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Remote Voices: Outside

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Outside

Lisa Marie hadn't smelled a flower in four months.

The pink petals kissed her lips the way her mother was too afraid to. She thought it smelled sweet like cherry blossom or honeysuckle. She didn't remember exactly what those smelled like, but they were often the scents of the bubble baths and body lotions her mother bought.

Lisa Marie couldn't remember the name of these flowers, but they bloomed every year on a bush out in the backyard. Back when they were allowed outside, her brother Nicholas used to kick soccer balls into the bush on accident and the petals would drop. Mom always got mad.

The plant's leaves felt leathery. Lisa Marie pulled one off the stem and put it in her pocket. She would have to remember to take it out before Mom did laundry.

"I thought you weren't allowed to be outside."

Lisa Marie looked up, noticing Gavin, one of Nick's friends. He leaned his bike against the house and unbuckled a helmet from under his chin.

"I thought my mom said you couldn't come over," Lisa Marie said.

"I'm only not allowed to come over because you're sick." Gavin balanced his helmet on the handlebars.

"No, you're not allowed to come over because of the virus."

"No. My mom let me go over to Tim's house yesterday," Gavin said. "What's wrong with you anyway?"

Lisa Marie traced the leaf in her pocket. Her secret. "I was born too small. I get sick a lot. My mom says that I will get more sick than other people if I get the virus. So, no one can come over, and none of us can leave."

"How'd your mom let you come outside?"

"She's asleep." Lisa Marie picked at the grass below her. She liked the sharp tickle against her fingertips. "She sleeps a lot now. She usually just

makes breakfast for Nick and me and then doesn't come out of her room until dinner."

"That's weird. What do you think she does in there?"

"I think she's sad." Lisa Marie plucked a flower and put it behind her ear. "One day I think I heard her crying through the door."

"My mom's sad, too," Gavin said. He took a seat in the grass beside her. He began to pick at the grass too. "She said my brothers and I are driving her crazy and told us to go outside and ride bikes."

"She won't let you back inside?"

Gavin shook his head.

"Must be nice. I wish I could spend all day outside. I'm outside now, and I'm not sick."

"Lisa Marie!" Nick ran down the porch steps. "You're not allowed to be outside!"

"Neither are you!"

"I'm out here to come get you."

"No, you're not," Lisa Marie said. "You're here because Gavin's here."

"You're the reason Mom won't let me go outside. It's not fair that you're out here and I'm not."

"You are out here." Lisa Marie threw a handful of grass at her brother. The blades rained down and settled in the green.

"It's your fault Mom's always sad. It's your fault Dad can't come home anymore. It's your fault we couldn't go to Grandma and Grandpa's for an Easter egg hunt this year. You ruin everything!"

Tears budded in Lisa Marie's eyes. She ran back to the house, up the porch steps, and inside, slamming the screen door shut behind her.

Lisa Marie's mother ran down the steps. Her hair was wispy and messy, unlike the way she used to wear it when she drove Lisa Marie to school or went to one of Nick's soccer games.

"What's that in your hair?" her mother asked. She walked up to Lisa Marie and plucked the flower from behind her ear. She studied the bright pink petals in her palm before clasp them into a fist. Lisa Marie figured this wasn't the best time to ask her mother what the flower was called.

"Lisa Marie, go to your room."

Lisa Marie ran up the steps and into her bedroom. The same floral wallpaper lined the walls. It still peeled at the edges. Her bed still creaked when she sat on it. There was still a stain on her carpet from when Nick spilled grape juice last week. Nothing had changed.

She took the leaf out of her pocket. It was bent, and no matter how many times she flattened it, the creases would not come out.