I remember when my appendix burst, Poppy brought me flowers and cried so much that I had to send him to the cafeteria to calm down. A month later, I fed him juice and cookies in the ICU, antibiotics fighting his pneumonia through an IV drip. I didn't cry once.

Poppy starts to snore and I give him a jab to the ribs with my elbow. He comes to and we laugh our private joke laugh because we both know he got caught. For a moment, I wonder if anybody makes the bag lady laugh. I wonder if anybody brings her hot towels from the dryer after she bathes (if she bathes) or cuts her tuna sandwich in perfect little triangles. I wonder if anybody sits with her at noon time and watches “Little House on the Prairie.” And, I wonder if anybody swaps hankies with her, like me and Poppy do, every time Pa and “half-pint” save an old man or an old cow. I try to shake the thoughts off as quickly as they come because I'm tired and I only have enough energy for Poppy today.

At the corner, we get off the bus. Poppy first and me next, him holding his hand out to me to help me down because he's still a gentleman. And, we stroll arm in arm up the block to our favorite theater next to the fifties style diner with the nickel jute boxes. And, Poppy asks if he ever told me about older brother John. And, I say “no” with wide-eyed interest.

Soon, we order tickets from the bored teenager with bad acne and purple hair who would never be caught out in public with her father. And, like usual, I pull out my change purse stuffed with old dollar bills and quarters stolen from the laundry money. But, today, Poppy stops me. It's his treat he tells me because he got his pension check, a whole hundred dollars en years of hard work, and we agree that he's rich enough to afford it all right.

So he, shoulders back and head held high, pulls out a crisp new twenty dollar bill and hands it to the little girl. We giggle when the girl gives us our tickets and we laugh all the way into the theater because it's a good day. And, I don't even feel guilty about letting Poppy spend his money 'cause he still likes to be the daddy and I still like to let him.