

Real Special

From a Novel by Don Bailey

George Maitland. Days away from turning sixteen. Daydreamer supreme. Sometimes he wishes he could enter one of the movies of his mind and stay there forever. Life on a loop. His favorite scenes played over and over.

But are they real, he wonders. The memories are of special moments. Moments that when recalled make him feel special. But are the memories truthful? Or just things he's made up to make himself feel better. He wonders if things can be both real and special. At the same time.

He is four years old. It is late Spring and very early in the morning. But the sun has risen. He can feel its warmth on his back as he sits beside his mother on the gravel driveway facing the river. They are sitting on lawn chairs. He has his very own that is scaled down so that his feet can touch the ground. The strips of plastic on the seat and back are blue. His favorite colour. His mother's chair is made of canvas and wood. The canvas is dyed yellow.

She has placed a small table between them on which sits a pitcher of grapefruit juice. There are two glasses. His is the small one with a design of little red apples. Hers is tall and made of thin crystal that has little bubbles in the glass. He watches her pick it up and take a small sip. Since her illness she eats very little. But she drinks jugs of grapefruit juice every day. She insists that it be from the Indian river region of Florida. No other kind will do.

He knows his mother is dying. When he visited her in the hospital, she opened the bandage and showed him the scar left by the removal of her breast. The sight of it frightened him but he was glad she let him see it. Secrets scared him more than anything. His father kept secrets. His mother told him almost everything. Except about dying. They are waiting for the turtle. Every year the turtle returns to this same spot to lay her eggs. He remembers the event vaguely from the year before. His mother and father watched for the creature every day for a week. He was too young to be allowed up so early. But this year is different. He is almost grown up.

His father is still sleeping. These days his father stays up late watching television and drinking whiskey. Sometimes he hears his father stumbling to bed just when it's time to get up. Most days, his father is still sleeping at noon.

"How come you think the turtle'll come today?" he asks.

"I just know," she says. "I can feel it."

He feels proud to be her company for such an important occasion.

"Dad says the turtle is stupid to lay her eggs here. He says when they hatch, the birds eat them."

She laughs and takes another sip of juice.

"Your father's a cynic," she says.

"What's that?" he asks.

She thinks about this for a minute. He sits quietly and watches the herons fishing the far shore of the river. He hears the splash of a fish jumping. Dozens of swallows dart along the surface of the water. And then suddenly he sees the huge snapper emerging from the river. A thrill of excitement jolts through him. He touches the sleeve of his mother's housecoat and points. She looks and her face bursts open in a broad smile. In that instant, he is sure she will never die. She takes his hand and squeezes it tightly. Her hand is cold and thin but he wills the heat of his own, warmly dressed body to pass through to her.

She leans close to him and whispers in his ear.

"A cynic," she says, "is someone who's afraid to believe in things."

"Oh," he whispers back.

They watch the thirty pound turtle lumber her way across the lawn until she reaches the edge of the driveway. She stops for a few seconds and seems to be sniffing the air, her head moving back and forth, and up and down. Then slowly she begins to rotate, until her back is to them. She backs up several steps and begins to dig with her front claws.

In a few minutes she has dug an impressive hole. She uses her back legs to push the dirt out of the cavity. When her shell is level with the ground, she stops digging.

"I showed this to Margaret last September and I suddenly remembered how she liked it... this little piece is just the opening but somehow it seems more, I don't know, right I guess. When I think of Margaret, the river, love, life and death."

(Don Bailey)

She becomes still. And then she starts to make a low honking sound. It reminds the boy of geese, flying high overhead in the Fall on their way south.

His mother continues to hold his hand. He feels her excitement. Her hand is warmer now, as though her blood flows faster.

"How come the turtle always comes back here?" he asks.

"She was born here," his mother answered. "This is where her roots are."

"Like me," he says.

"Just like you," she says.

"But wouldn't it be safer someplace else? A place the birds didn't know about."

His mother turns and faces him. Her eyes are bright and wet looking. He is afraid she'll cry. She cries a lot these days and often he doesn't know why.

"Safe isn't always better," she says.

"When I'm grown up, will I come back here?" he asks.

"Yes," she says.

"Why?"

The turtle has stopped grunting and groaning and is pulling the dirt back into the hole. When it's filled she heaves herself up and without a backward glance makes her way back to the river.

They watch her sink and disappear into the fast flowing water. The boy feels a sudden loneliness. He rises from his chair and lets his mother take him into the circle of her embrace. She holds him tightly and he is aware of the absence of her one breast. The other presses against his chest.

"Part of you will always belong here," she says. "You'll come back looking for that part. If only in your dreams."

In the early summer when the eggs hatched, hardly any of the young turtles made it to the river. Hundreds of birds, mostly ravens swooped down from the trees and scooped them up in their beaks. But a few survived.

The boy watched the spectacle by himself. He vowed he would return the following year. And the year after that. Forever. It was a promise he would always keep. Just as the turtle did.