

(warmup)

- 1) I'm proud of the falling action
- 2) I'm unsure if the conflict is enough for the climax
- 3) I really need to work on the word count. I'm way too many words over the limit.

The Void Left Behind

Mia stepped carefully around the carton of chocolate milk on the ground, cautiously avoiding the liquid that sprawled out in all directions. She sat down at the end of the table, away from the 4th graders.

Poking at her food, she thought, *Grilled cheese again!? That's the third time this week!*

Sighing loudly, she shoved the sandwich into her mouth.

"No way," a gasp rose from behind her, "She really did that!? Your uncle sided with her!?"

"Yeah, and she doesn't let my cousin visit her mother," a different voice replied, "She makes her do all the chores too! My cousin's been doing the dishes for a week!"

"She's been forcing my cousin to call her mom! It's like she's trying to replace my aunt!"

Mia raised an eyebrow. *Good thing dad said he wasn't going to find us a stepmom.* But she suddenly had an uneasy feeling in her stomach. *Stupid grilled cheese,* she thought, dumping her lunch in the trash and leaving the cafeteria.

James fumbled through his backpack, shoving aside the crumbled math test that he had oh-so-spectacularly failed and grabbed the keys from the bottom of his bag, bringing out a few gum wrappers. He pretended not to notice, dropping them back into the bag and shoving the key into the lock on the badly painted front door. When they moved into this house, their dad had insisted on painting the front door, claiming that it would be “the most eye-catching door you ever did see.”

It was eye-catching, but also hideous.

James closed the door behind him, taking off his shoes and placing them neatly into the shoe rack. He couldn't count the number of times that his mother had found his shoes scattered across the entryway and lectured him for it. But now that she was gone, there wasn't anyone to scold him about it. It had become a habit without him realizing.

James stopped in the entryway of the living room. His sister and his dad were sitting on the couch, locked in what appeared to be a staring contest.

“Dad?” He asked hesitantly.

“James! You're home,” his dad exclaimed, “I have something very important to tell you guys.”

“Ha! I win daddy! You blinked! Twice!” Mia shouted.

“You're too good at this,” their dad shook his head in exaggerated disappointment.

James dumped his backpack on the ground and sat himself down on the couch.

“So, what's up dad?” James asked.

Their dad clutched at his jeans. Suddenly, James wasn't curious anymore. Somehow, he knew that he wouldn't like whatever their dad had to say.

“I’ve been dating this woman—” He began, averting eye contact. James turned to look at Mia. *Oh Dear God, she’s gonna start screaming.*

“Her name is Edith... and I think she’s really great and I know I said I wouldn’t find another wife, but I think she’ll be good for all of us and—” Their dad rambled on, but James’ ears had stopped working. *This could not be happening.*

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Mia felt anger bubble within, flames rising up and consuming her senses. She rose from her seat, walking over to their father and stopping before him, staring into his eyes.

“A stepmom,” she whispered, “you want to marry this woman who you didn’t tell us about, after you promised, *you promised us* that you wouldn’t ever replace mom!”

Their father tried to say something, but Mia wasn’t having any of it. She stormed upstairs, tears welling inside her blue eyes, identical to her mother’s. Sobs escaped her throat as she slammed the door and threw herself into bed, burying her face in the pillow that her mother had made for her 5th birthday. She sobbed louder at the reminder that her mother had not lived long enough to see her turn 6.

Her thoughts were overwhelmed with images of *Edith*, who would soon barge into their life and sleep in her mother’s bedroom, sit in her mother’s favorite chair, read her mother’s books, and erase all the remnants of her mother that still lingered in the house.

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James stared down at the equation scribbled messily across his notebook, which made no sense. It didn't help that he kept picturing what could happen if his dad married *Edith*. What if she didn't like them? What if she tried to touch their mother's stuff? What if—?

There were too many what ifs. So many that they tore through his head in a manner that made him dizzy, anxious, and unable to comprehend math. His lack of understanding definitely wasn't because he had been sleeping during math class. Definitely not.

He could hear the clatter of pots and pans downstairs as their dad scrambled to put together dinner. Normally, Mia would go help him, but today she was still in her room. Secretly, James thought Mia should be banned from the kitchen before she set something on fire. Again.

He stared back down at his notebook, taking in the glorious mess that was numbers, doodles, and question marks, and decided that was enough math for today.

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“Dinner!” Her dad called from downstairs. The sound seemed to echo in the void within her heart. At the table, they sat in silence. Mia poked at her potatoes passive aggressively, occasionally letting out an angry huff.

“Mia—” her dad began, but Mia cut him off with a louder huff.

“Mia please—”

“No.”

“Sweetie—”

“Mia,” James spoke up. Mia paused her stabbing of potatoes to stare at James disbelievingly. *Why are you siding with him?*

“Mia, I want to hear his excuse.”

She didn’t respond, but stopped interrupting. Mia crossed her arms as their dad alternated almost comically between apologizing profusely and telling them as much as he could about *Edith*.

“She.... sounds alright....?” James responded hesitantly, his expression conflicting with the words exiting his mouth.

“Please, spend some time with her, 3 months, and if you don’t like her, I promise I’ll call it off.” Their dad pleaded.

“30 dollars,” Mia said.

“50,” James corrected.

“Forgive me?” Their dad asked cautiously, pulling out a hundred-dollar bill. Mia snatched it from his hand, running upstairs and yelling, “Fine!”

James blinked twice, staring into the empty space Mia disappeared from, then bolted upstairs after her.

“MIA—”, He screamed, “YOU OWE ME FIFTY DOLLARS!!!”

The week dashed by, and soon, James was sitting at the dinner table with Mia, who was stabbing her potatoes again, their dad, who was wringing his napkin, and Edith, who was wearing a ‘please don’t hate me’ smile.

“What’s your favorite color?” Mia asked suddenly.

“. . . forest green...”

“That was mom’s least favorite color.” Mia responded coldly. Edith froze in her seat, her expression morphing into an ‘is it too late to take that back’ smile.

Mia was lying. Forest green had been their mother’s favorite color.

“What’s your hobby?” Mia asked.

“Reading?”

“I don’t like that.”

Mia was being unreasonable, but James didn’t care.

“How old are you?”

“28.”

“You’re too young for my dad.”

Edith looked near tears. James felt pity for her, but it was masked by the satisfaction he felt knowing that she would probably call it quits as soon as she left.

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How dare she!? Mia thought furiously, marching over to Edith, who was sitting in her mother's armchair. *How dare she sit there, in her mother's armchair, talking to her mother's husband, in her mother's house. Who did she think she was!?*

Mia walked over to Edith and grabbed her arm, yanking her out of the chair towards the front door. Her dad tried to intervene, but James stopped him.

"Mia—" her dad began.

"Arthur, it's fine. I'll see you tomorrow," Edith cut him off.

The door slammed shut, the sound echoing throughout the house.

The next day, Mia found herself zoning out.

"Mia?" Susanne tapped her shoulder.

"Huh?"

"Oh, I was telling you about going to the beach with my stepmom."

"You have a stepmom?"

"I just call her mom," Susanne said, shrugging it off, "she took me to the beach, and then we went shopping. She kept making me try on pink dresses. Apparently pink looks great on me, but I disagree."

"You get along with her?"

"Of course! She's like, the best person ever!"

"You never feel like she's trying to replace your mom?"

"I used to, but then I got to know her and it worked out pretty well. It wasn't like she was trying to replace my mom."

The thought lingered for the rest of the week. Maybe, just maybe, she could try being nice to Edith. After all, her dad had promised a 3 month trial period.

James looked up to see Edith cheering from the stands. Mia was jumping up and down beside her, waving around the absurdly expensive pom-poms she had previously asked for and been turned down repeatedly.

He wasn't surprised to see them, considering they had been in the same spot for the past 5 weeks. It seemed that Edith was slowly becoming a part of their lives without them realizing. 3 months had passed, and neither he nor Mia objected when their dad asked if Edith could move in.

He was used to seeing Mia and Edith in the kitchen, laughing with flour on their noses. Used to her presence at each and every one of his soccer games, used to seeing her snuggled up on the couch with a book. She never forced herself upon them, but she just fit. She fit so perfectly into the void that their mother had left behind when she died, so perfectly with just enough space for the both of them in his heart.

So perfectly, that his family felt whole again.

Mia guided Edith into her mother's favorite armchair, hands over Edith's eyes. James approached with a carefully wrapped box and placed it into her lap.

One, two, three, she mouthed, and in unison, they shouted, "HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!"

Artist's Statement

Because my story is about 2 siblings who are having a hard time accepting their father's girlfriend, it makes sense for the perspectives to jump between the two of them. I had originally considered adding the stepmother as a third perspective, but it worked much better to leave it out.

My story is tied heavily to the idea that you can accept someone into your family without replacing another person. It doesn't seem directly connected to the essential questions of this project, ***what it means to be a family*** and ***how family impacts one's identity***? However, I feel that my project answers these questions in a subtle but thorough way.

My story begins with Mia and James holding a terrible impression of Edith only because of her role as their father's girlfriend. But as the story progresses, both James and Mia see that accepting Edith into the family doesn't mean she has to replace the role their deceased mother played in their lives. They realize that her existence and purpose as their family member is not to replace their deceased mother, but to love and support them just like their mother had, to do so because their mother cannot. Throughout the story, it is also revealed that family can contribute to the little habits one holds, how one sees things, and what the presence of family can give to someone emotionally.

Dramatic irony is displayed when Mia is relieved her dad promised not to remarry, and when she links the uneasy feeling within her stomach as a result of the grilled cheese. The readers know that both are foreshadowing, but the characters don't.

Additionally, thoughtshots, snapshots, and dialogue are included in the story, the most significant being Mia's thoughts about Edith (*Beginning with 'how dare she'*) immediately after dinner, the snapshot of Mia in her room after finding out about Edith, and the dialogue that makes up the climax of the story.

Other thoughtshots include ‘*Good thing dad said he wasn’t going to find us a stepmom*’, which adds dramatic irony, and ‘*This could not be happening*’, which displays James’ disbelief at their father breaking his promise to never remarry.

The main snapshot included in the story represents Mia’s reaction after finding out about Edith. It thoroughly displays her emotions and why she feels this way. It shows first anger, then sadness, then worry. She’s angry about Edith, sad about her mother’s passing, and worried that Edith will erase what’s left of her mother. This snapshot is crucial to helping readers understand why Mia acts the way she does towards Edith later on in the story.

I chose to use dialogue in the climax of the story (and other places in order to progress the story) in order to create a more heated moment with less explanations. The example below is an excerpt from the climax. I used dialogue in order to show Mia’s dislike towards Edith in a more straightforward way than describing it.

“What’s your hobby?” Mia asked.

“Reading?”

“I don’t like that.”

And finally, the motifs of the story are, 1, the worry that Edith will replace their deceased mother, and 2, the idea that family and the impact they hold become a part of you even when you don’t realize it.