

It all began when Lyla, the colonel's daughter, got her arm stuck under the tracks of a tank. Her ball had rolled into the street and under a tank that she thought was unoccupied, but in fact was on the move. She was under the belly of the tank, pawing into crevasses for her lost ball when it rolled into action. The driver heard a shatter-your-glasses scream and leapt out to investigate. When he saw that he'd just run over the general's daughter, his face grew ghostly pale and he was paralyzed with shock.

Her arm was crushed, no doubt. Lyla quickly realized the soldier was too stunned to move the tank, and she grew impatient. It was a sunny day, but not too hot. The best play day in weeks. And she wasn't going to let a little hiccup like a crushed arm ruin her fun.

The soldier was still staring at her, mouth agape. In one deft move she grabbed the knife strapped around his thigh and plunged it into her shoulder.

It may be useful to know that Lyla had never known pain. For example, when she was a child her father told her not to touch the hot stove, but like all children she did it anyway. With her typical defiance, she touched the hot stove day after day. When her father caught her doing it and scolded her, she would always ask why she shouldn't touch the stove. He would trace his finger over her scared pink palm and remind her that whether she felt it or not, she was hurting herself.

It wasn't that she had no sense of touch. She felt the hot desert sun on her back, and the coolness of shaded rocks, the discomfort of sand in her bed. But she was ignorant of raw pain.

So now here she was, arm pinned beneath the tank, knife in her arm. She worked it this way and that until her arm came free. She wiped the bloody knife on her pants and replaced it into its sheath on the soldier's leg. His face was pale blue now. "Thanks!" she sang, skipping away to the playground.

There she played a few rounds of tetherball with herself then swung on the monkey bars, even though it was challenging with only one hand. But once the adults noticed that she was missing an arm, and was bleeding all over the sand box, they took her to the infirmary.

Being the colonel's daughter, she commanded immediate attention. A small army of doctors asked her if her arm had been blown off by an explosion, or if a bad man had done it. When she told them the truth, they scratched their chins and mumbled to each other. The term "brain trauma" was used repeatedly.

When the colonel saw his daughter, he cried loudly over her. He knew it hadn't been a bomb, or a bad man that had disfigured his little princess. Even her ear-to-ear grin couldn't penetrate his

anguish. She had never cried in her life. It seemed like such a childish thing to do. Between sniffs, he asked her to promise never to sever her own limbs again. Out of pity, she promised.

The colonel's sadness turned to fury when the doctors told him there were no more prosthetic arms available, and there probably wouldn't be for some time because of their base's remote position. After much chewing-out, the colonel stormed away, ordering the doctors to do their best.

Their best, it turned out, a short broomstick surgically grafted to Lyla's shoulder. After the operation, she was able to move it as if it were her own arm. The days afterward were spent recovering in the hospital bed. She'd never been patient when it came to recovery, and soon she began to wonder about the people around her.

The colonel did his best to keep Lyla from the infirmary for most of her life. In all of her twelve years, she'd never seen grown-ups behave like this. Many of them asked the doctors whether they were going to live or die. Some cried in their sleep, asking God for death. When the doctors poked them with knives, their faces twisted up.

Lyla didn't understand any of it.

One soldier, on the cusp of death because of a shrapnel injury, told Lyla that pain was important to being a soldier. "When you're in a ditch," he said, "holding your guts in with your hands, the pain is the only thing that's real. That when you find out what you're made of."

Nobody in the infirmary complained or talked about how much their injuries hurt, but Lyla knew everyone here was in pain. She realized, for the first time in her life, just how different she was. Pain was everywhere.

When Lyla was released, she went directly to the rocky foothills. The foothills were widely avoided by the soldiers because they were known for being infested by insects known as wind scorpions. Wind scorpions, the soldiers said, were nasty not just because their claws were exceptionally powerful (they're Olympic leather boot slicers), but also because their stingers delivered an excruciating venom that felt like boiling battery acid in the bloodstream.

Grown-ups always expected her to be afraid of bugs and creepy things that crawled, but she wasn't. Lyla found a narrow but deep opening between rocks that was teeming with movement. She plunged her hand in, brushing the scorpions around and tossing them into each other to make them mad. She felt soft pinches on her skin, like a weak clothespins. Her arm was in the hole up to her shoulder. Nothing was biting her, it seemed. She waited a few more minutes, and when she removed her arm, scorpions hung from it like

washed up crabs and fell to the ground. Her arm was swollen to nearly twice its original size and was covered in red whelps. What she didn't realized until now was that she'd been standing in a scorpion's nest all this time. Dozens of pebbly black wind scorpions were crawling up her right leg, pinching and stinging as they went. She urged them to do their worst. But to her disappointment, Lyla felt nothing.

She dragged her feet all the way back to the camp, where she was immediately rushed back to the infirmary.

"What were you thinking?" her father boomed, towering over her gurney. "You promised me you wouldn't do this again."

She corrected him. "I promised I wouldn't sever my *own* arm."

The doctors had amputated Lyla's arm and leg to keep the poison from spreading to her heart. Now, her father was again crying over her as if she'd died. Except this time he was much angrier than before.

He took her by the shoulders and shook her vigorously. "You can't keep doing this to me. I can't take this, do you understand?" His face had grown slim, and purple pools were gathered under his eyes. He probably hadn't slept a wink since the scorpion thing. He was also still angry that the doctors still hadn't received any prosthetic limbs, so they grafted a robot arm to her shoulder, and a golf club to her right hip.

While she recovered, she spoke at length to the guy who'd had the shrapnel accident. She told him that she'd never felt pain. He asked her if she'd ever cried, she said no. He asked her if she'd ever felt sad. She told him about her mother dying a few years earlier, and that she missed her sometimes, but she didn't feel sad, exactly.

"It's not that you don't feel pain. You don't have any feelings at all," he said.

Lyla protested, saying, "I do to have feelings! I feel happy most of the time."

"I don't know much kid. But from what I've seen, you have to go through the worst pain in the world to find happiness. Real happiness, the kind that lasts."

Even if Lyla didn't always understand what her friend was talking about, she enjoyed their conversations. Day by day, the desire to feel pain grew inside her. Then one day, the shrapnel-wounded soldier died. She thought about what he'd said about not having feelings. When they took him away, she felt as if they'd taken away a meal she hadn't quite finished. She wasn't sad, as far as she could tell. Pain, she always assumed, would be easy to identify, once she finally felt it. But that was bodily pain. How would she know when she was hurt on the inside?

For many weeks, Lyla was obedient to her father's wish that she stay out of harm's way. She couldn't get into much trouble these days, anyway, hobbling around on her golf-club leg. Life was much more difficult without elbows. She fumbled everything between her robot clamp and her broom-hand. And yet, her spirits remained high.

Sometimes she found herself thinking about the shrapnel-wounded soldier when she was playing or doing chores. Once she was sweeping out her father's tent with her arm, saying "See?" as if her friend were there next to her. "See? I'm happy even when I'm doing my chores. Even though I only have one limb left, I'm happy."

One day, Lyla awoke and all the soldiers were scrambling around, yelling "Retreat! Insurgents! Everyone back!" Gunfire pattered outside the tent, but it sounded far away. "Where's the colonel?" she asked, but none of the men whizzing by her could say where he was. Outside, she walked a ways, calling for her father. At the crest of a hill she found some soldiers lined up on their bellies with rifles on tripods pointed at a nearby mountain. Lyla couldn't see what they were shooting at. Then she saw a glint, like a star flashing along the distant mountain ridge. Then a few more glints. They looked like fireworks, maybe. Tiny explosions.

Something pushed her back onto her bottom, an invisible shove.

Then she heard the crack of the fired shots.

She was sitting in a pool of blood. Blood that hadn't been there a moment ago. Her clothes were also drenched in blood. The soldiers leapt from their rifles. Her father was among them.

"Daddy!" she shouted. His face registered pure horror, but he didn't hesitate in scooping Lyla into his arms and spiriting her down the far side of the hill, straight to the infirmary—which was now mobile and on the retreat.

Her father sat next to her silently while the doctors examined her. They found that she'd been shot in the liver, one lung, and through the handle of her broom. It was a miracle, they said. The wounds would have torn any adult to ribbons, but for some reason they passed right through her body with minimal organ damage.

The broom, of course, would have to be replaced.

Lyla was stitched up and once she was out of surgery, she was returned to her usual spot. It was strange that her father wasn't here to chastise her, tell her how irresponsible it was to walk into a combat zone. How her carelessness would be the end of him. Days went by, and the colonel never showed up.

At last a chubby soldier approached her with his helmet in his hand. He explained that the colonel was very sick, and that he wanted to see his daughter.

The doctors told Lyla it was too early for her to be walking around, that she might pull the stitches from her stomach muscles.

But by the time they'd gotten the words out she had already vanished. She flew like a dust storm across the base camp, bursting into her father's enormous tent. Soldiers and doctors were standing by, all of them silent.

"She's here," they said. "Let her through."

Her golf-club-leg clanked on the hardwood floor as she made her way through the crowd. Someone hoisted her up and now she was sitting on the edge of her father's bed. His milky eyes watering when they saw her.

He touched her face. The corner of his mouth twitched, as if trying to form a smile.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Lyla.

One of the doctors answered. "It's not clear. His metabolism is slowing, his blood pressure is dropping. We just don't know."

Lyla touched her father's hand. It was hard like rough-cut wood. "It's my fault," she said. Her father swallowed hard, then spoke softly, "Don't say that."

"But it is. I've made you like this."

The colonel's drowsy eyes blinked slowly. He shook his head.

But Lyla knew that what she said was true. She hadn't understood until now, but every time she got hurt, her father got hurt. Except he wasn't immune to pain like she was. If anything, he felt it even more.

"Ever since I was born," she said, "I've caused you pain."

He took her face into his rough hands. Lyla felt something burn in her throat and behind her eyes. She was crying.

The strength left her father's hands and they fell to his side. Everyone in the room bowed their head. Lyla threw herself over his chest, heaving uncontrollably. All the tears she'd stored up over the years, tears for her mother, tears from the pain of injury, tears for the man with the shrapnel injury, all the tears in her short sad life formed pools on the colonel's still-warm chest.