

The Cemetery Is Off-Limits

He stands before me, his little brow furrowed,
his lips pursed,
just this side of defiance.

“I’ve told you,” trying to sound patient,
“the cemetery is off-limits.”

His face plays out his thoughts
As clearly as one of his TV stories.

In his eyes, I see the dialog assembled:

But the grass is always green there,
and no one is in the way

And it doesn’t hurt the tombstones for me to sit on them

And there’s nobody around here my age I can play with

And there’s no traffic so Ranger is a lot safer

And, and, and.

Almost, I smile. Maybe a little, inside.

“All of those things are true,” I admit.

“But those points are all about you,
and you are not the center of the universe, you see.”

The clouded face moves closer to a storm, so I go on.

“Think this once about all the people who have buried someone there –
maybe a mother, or a husband. Maybe even a child lost too soon.”

I wait, letting him try to shift his perspective a bit.

“If all they wanted was to get rid of a dead body,
It would be faster and cheaper
to just send them off with the trash.”

I am not sure if this is a road I should be taking.

“If Mom died, or Lizzie,

would you want to just stuff them into the bin?
I don't think so. People – including you –
need to let go of their lost ones
with good feelings, with respect.
Maybe they even want to go visit their graves and spend a few minutes in
peace
Remembering the best of times when they were together.”

I stopped, expecting questions. Arguments.
Instead, he turned, not quickly, and walked away
To the stairs up to his own room.
I felt I had not said enough
While having opened a subject
For which he was much too young.
He stayed in his room the rest of the day,
Only coming down for something to eat.

Morning is Saturday
He finds me again at my chair
Holding his copy of The Little Prince.
We've struggled with some of this story
But each time we read it,
He seems to enjoy it more.
Now his face is clouded not with anger,
But that distillation of attention
I saw when he was learning to ride his two-wheeler.

“Sometimes I feel sad,” he begins.
“I don't always know why.
Sometimes I feel happy,
And I don't always know why.
But whenever I am angry,
I know who is to blame.”

He pauses, but I hold back.

“Sometimes, Lizzie is happy
Or angry, or sad and I don’t know why.”
He shifts his hold on The Little Prince
And we are quiet again.

“If I don’t understand
Why Lizzie feels a certain way,
And I don’t always know why I feel a certain way
How am I supposed to make her feel better,
Or make myself stop feeling bad?”
He now holds his book in both hands.
“How am I supposed to learn
Why people feel like they feel
If I don’t know why I feel some way?”
Tears fill his eyes, but his face stays grim.

I realize my own tears are forming now.
“Here,” and I motion him toward me.
“Here, we’ll just have to learn a little more
Every day. We’ll do it together.”
As he rests his head on my chest,
A featureless vision comes to me:

The eaglet falling more than flying
Learning the strength
That would soon take him away.

