

Finalist, Fiction

The Real Thing
By Randal Doering

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When Sylvia's daddy came home from Afghanistan, he was different. His right leg was gone, and there was a metal pole there and a plastic foot in a tennis shoe. His leg was just a stump, and the metal and plastic leg attached to this. He showed her how it worked and got up from the dining room chair and walked around on it. He didn't fall down, so that was pretty good. He could really walk on just that metal pole.

"Does it hurt?" asked Sylvia, reaching out to touch the metal. It was cool under her hand.

"Not a bit," said her daddy. "Sometimes it's a little hard to walk, especially going down a steep hill, but mostly it works just fine. Half the time I forget it's there."

"What happened to your real leg?" asked Sylvia.

"I stepped on a bomb, and it blew my leg off."

Sylvia looked at his face for a long moment, then she said, "Why did you step on the bomb? Were you crazy?"

Her daddy laughed. "No, it was disguised to look like a rock. I thought I was stepping on a rock, but in truth I was stepping on a bomb. The bad guys put fake rocks out there to kill Americans."

Sylvia chewed on this for a long time. "Are you going to leave us again and go back there?"

"No, my fighting days are over," said her daddy. "I've served my country, and that's enough. I'm back for good, this time." He reached out and gave Sylvia a hug, and she hugged him back. She felt bad for her daddy, and she hoped he would grow a new leg pretty soon. It would be strange to walk on a metal pole your whole life.

It was good having her daddy home. He looked for a job, on the computer, and he and Sylvia played hide and seek in the bushes outside their apartment. Her dad also pushed her along on her bicycle, and he watched her ride in big circles. She was getting good at riding her bike. She didn't even need training wheels any more, she was so good at it. She thought about the metal leg a lot, and bombs that looked like rocks. She saw the rocks in the garden outside their apartment differently now. Maybe a bad guy would come along and put a bomb in their flower garden, and her mom would have a leg blown off. Then she would get a metal leg, too.

It was summer, so Sylvia didn't have to go to school. She had lots of friends, and her mother took her to play dates with other kids. They had all been in kindergarten last year, and next year would be first grade. She enjoyed school and was pleased that she could still see her friends in the summer time. It was hot, and they played in the water, but not too much. There was a drought, and that meant there wasn't enough water for everything.

One day Sylvia and her dad were playing in the parking lot of their building. It was tag, and Sylvia's dad was "it" and chased her across the parking lot. Suddenly a car pulled into the parking lot and almost hit Sylvia, but the driver stopped in time. Sylvia's dad came and picked her up, and they moved onto the grass to play.

"I guess we kind of blew it, there," said her dad. "That car might have hit you and killed you, or tore your leg off, and you'd end up like me." He was upset, and Sylvia gave him a hug because that's how you make it better when someone is having a bad time.

But now she was thinking. She was thinking about cars, and metal legs. The thoughts went round and round in her head, all the time, and she looked at her dad's leg and remembered what

he said, that it didn't hurt. It was just tough going down hills. But there were no hills around their apartment, so it was no big deal.

A few days after this Sylvia and her mom and her dad were playing catch with a Frisbee ring, out on the grass next to the street. It was a three way game. Her dad was good at throwing the Frisbee, but her mom and Sylvia weren't so good at it. Then a big new idea occurred to Sylvia, and she waited for her chance. A car zoomed by, and Sylvia ran out in front of it, full of excitement. The car hit her, and she fell down. It was hard to breathe, and her head spun round and round. She couldn't feel her legs.

Her mom reached her first and had an awful look on her face, and Sylvia said in a teensy weensie voice, "It's all right, mommy, I'm not dead." But her left leg sure hurt. Her mother put her hands to her mouth and said something to Sylvia's dad, who picked Sylvia up and put her in their car. They went to the hospital, where the doctor took an x-ray of Sylvia's legs.

"The left leg has a buckle fracture, but the break is clean, and it should heal up just fine with a cast," said the doctor. "I'm going to say, keep her off her leg for six weeks. Let it heal." He said a bunch more stuff to her mom and dad, and then he put the cast on her leg, and it stopped hurting. Sylvia felt bummed out, because she had failed. She reached down and felt the cast. It was hard, but it was made of something else, not a metal pole. It was no good.

Her parents kept her in bed for a very long time, and Sylvia got used to not running around and playing. Her friends from kindergarten came over to her house, and they played on the bed. Sylvia's leg throbbed sometimes, but after six weeks she could get up and walk around. But no running.

The three of them went back out on the grass and played catch with the Frisbee. Sylvia was next to the street. A big blue SUV came zipping past, and Sylvia dropped the Frisbee and ran in

front of the vehicle. The driver was very quick and stopped before hitting Sylvia, and her parents ran over to her. Her mom went to thank the SUV driver for being quick, and Sylvia's dad picked her up and held her so he could look right into her eyes.

"Baby girl, what are you doing?" he asked her. He sounded scared, which was strange. What did he have to be afraid of?

"I ran out in front of the car," she said.

"I saw that. *Why* did you run in front of the car?"

"It was disguised as a car, but really it was a bomb," said Sylvia.

Her daddy looked at her for a long time, then he said, "You can get killed, running in front of cars. You can't come back to us if you die, squirt. You're gone to Heaven."

"I don't want to go to Heaven," she said.

"Tell me what you were thinking," said her daddy. He kissed her cheek, then looked into her eyes again. It was hard to talk when he was staring at her so strong.

"The car would blow up my leg, and I would get a new leg, made of metal and plastic. Then I would be the same as you, daddy. It would be good. We could walk down hills together."

Her mother was done with the SUV driver and had heard this last bit that Sylvia said. "Oh my God, sweetheart, you don't need to lose a leg to be like your daddy. You've got some of your daddy in your DNA. You're a little bit mommy and a little bit daddy, already."

There were little tears in the corners of her dad's eyes, and he gave her a great big hug. "You have to promise me you won't run in front of any more cars," he said to her, very seriously.

"But I want a metal leg, too."

"Listen to me, squirt, this is serious now. You want to keep both your legs just like they are. It's better to have real legs than a mechanical leg. It's always better to have the real thing. You

can't run on a mechanical leg, it won't keep up. And little girls need to run, and play outside. So keep your real legs. You can tap on my metal leg if you want to feel a fake leg. It's only second-best. Keep the first best, okay?"

He looked so sad that Sylvia immediately said, "Okay, daddy, I won't run in front of cars any more."

"That's my girl," he said, and here was another great big hug, and a few more tears, which he wiped away with his fingers. He set her down on the grass, and they played Frisbee for a while longer. More cars came, and it was tempting to run out in front of them and get a metal leg. But she didn't want to disappoint her daddy, so she stayed on the grass.

After a while they went inside, and her mom made dinner. Her dad helped her cook, and the two of them had a lot to talk about. Sylvia didn't listen to grown-ups talk, it was boring. Her left leg was still a little stiff, but she could move around just fine. But the doctor said no jumping or Jungle Jims or skipping rope for another ten weeks. The doctor took all the fun things away.

And that's how Sylvia tried to get a mechanical leg, but her mom and dad talked her out of it. It was an idea she had that nobody liked, so she just threw it away and kept her own legs. It was better to have the real thing, anyway.

Her leg healed up, and she went back to school and played outside with all her friends, and that bad idea faded out of her head and never came back.

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