

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

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**Issue
2**

Six gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet
Peter Astle, Gabriella Balcom, Gary Bonn, Emily Fluke, Sharon Frame Gay, and more



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Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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The Arboretum Boy by Peter Astle — an encounter in a Derbyshire arboretum poses questions but yields unexpected results.

Mouses and Cats Cot Reel Cheep by Gabriella Balcom — a heartwarming tale of love and changed destinies

November Moon by Sharon Frame Gay — this tale of a forlorn soldier in the American Civil War will break your heart, lyrically.

Missing Notes — A Slovakian Tale by Alexander Marshall — a dysfunctional family visit turns into an odd sort of unifying event.

What Happened to Asher by Emily Fluke — a story of love and loss from a survivor.

Friendship and Fire by Gary Bonn — good, evil, the struggle to survive, and an unlikely friendship in a dystopian world.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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**The
Arboretum
Boy
by Peter Astle**

The day I learnt I had dementia was the day my life began.

I walked out of the surgery into bright sunshine and choking traffic. Park View Medical Centre was just across from the entrance to the arboretum on Rose Hill Street, but I couldn't see the park today. It was a Thursday afternoon and the road was gridlocked with cars and high-sided lorries and buses.

Maybe there were road works on Normanton Road, or maybe someone had broken down? Maybe someone had died?

I wasn't dead yet. I was very much alive. The moment Dr. Sherpao had delivered the verdict a strange calm had settled over me. A certainty. More than anything else, a sense of purpose.

I was ready to see the world.

Although I had suspected such a diagnosis for months now, the confirmation was a relief to me.

I was sixty-four years of age when I crossed over Normanton Road and walked into the arboretum that sunny morning, but I felt like a teenager.

I certainly felt no anger. It was a beautiful day.

I'd have to tell Margaret, my wife of forty-two years, about my new situation, but I guessed she already knew. I was befuddled by the plots in TV crime dramas, and couldn't read a book without making notes in the margins. I was losing my mind.

And I was quietly enjoying it.

I thought about flowers. A bouquet from the florist on the corner of King Street. A lively spray of pink roses and white lilies mixed with orchids perhaps. Flowers had always worked well with Margaret when it came to breaking any kind of news — good or bad. I'd worked this out many

years ago in the first decade of our marriage. Quite simply the act of arranging the flowers gave Margaret something to do as she digested the news, whatever the news might be.

She was a fast and practical woman and not one for sitting at tables and debating issues. She had fidgety hands and was always on the go. I once suggested buying a dishwasher as she stood one day by the sink scrubbing plates and she actually laughed out loud. It was a genuine laugh, but a kind smile followed, because she knew I was only trying to be kind myself. I remember her shaking her head as though I was an idiot. I think she laughed a second time. She told me that by the time a dishwasher was fully loaded and set in motion and had done its job of scalding (and sometimes cracking) the plates and cups and dishes she could have not only cleaned them all *properly* in the sink and stacked them away but she could also have vacuumed the entire bungalow, cooked a meal and completed *The Derby Telegraph* cryptic crossword. Dishwashers were a waste of time and electricity and water. I really couldn't argue. I knew nothing about dishwashers.

But I knew my Margaret. In all our years together, I don't think I can remember a single argument I've won. But my oh my, it has been the most wonderful marriage.

As I crossed Normanton Road to the arboretum public park in a break of traffic I was definitely thinking about flowers. The sun was warm on my face and the scent of freshly cut grass was keen and sharp and sweet. The arboretum was a beautiful place to sit and think. Think, not brood.



I found a bench close to the place where the bandstand had once stood.

Now, the bandstand had been destroyed by fire in the mid-Nineties, but I remembered sitting there on the curved bench inside with Margaret on the night I proposed to her.

It's hard to believe, but she was knitting at the time. Some sort of tiny pink cardigan for one of her nieces. Her hands never stopped moving, even when I popped the question.

I could remember these things clearly.

There was no one else in the arboretum apart from me and the boy. I noticed him turning over top soil by a hedgerow on the other side of the park near the yellow rose bush, but was so lost in thought I paid him little attention.

I was contemplating my future, but not in a negative way. In my head I wasn't writing bucket-lists or farewell speeches or last wills and testaments. In my head I was wondering how to embrace the future. Wondering how I would put it all to Margaret as she arranged the lilies in the vase.

The boy appeared right in front of me holding a long-handled shovel, stamped into the turf. I'd been so lost in thought I hadn't noticed him approach. He leant on the handle and met my eye.

There was a smudge of dirt on his left cheek. He might have been sixteen or seventeen, but his eyes were older. He had blond hair sticking out of the rim of his flat-cap, a square jaw and pleasant features.

There was something unusual about the clothes he wore.

The jeans were ordinary enough, as was the white T-shirt, but instead of a belt his jeans were held up by a thick piece of old yellowing rope, tied in a double knot. Around his neck hung a bright red cotton scarf, loosely tied, presumably to absorb the sweat as he dug over the soil. It was not the sort of thing I'd seen a teenager wear before. The cap was unusual too. No doubt it was a new trend.

I'd long stopped noticing fashion, but it was a boiling hot in the park. Too hot to be wearing headwear.

"It's a corker of a day," he said. "Can't believe there aren't more folk out."

"It's mid-afternoon," I said. "Most people are at work."

"Apart from you."

"I'm retired," I replied. "And I've just been told I'm losing my mind."

The boy laughed.



"You wouldn't be the first I've visited who's said the same thing." He laughed again, this time so hard that his shoulders shook.

"What do you mean? Visited?"

He finally stopped laughing.

"Come by to say hello. I do it sometimes." He pointed with his finger to where I'd first noticed him. "I've been digging that flowerbed in the far corner for over sixty years.

"The most beautiful roses ever. Amber Queens they call 'em. Yellow as dandelions."

The boy was no more than seventeen and the long shovel looked real enough, but I reminded myself that my mental faculties were impaired.

I must have heard him wrong. Six years perhaps?

I wanted him to go away. I needed time to think.

"Sometimes I dig on the other side of the park."

Once again, he pointed. "It all depends which day it is. On Thursdays it's always there. By the summerhouse. I don't much like Thursdays."

"I'm sorry. You're not making much sense."

"The statue. It's the statue I don't like. Not Thursdays. It just so happens that on Thursdays, Mr McCarthy makes me scrub it."

"Mr McCarthy?"

"Park-keeper. Works me like a slave, he does. Makes me scrub it with a toothbrush if he's feeling mean."

I looked in the direction of the arboretum summerhouse on the edge of the park. A building that had been there for as long as I could remember.

I played there myself in the sixties when I was around the same age as the boy.

I remembered the statue of Sir Henry Royce, co-founder of the Rolls-Royce company, quite clearly.

It was placed on a short square concrete pedestal with an inscription in bold capital letters on the side, praising the life of a humble yet successful engineer.

I'd read the inscription once, but couldn't remember what it had said now about the man.

What I did know was that the statue had been moved decades ago, in the Seventies perhaps. I had some distant recollection that it was moved to Moor Lane at the Rolls Royce headquarters. It was certainly no longer in the arboretum.



"It's been a strange day," I said. "Thank goodness for the sunshine."

"I sometimes imagine I can still feel the sunshine," the boy grinned. "How nice would that be?"

Dr Sherpao had warned me that I would have to be patient with myself. That sometimes things would not make complete sense. That sometimes I would be frightened; sometimes depressed.

But I had to try to stay calm. The medication might take some time to work.

I'd told the doctor I felt fine and that the diagnosis was a relief. Now, looking at the boy, I wasn't so sure.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "You're thinking that I don't exist."

I pondered the question.

"I'm not sure what I'm thinking. I'm trying to come to terms with losing my mind, thank you very much. But in a positive way."

"Absolutely." He laughed out loud. "And that's why I visited you. You saw me and so I returned the favour by saying hello. You have an optimistic spirit."

"I can't see any reason to be pessimistic."

"Even though you're losing your mind?"

"Especially because I'm losing my mind."

"Excellent."

"So, what is wrong with the statue?" I said, mindful to use the present tense.

"It's very difficult to clean. Particularly the beard and hair. You have to stretch and stretch to reach it, even with bricks, because it's bigger than a normal man." The boy shook his head. "Mr McCarthy won't let me lean a ladder against the statue itself. Says it's sacrilege."

"So what do you do?"

The boy shrugged. I noticed he had lost a couple of teeth.

"Bricks. That's all you can do. It's the only way you can reach the beard and the hair."

"Bricks?"

"From the maintenance shed. I stack them up on the plinth and stand on them, so that I can reach. The plinth itself isn't that high. I can clamber on that without need for a ladder. But I can't scrub the head without the bricks."

"And how would Mr McCarthy know you hadn't scrubbed the head? Does he climb on the bricks to inspect your work afterwards?"

The boy laughed out loud again and raised his index finger.

"You're one wise man, sir," he said. He took off his flat-cap and used it to give an exaggerated bow. "Of course he doesn't. He's got too much of a belly. And after what happened to me, I doubt anyone would. But I still clean that beard and hair every Thursday. Even now."

The sun was high in the sky. Not a soul in sight.

"So what happened to you?" I said.

"I fell off the plinth." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Not one of my better days. That's why I hate Thursdays."

I thought about my own predicament and wondered if I too would hate Thursdays.

The boy leaned on the long shovel.

"I can tell you your future," he said. "I really can. The holiday you're going to take to Botswana for example. I've told other people who I've visited before, those who've *seen* me. I've told them all manner of things. Secrets even—"

I cut him off.

"I don't want to know my future," I said, closing my eyes. "I'm too busy enjoying the now."

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The sun was hot and dry and furious. There was not a single person in the park other than me and the boy with the long-handled shovel.





When I opened my eyes, thirty seconds later, there was just me.

* * *

Normanton Road was still clogged with traffic, but I found a pelican crossing and made my way towards the florist shop on King Street.

Before I got there, another very different kind of shop caught my eye. I stopped and stared through the glass window at the colourful and inviting displays for quite some time before entering.

It was late in the afternoon by the time I pushed through the door of the florist shop further down the road. A tiny bell rang announcing my entrance.

A young female shop assistant (or perhaps it was the owner) was busy closing down business for the day, dragging in the display plants from outside (begrudgingly, I thought) and stacking them neatly near a side door.

The scent of summer hung in the air like freshly sprayed perfume.

The woman was no more than twenty-five and held up her hands in a kind of apologetic gesture when I asked if I could still buy a bouquet. She didn't say a word. She shook her head before disappearing outside again to haul in another black bucket.

I felt like I was imposing.

I stood close to the counter and watched her bring in the plants and shrubs, and when she had finished her brow was shiny with sweat.

She had a fierce and determined look about her that reminded me of Margaret.

I stood there for a while, staring, before repeating my specific request for a bouquet.

Running grimy fingernails through her hair the woman said she could make one up for the next day. Best she could do. There was a delivery at six o'clock in the morning.

It was closing time and there were no yellow roses anyway. She said there was a garage just around the corner that did some very nice sprays.

I opened my wallet and fished out a twenty pound note.



"That's for you. For your time. Not for the flowers. I'll pay extra for the flowers, of course."

She gave me an odd look, but took the money anyway.

"We've got cala lilies with white peacock feathers, and I suppose I could make up a decent bouquet with red or pink roses."

I nodded. I could tell the woman was itching to leave the shop, but the warmth of fresh cash in her hand had motivated her to create the bouquet.

As she was constructing it, she glanced at me from time to time, very much like Margaret used to do when she was busy with a task, whether it was ironing or scrubbing dishes.

I watched her prepare the bouquet, paid the bill, and left the shop with that tingling bell without saying a word.

I gave a wave and a smile and she waved back.

The bouquet was a fine spread of white, red, green and pink and I knew that Margaret's face would light up at the sight of them. I also knew that her face would then quickly darken at the sight of them because flowers meant news — good or bad — and that Margaret was suspicious of news of any kind.

Other than telling me I'd have to be patient with myself, and that things would not always make complete sense, Dr. Sherpao had told me I would have to consider surrendering my driving licence. As I placed the bouquet of flowers on the back seat of the Volvo, I considered my physician's advice for about a second. Then I turned the ignition key.

I was thinking about the Arboretum boy.

On the face of it, the whole episode might have been a daydream of some sort, brought on by the dramatic news, the warm sunshine and the strange inexplicable joy of the moment.

Perhaps it was just my playful new mind?

But I wasn't convinced I'd dreamt it. If the youth had been a figment of my imagination then why were certain details so clear?

The old-fashioned clothes, the yellow rope tied around the belt-hooks of his jeans, the missing two front teeth, the blond straw-like hair sticking out of the flat cap, the bright red cotton scarf, the smudge of dirt on his left cheek. The yellow rosebush he'd been working on for sixty years. Amber Queens. Yellow as dandelions.

And then there was the statue of Sir Henry Royce. A monument that had been removed from the arboretum decades ago. The cocky confident smile of the youth. There was no way I could have imagined all that.

The evening traffic was slow, but my mind was racing. The bouquet was fine and I was sure that Margaret would handle the news as she busied herself with household tasks. Recently Margaret had joined some sort of bakery club and was forever rolling pastry and creating sponges with fancy icing shapes.

I just hoped that the other purchases I had made that afternoon would make all the difference. There would be some initial panic, of course, but she would calm down through work. The way she always did.

Home at last, I pulled into the driveway.

There was a light on in the kitchen. Margaret was making supper. There would no doubt be the ever-present smell of baking bread.

I still couldn't stop thinking about my dream. The Arboretum boy. Mainly because I knew it hadn't been a dream at all.

I wondered what Margaret might be cooking. Pasta maybe, with some sort of chilli or bolognaise sauce, diced onions and sliced mushrooms on the chopping board. Always busy. Always moving forward.

Well, now I was moving forward too.





I grabbed the flowers from the back seat of the Volvo and stood on my own front doorstep and rang the bell. There was no need to do this because I had my own key, but it was one of the games we'd played in the early days and I wanted to play it again. These things I could remember.

I was in a mischievous mood.

Margaret opened the door wearing the same apron she'd worn for more than thirty years.

Her hands were covered in flour and she didn't seem best pleased that I'd called her to the door.

"Special delivery." I smiled, offering the bouquet. "For you, madam."

"Good news or bad news?" Margaret knew I'd been to see Dr. Sherpao and it was pointless mincing her words.

She took the flowers from me and I gave a theatrical bow. It was just one of the things we did when we first started going out and I was now doing it again. If I'd been wearing a hat or cap, like the Arboretum boy, I would have tipped it with a twirl.

I saw a flash of a smile, but it was brief and dishonest. I knew my wife well. Margaret needed to be doing something.

I closed the front door behind me and followed her though to the kitchen, then sat down at the central island. There were pastry dough, white flour and kitchen utensils everywhere. Something beefy and oniony was cooking in the oven that I guessed was a bourguignon, simply because there was a half-empty bottle of red wine next to the hob.

I might be losing my mind, but I knew these things.

"You're very late," she said. She found a glass vase from under the sink that had been knocking around the house for years. "Where have you been?"

"The Arboretum," I said. No point in lying. "Where I proposed to you, remember? The bench next to the bandstand. Just enjoying the sunshine really."

Margaret inspected the glass vase for a while before cleaning it with a damp cloth. She had placed the bouquet of flowers on the worktop.

"So what did he say?" she said at last.

For a moment I thought that she was asking about the Arboretum boy, but then I realised she was talking about Dr. Sherpao.

"He told me I was losing my mind," I said, refocusing. I couldn't get the Arboretum boy out of my head. "It's dementia. It's treatable, but not necessarily curable. But I know I'll be fine. I've got something planned, Margaret. Something for both of us."

Margaret started on the flowers, picking them apart, her lips drawn in a thin line. Not a mean line, but a concerned line. More than anything else right now, she needed to be doing something, and flower arranging was right there in front of her.

"Planned?"

"Yes. Planned and booked."

"What's planned and booked?"

"The holiday of a lifetime," I said. "America first. Then when we're done with that we'll hit Europe, and when we're done with that we'll travel to the Far East. Then Africa. We'll get to see Botswana. Five days time we'll be flying to John F Kennedy Airport."

Margaret filled the vase with tap water.

"Botswana?" She stopped what she was doing, turned off the tap and stared at me. "How did you know about Botswana?"

Until that afternoon, that southern African country had never entered my head. "I thought you might like to go there."

Margaret placed the vase on the draining board. She seemed to be frowning and smiling at the same time.

"But I've never mentioned it."

"We'll be staying in a lodge on some camp close to the Chobe National Park. I've booked a light aircraft flight as part of the package. Lots of elephants to see, and hippopotamuses and zebras and—"

"But how did you know?" she interrupted.

"Know what?"

"About Botswana. Have you been snooping through my paperbacks?"

"Of course not."

Margaret returned to the worktop and started separating the pink and the red roses and the lilies. The smile was greater than the frown now.

"I've been reading Alexander McCall Smith for years now. You must have picked one up and read a back cover."

"Never," I said, quite honestly. Because I hadn't. "Who is he?"

"*The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* writer," she said. "I've read almost all of the series. *The Full Cupboard of Life* was especially good. Maybe I mentioned it to you."

"Not that I recall. Why would you? Do I ever mention Andy McNab?"

"You know I'm not interested in war stories."

"And I'm not interested in romantic fiction."

She tried for a stern look, but the smile was not ready to leave just yet. Like someone being tickled with a feather, it played involuntarily around her lips.

"They're not romantic fiction. They're crime stories. And they're set in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. It's a place I've wanted to visit for years. I must have mentioned it."

"Never," I said. "Lucky guess."

There was warmth in her eyes as well as a sliver of suspicion when she reached across the worktop to touch my hand.

"Can we afford to go?"

"We can't afford not to go. Besides, I got us a good deal."

Margaret picked up the glass vase from the draining board and started arranging the flowers on the worktop. She spread the peacock feathers around first and then started on the cala lilies.

"I'll have to get some light clothes. Shorts even. I can't remember the last time I wore shorts."

She suddenly stopped what she was doing and held up a single rose that had been hidden beneath the pink and the red ones.

"Oh, this one is really nice. I'll put it right in the centre."

The rose was the colour of sunshine. Or dandelion-yellow. The florist must have found one after all, although she hadn't mentioned it.

It was an Amber Queen.



CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

PETER ASTLE



'This isn't a book you'll find easy to set aside until tomorrow: make a cup of tea, get comfortable, switch off your phone and be drawn into the little worlds of this book to emerge content and refreshed by the work of a master author.' — Grant P. Hudson, 2020



TWISTS and TURNS

Derbyshire Tales with a Twist

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Mouses and Rats Cot Reel Cheep!

by Gabriella Balcom





Dahlya heard something rustling behind her. When she turned around, she saw a small animal dart into the hydrangea bush by the garden. All she caught was a glimpse before it vanished into the densely-packed leaves, but she was sure it was a cat.

The seven-year-old ran inside the house to open the fridge. Studying the contents, she noticed cheese slices and counted them. Eight were left. Daddy always said, "Be careful with our food, hon. Don't waste any." But she figured animals needed food just like they did, so feeding one wouldn't be wasting. And she wouldn't take much. Just one slice. They had more.

Going back outside, she inched toward the bush. "Kitty, kitty? Kitty, do you hear me? I have a yummy for you. You'll like it a lot." The animal didn't come out. "Okay. I'll leave it here." Setting her offering on the ground, she took a few steps backward and waited. No movement or sound came from the bush. She eased back farther and farther, and soon stood on the front porch several feet away.

The bottom of the bush quivered. An orange-and-white paw shot out, snagged the cheese with its claws, then ripped the slice in two and yanked its catch out of sight. Within seconds, the other piece disappeared, too.

Dahlya bounced on her feet, giggling. "Your claws are good grabbers. I wish I had some. I'd do lots of fun things if I had claws." In school once, her class had been told to imagine themselves as any kind of animal, and then write about it. She'd chosen to be a cat. Dashing up trees would be so much fun. So would jumping down from up high, chasing her tail, and pouncing on stuff. And she'd love to do flips in the air. Besides, who didn't like cats? Everyone loved them, gave them treats, and petted them.

The next day, Dahlya scrambled an egg with a fork—the way Daddy did it—and left the bowl of it outside for the cat.

Later that evening, she snuck a fried chicken wing to the bush.

Jesse wondered the following morning what his daughter was doing by the garden. The day before, they'd weeded it, and the plants wouldn't need watering until later tonight. Had she found a bug or pretty pebble? Feathers or leaves for her collection?

Gulping coffee from a mug, he grimaced. Although he typically liked his coffee strong enough to dissolve nails and hated wasting anything, the remnants he'd poured from his coffee pot had been around *way* too long. And a dead fly floated on the surface. Thankfully he'd seen it *before* taking another gulp. Next time he wanted coffee, he'd clean out his pot and brew a fresh one.

Pouring the sludge and unwelcome visitor down the sink, he headed outside to check the fluids in his 84 Ford Escort, because it leaked oil. He'd gotten the car for almost nothing; it had been wrecked before, had high mileage, didn't get many miles to the gallon, and definitely looked like it'd seen better days. Sighing to see the right front tire looking a little low, he remembered the nail he'd discovered there a couple days earlier. The tire needed a plug. Heck, soon he'd be plugging the plugs. What he really needed was another tire; the tread on this one was almost nonexistent.

Darting a glance at his watch, he frowned. "Shoot!" He couldn't do the plug now, because he had to be at work in twenty-nine minutes. If he left immediately, he'd arrive sixteen minutes early, give or take. He couldn't risk being late today. A guy had been fired for tardiness only last week.





Once again, Jesse wished Bent Oak, Texas was larger. He liked the town as it was, but a population of 873 didn't make for many jobs. He bagged groceries at their one grocery store, but business had been slowing down. Four months ago, a Walmart Super-Center had opened one city away.

Staring into space for a moment, he shifted his focus to what he'd fix his daughter for breakfast. He went inside, looked in the refrigerator for something he could make fast, but his search made him narrow his eyes and study things more closely. Some of their food was missing—small quantities but gone nonetheless. He kept a close eye on what they had in the house; even a small portion of food could be the difference between whether or not they had a meal. Yesterday, although he'd been exhausted from a long day at work and not entirely sure of himself, he'd thought two eggs were missing. Today, he was fully rested and counted a total of four eggs gone. "Dahlya," he called. "Would you come here?"

"Yes, Daddy?" His daughter appeared within seconds.

"We're missing some eggs. Do you know what happened to them?" He'd couldn't be upset at her for eating when she was hungry, but his seven-year-old didn't know how to prepare food beyond the simple slathering of mayo on slices of bread, and slapping bologna or ham and cheese between them. She could also add milk to cereal. With quick meals on his mind now, he remembered the beef-flavored ramen he'd just bought, and made a note to show her how to make it. Ramen might not be the healthiest choice, but it was cheap and quick. "Dahlya?" She stared at her feet.

"I used the eggs, Daddy." She didn't raise her eyes.

"Okay. For what?" Had the babysitter shown her how to microwave them?

"The cat was hungry and—"

"Cat?" His eyebrows went up, but he kept his tone mild. "What cat?"

"The one in the bush." She said it like he knew what she was talking about.

Jesse stifled the urge to lecture her on not wasting food—that or just bang his head on a wall. They'd had conversations like this before. She was the sweetest little girl with the best of intentions, but she had no clue how the world worked. She didn't understand jobs were scarce and money scarcer. She didn't understand how truly bad off they were. Understanding that wasn't her responsibility anyway, but he still felt frustrated. "We need the food for ourselves, Dahlya. Please don't give anymore to stray animals that come along. All right?"

"I only used a little," she countered.

He bit his lip and explained for what felt like the thousandth time, "Honey, do you remember us talking about this before? Last time, you gave half of everything we had in the freezer to two stray dogs, and that meat was pretty expensive." Seeing her gazing dreamily into the air, he sharpened his tone. "*Dahlya*, do you remember giving away our meat?"

"Yeah, Daddy. You fussed at me, and then we ate potatoes and cabbage every day for years."

Jesse's lips twitched, and then he smiled. "Seemed like forever to me, too, hon, but it was only two weeks." Furrowing his brow, he spoke slowly. "I want you to understand. I don't have a lot of money. Remember I had no work for awhile after Daley's closed." The lumberyard had gone out of business after people started going to the new Lowe's in a larger city. "I just got another job three months ago, and we have to be very careful with everything we have. *Everything* includes our food."





"I remember." She scuffed the ground with one foot. "You told me 'Don't get your shoes wet. They won't last as long, and we can't afford new ones.'"

He sighed. She'd asked for new pair of pink Sketchers, but they'd been priced too high. Even if they'd been on sale, he wouldn't have been able to get them for her. "Yes, because we didn't have the money. We still don't have extra money. That's why we need to make everything last."

"Mama used to say, 'Use it up, wear it out—.' I can't remember the rest."

"Use it up. Wear it out. Make it do, or do without." He could almost hear his wife's voice saying the words, and blinked hard to keep his eyes from tearing up. If only she were with them. "That also applies to food. We have to be careful with it. It's for *us*, not animals."

"But, Daddy, the cat's hungry. He's gotta eat, too. I talked nice to him and he let me get close. Last night, he ate right out of my hand. Well, almost. He grabbed the food I put down, then ran into the bush."

"We'll be hungry, baby, if we run out of food."

"But we can go to the store and get more."

"Not without money, we can't."

"You have money, Daddy."

He stifled a groan and checked his watch. Maybe demonstrating reality was the best way to handle this. Pulling his wallet out, he counted the contents out onto the kitchen table. "Twenty, forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two dollars. And..." He rifled through his coins. "Seventy-two cents."

"That's a *lot!*" Her eyes were huge. "Enough for food."

"No, it's not." He grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and calculated. "\$52.72 minus \$24.18 for the water bill leaves \$28.54. I've got a few more days of work before payday, and I have to pay for gas to drive to work and back home. I'm putting \$20 in the tank. \$28.54 minus \$20.00 leaves what?"

She tallied on the paper. "\$8.54."

"Okay, now subtract \$4.00 for a quart of oil. The car's low. And I've got to replace a spark plug. That's about \$2. What's left?"

"\$2.54." Her shoulders drooped. "Oh."

"Yeah. This is why I keep saying we've got to be careful."

"But you'll get more money when you're paid."

"Yes, but rent was due two weeks ago. Most of my check will go toward that." Wincing, he tried not to think about the headache he felt growing, and ruffled her golden-red hair. "I don't want you worrying, because things *will* work out. Just...no more feeding the cat, okay?"

"But it's *hungry*." Her eyes pleaded with him. "And it's got something yucky on its fur. It needs a bath and—"

"Dahlya," he pressed, firm but gentle, "*listen* to me. I want a promise from you. I want it now."

"Daddy, the cat—"

"*Dahlya!*" Seeing her whole body sag made him feel awful, and he wished the situation wasn't what it was. But, he knew if she gave her word, she wouldn't break it. "No more of what's in the fridge for the cat. I'll check with the deli and bakery at work to see if they've got any leftovers they plan to dump, okay?"

"Thank you!" Her face lit up and her eyes sparkled. Throwing herself into his arms, she said, "I love you, Daddy!"





"I love you too, honey bunches..."
He squeezed her tightly.

"Of oats." She giggled. "Mama used to call me that."

"I know." His voice was low, but he spoke louder. "But you didn't give me your word. Now *promise* me about the cat. And promise you won't get too close to it, because it could have some disease, or scratch and hurt you."

"All right." The words sounded like they were being dragged out of her. "I promise, Daddy."

Looking at his watch again, he exclaimed, "Damn it!" He rapidly made her beef ramen, added an egg he scrambled in the microwave, and peeled an orange. If he sped to work, he'd arrive with a couple minutes to spare. Maybe. "Lucy will be here any moment to watch you till your bus comes. I've gotta go or I'll be late to work. Be good and don't wander off. Lucy said you almost gave her a heart attack last time."

She giggled. "I was in the back yard. She didn't look there."

"I know, hon bun, but tell her where you're gonna be if you go outside, okay?"

"Yes, Daddy."

He kissed the top of her head, dashed for the car, and peeled out—tires squealing.

Dahlya watched him drive away and eyed the bush. Yes, she'd made a promise not to give the cat anything from the fridge, but Daddy hadn't said anything about *her* food. She could share her meals with the cat.

Carrying her bowl of ramen, she sat down near the bush, and spooned some noodles and egg onto the ground several inches in front of her. The cat crept out, one cautious paw at a time, and she smiled. After he ate the food, she put out more, this time closer to her crossed legs.

She held her breath as the animal inched toward her. The last few times she'd fed him, he'd only come out long enough to grab food and vanish. All she'd glimpsed was dirty fur, but not much else. He'd never gotten this close, and she gasped when he looked directly at her.

The cat's left eye was swollen shut, something red caked around it. Dahlya thought it was dried blood. The fur on the animal's back was stuck together in clumps. Dirt and leaves were mixed in, too. The cat was *super* dirty and smelled like French fries. Mama used to say restaurants were supposed to dump old grease and replace it, but some used their old stuff longer than they should. Dahlya wondered if somebody had poured old grease on the kitty.

"Poor thing," she crooned. "Who was mean to you?"

"Dahlya, where are you?" Lucy called.

The cat zipped into the bush. Dahlya yelled, "I'm coming."

Jesse forced himself out of his car once he got home from work. Bending backwards, then side to side, he tried to ease the discomfort in his back. He was twenty-six years old, but felt seventy. His boss had fired one of their night stockers, and expected Jessie and one other bagger to stock in addition to their regular duties. Stocking wasn't hard, but they'd been nagged to hurry, the boss griping at them to get the boxes out of the aisles and the customers' way. Jesse hadn't understood the fuss. It wasn't as if people were swarming through the store or beating the doors down to get in. Still, he'd raced around, lifting heavy boxes, shifting them, and emptying them. Periodically, he'd dashed up front to bag. All in all, he'd hot-footed it through his entire shift. Then he'd been asked to stay an extra hour.

Moving slowly, he made his way to their one bathroom. He couldn't stop worrying and wondered if he should let this two-bedroom house go and look for an apartment. The house was tiny but rent was fairly high. If they moved out, he might be able to save \$100 or so a month, but that was a big *might*. Several factors were involved which he couldn't control: *if* he found an vacancy, *if* it didn't cost too much, *if* his car kept running, *if* he could keep his job. The way things were going at the grocery store, he wouldn't be surprised if it closed eventually. He had to face reality even if he started looking for another rental. Everything had gotten more expensive. Small towns being what they were, reasonably-priced places went fast and weren't given up. He knew people who'd been renting the same homes for fifteen years or more, even when those places were falling down around their ears.





His wife's parents had offered to take Dahlya for awhile, just until he got back on his "feet," but being away from her for any length of time would've killed him. She meant the world to him. She *was* his world.

Throughout his marriage, his in-laws had nagged the heck out of him and Maria, his wife, to "get that baby out of the boondocks and back into 'civilization'," which to them meant their home in Houston. However, Jesse and Maria had resisted. She'd wanted distance between herself and her parents, and she and Jesse had preferred small-town life. Since Maria's death, her parents had visited once, pressing Jesse to move to Houston. He'd declined. They'd asked to take Dahlya back for a visit. He'd declined. Maria had warned him how pushy her folks were, how they wanted things *their* way, even when they were dead wrong. Jesse worried that, if his in-laws ever got their hands on his baby, they might refuse to return her. Might try for custody. Nothing had come up in the twice-a-month phone calls between them, but who knew? He'd heard horror stories from others. Better safe than sorry.

A bath appealed to him more than a shower, considering his aching back. Reaching down to plug the drain, however, he saw something disturbing. Clumps of hair. No. Was that— fur? Immediately recalling his daughter's talk of a cat, he bolted for the kitchen, his aches forgotten. Dahlya wasn't there. She wasn't in the living room where Lucy sat knitting either. Jesse shot down the hall. In his daughter's bedroom, he caught her placing something on the floor by the far side of her bed. He rounded her bed and stopped short. A blasted cat was wrapped up in a towel, struggling to get out of it.

Shaking his head, he clenched his jaw. His words came out harsh and flat. "I remember telling you *not* to get close to that cat, but you decided to bring it into our home."

"It's hurt!"

"We can't rescue everything." Frustration leaked into his voice. "We can't fix everything. We're not rich. Yeah, it's nice helping strays, but good deeds won't feed us." His voice shook. "Step away from the cat. I'll take it outside."

"But, Daddy," she wailed. "He's hurt."

Jesse squatted and reached cautiously for the bundled mass so he wouldn't alarm the cat. Shifting the towel, he recoiled. 'Hurt' was an understatement. One of the thing's eyes was fine, reflecting a little fear, but the other was swollen and covered with dried pus and blood. Several scratches marred its face. At least one of them must have been deep. Jesse inched closer and tensed, preparing for some version of an attack. When the cat pulled backward but didn't flee or launch itself at him, Jesse relaxed just a bit. Its body was in no better shape than its head, and something matted its fur. Some fur was missing entirely, leaving patches of bare skin.

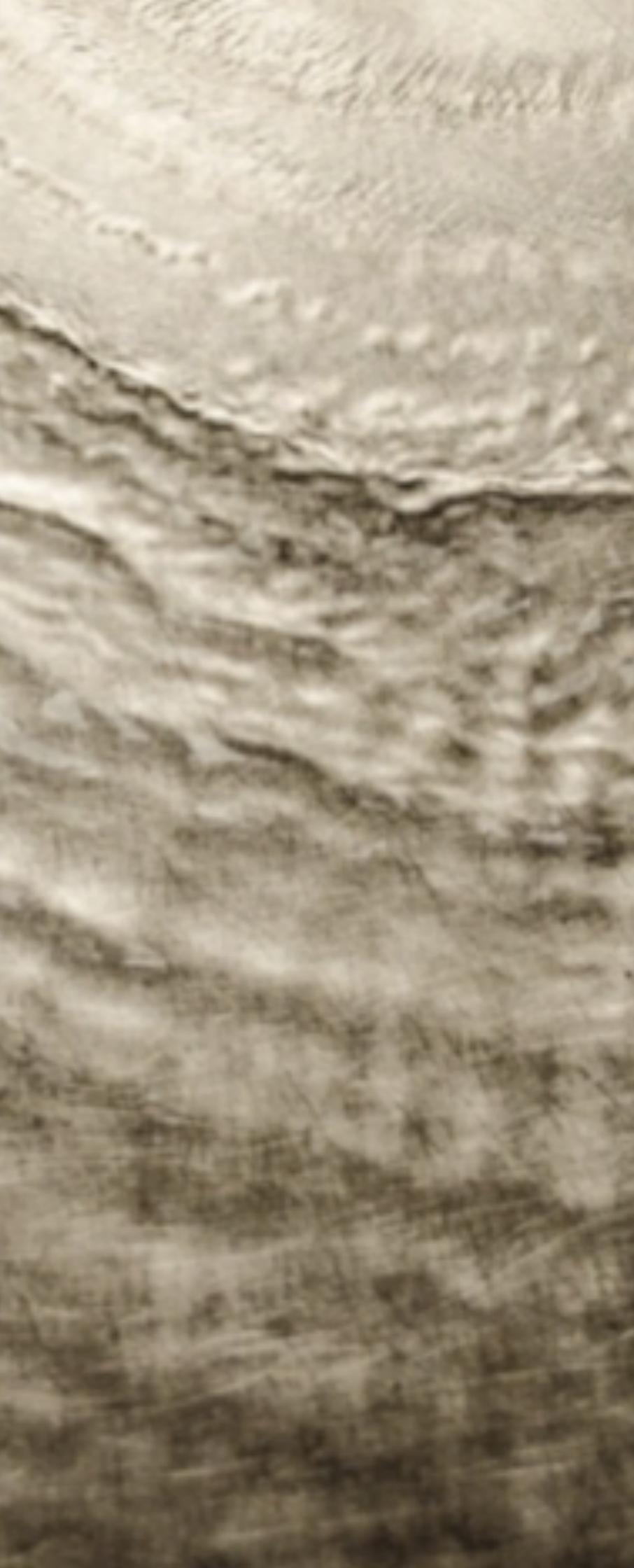
Meeting a wary but sharp yellow eye, Jesse wondered if putting the thing out of its misery wouldn't be the kindest choice. But involving a vet was out of the question. At this point, he didn't have three quarters to rub together. When he'd stopped for oil, the store had been out of the cheapest brand, and he'd been forced to buy what was available.

"Please don't put him out, Daddy! Help him!"

About to give her a sharp "no" in reply, he studied his daughter's teary, beseeching eyes. The yearning he saw there did him in completely. Some people might call him a dweeb or sap, but he loved his angel, and could no more turn her down than he could've her mother.

Jesse sighed. "I'll see what I can do." Returning her hug, he spoke to the cat, which watched him with partial-distrust and maybe something else. "Cat, I don't know if you understand, but I'm not going to hurt you. I'm gonna try to help you, okay?" He carefully picked up the animal, towel and all, and headed for the kitchen. Cleaning the cat in the sink—trying at least—would be easier on his back than the tub. Scrubbing up afterward would be easier, too.





Filling the sink with hot water, he had to cool it a little so he wouldn't burn the creature, then figured he'd better add some dish soap.

"Are you doing dishes first?" Dahlya asked. He'd piled the contents of the sink on the counter: two plates, two cups, her former ramen bowl, two forks and a spoon.

"No, baby. It's for the cat. Something like grease is in its fur. I'm thinking the soap'll help get that out." Gently petting the animal's head and avoiding its injuries, he used a hand to dampen its fur and dribble water over its body. Most cats reacted negatively to water, and he wanted to get it used to dampness before setting it in the sink.

If anything, the cat seemed aggrieved, but didn't resist getting wet, not even when Jesse placed it fully in the water.

Jesse took his time bathing the cat's head, being gentle around the scrapes and cuts, then focused on the injured eye. Cleaning that took time, but he finally managed to remove the dried blood and pus. When he carefully opened the eyelid, he was relieved to see the iris—green as leaves—showed no obvious sign of trauma. As his daughter reached for the cat's face, he removed her hand. "No, honey, it could have an infection."

"But I wanna help."

"Help me with the rest of the body, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy."

The grease on the cat's body was especially resistant to Jesse's efforts. The water in the sink was already filthy, so he drained it and ran more, then added a bit of degreaser. As he and Dahlya bathed the cat together, more of its fur came off—small tufts, then large clumps—revealing old scars and more scratches. "You were right," Jessie said. "It's a male." He didn't respond when Dahlya said she'd pick a good name for the animal.

After they finished, Jesse bundled the cat in the closest soft material at hand—his fleece-lined jacket. Using it meant another piece of dirty laundry would join the two loads waiting to be done. He couldn't do them until he had money for the washateria downtown and detergent, but at least the cat would be warm.

Having Dahlya fetch another towel, Jesse lightly patted the cat and bundled it up. His eyes widened when the feline sneezed twice before deftly wiggling out. His head seemed tiny with the fur slicked down, and the cuts, sores, and abrasions stood out more now that they weren't hidden by dirt. The most obvious issue, though, was that injured eye. The animal's body was a patchwork of healthy orange, brown, gray, and white fur contrasted with pink flesh. Jesse figured the fur would grow back over time. Hopefully sooner rather than later.

The most logical thing would be taking the animal to the closest vet twenty-five miles away, but Jesse had no intentions of running up a bill he couldn't pay. And, a vet might want to put the cat down. Jesse hated the idea of any animal being killed needlessly, especially when there was good chance it would be fine with a little time and care.

Rubbing his aching temples, he chewed his bottom lip. He couldn't afford to feed another mouth. Fortunately, he'd remembered to check with the deli at work. An employee there had given him four potato wedges, peas, soggy macaroni and cheese, and five hard chicken tenders. The food would've been dumped if he hadn't asked for it. He'd been thinking only of the animal at home, but part of the leftovers could be Dahlya's supper, and he'd give the rest to the cat.

He saw his child crooning to it, stroking its damp head, and felt like he'd been slapped. False hope—that's what he'd given her. They couldn't keep this animal. He'd have to talk with Dahlya about that soon. Like he did numerous times every day, he wondered how Maria would have handled this, and his eyes dampened. Nothing was the same without her.





Ten days later, Jesse knew he'd let the cat stay too long. His last paycheck had been nine dollars more than he'd expected, and he'd picked up generic dog food in town. It wasn't meant for cats—wasn't healthy for them either—but he didn't think a few days of it would harm their feline visitor, and what he'd bought had been cheaper than the available cat food. He'd splurged on candy bars for Dahlya, who loved them, and hadn't complained once about all the times he'd turned her down in stores when she'd asked for one. Lately, she'd stopped asking. In addition, she'd stopped talking about what she wanted for Christmas, which made him feel absolutely horrible on top of what he knew he had to do.

Dahlya would be heartbroken, but he had to get rid of the cat. He couldn't afford cat food. Or shots. Or flea shampoo. His meager pay had been depleted almost before he'd gotten it. Rent was due again soon, and he'd just paid last month's with his last check.

Nearby, Dahlya petted the cat she'd named Mr. Twinkles—Twinkles for short—because of his sparkling, healthy eye. Jesse saw her slip the animal pieces of her BLT, then nod at something Lucy said about her grandchildren.

Guilt-ridden, Jesse rubbed his right temple, wishing he could make the ache go away. Maybe he shouldn't have helped the cat when he did, but all living things deserved kindness. Regardless, that kindness couldn't keep coming from him. He'd wait until the coming Monday, then take the cat to the veterinarian's office after all. That location was closer than the shelter. Hopefully, the vet or his staff would agree to find the cat a home. In the meantime, Jesse could check with his coworkers to see if anyone wanted a pet. Today was Tuesday, so at least he had a few days to prepare Dahlya for the coming change and let her say her goodbyes.

His boss had asked him to stay two or three extra hours after his regular shift, and he'd agreed. More work, more money. Lucy, who lived next door, had agreed to watch Dahlya after school until he got home.

"My God!" Lucy screamed that afternoon.

Dahlya jumped off the recliner. Eyes wide, she stared at her babysitter, who'd dropped heavily onto the couch. "What's wrong?" She remembered Mama. Laughing and fine, then pale and sick. Then gone. "Are you hurt? Is Twinkles hurt?"

"I'm fine, dear, and I'm sure he's fine. I almost fainted when I saw the body." Lucy fanned her flushed face. "I was going to sweep a little and found it there. Scared me half to death." She pointed toward the front door.

Dahlya saw a small mouse lying on the floor. Twinkles nudged it with his nose and meowed. "Twinkles must've caught it."

"What a *good* kitty." Calmer now, Lucy beamed her approval at Twinkles, who jumped into her lap. The elderly lady smoothed the fur on his shoulders, while Dahlya stared at the dead mouse. Rummaging inside her purse, Lucy pulled out dollar bills and handed them to Dahlya. "Here's \$3 for a nice treat for Twinkles. He did excellent work, catching that nasty thing! Mice carry diseases, you know, and chew into everything with their awful little teeth." She froze, then exclaimed, "My friend Betsy's been complaining about rats or mice getting into her stuff. She doesn't have a great mouser like Twinkles."

"If we take Twinkles to her house, maybe he can catch her mice for her. I'm sure he wouldn't mind helping."

"Now why didn't I think of that?" Lucy chuckled. "It's a wonderful idea. Betsy and I are the same age, but she doesn't get around that well anymore. Can't put out mouse traps or poison herself, and her kids don't visit her much. So she's on her own with no help. Here, Dahlya. Hold my purse while I get up." The overweight woman puffed as she pushed herself to the edge of the couch and onto her feet. "We'll go say hi to Betsy right now. I haven't visited since my arthritis flared up, but I'm feeling much better. Twinkles can search for the wretched vermin, and I'll help Betsy with some housework." She pointed toward the kitchen. "Sweetie, hand me the notepad off the fridge, okay? I'll leave your Dad a note in case we're not back by the time he gets home from work."



Jesse enjoyed the quiet when he got home a few hours later, but missed his daughter's laughter. Listening for Twinkles' rusty mew, he was surprised by how much he missed that sound also. He found Lucy's note, shook his head, and muttered, "Waste of time, if you ask me."

After a quick shower, he turned his attention to supper. He'd just finished making bologna-and-cheese sandwiches on white bread, along with bananas, milk for Dahlya and water for himself, when the front door opened.

"Twinkles did..." Lucy's chest was heaving, and she stopped for a moment to catch her breath. "Very well."

"Lucy, do you need to sit down for a minute?" he asked.

"No." She waved him off. "I'm fine. Just a bit winded."

"Daddy, you would've been so proud of Twinkles." Mere steps behind Lucy, Dahlya peered at him from behind the woman. Her father smiled when she practically bounced into the room and sat beside him.

"I'm going to head home and get some rest," Lucy said. "See you next time."

"Okay." Jesse followed her outside. "Hold on a second." Although Lucy never pushed to be paid for watching Dahlya, he knew she was

on a fixed income, probably needing money as much as he did. "I really appreciate your help," he said, handing her \$20 from his wallet.

"Thank you." She leaned on him just long enough to get her wallet from her purse. Carefully folding the money and placing it inside, she said, "Watching Dahlya's no problem. She's a real joy and we did some good today, so I'm pleased."

After she left, he returned inside and found his daughter feeding Twinkles pieces of her bologna and cheese. He forced himself not to remind her the cat had his own food.

"Twinkles has a job like you," Dahlya told him. "Look what he earned!"

Jesse's eyes widened when he noticed the wadded bills on the table. "What's this?"

"Twinkles' pay."

Taken aback, he reached for the bills and flattened them out on the table—seven damp, one-dollar bills, and a five-dollar bill. "Twelve dollars? Where'd you get this?"

"I told you, Daddy. Twinkles earned it."

"Uh, okay. How?"

"Catching mice at Betsy's house. And Lucy promised we'll go see more of her friends. I think she'll take me tomorrow."

"Not bad." He nodded with a little laugh. "Not bad at all."





By the following Monday, Twinkles had “earned” another \$31. From what Jesse could tell, Lucy had established fees of \$3 apiece for mice caught dead or alive, and \$5 for rats. Apparently two of her friends had been having rodent trouble for a long time.

He counted out the \$31 plus the earlier \$3 and \$12 Dahlya had received. Stubborn thing that she was, she'd refused to keep even one dollar. Instead, she'd insisted, “It's for food for you, me, and Twinkles.” Of *course* the cat was included. Smiling, Jesse thought how much his girl was like her mother—determination, generosity, and all. He tried to ignore the slight twinge in his temple—a sure sign of an impending headache. Truth be told, he was glad to have the money. Their gas and water bills were due, and they were short on food.

Yesterday, an unexpected expense and more bad news had caught him off guard. Even after he'd removed the nail in his tire and plugged the hole,

air had continued seeping out somehow. He hadn't been able to figure out the problem. Reluctantly visiting the repair shop downtown, he'd cringed at the end result. The guy who took the tire off and checked it had reported, “Man, that tire's bald to the point of being dangerous. I checked your others, and they're in the same condition. And you may not have noticed, but there's this.” He'd pointed out heat cracks around the sides of two other tires, and charged Jesse \$10 for his time. Bottom line, Jesse needed a minimum of three new tires—ideally four. But he couldn't afford even one. Not even a decent used tire, that might cost anywhere from \$25-35. If he used what Dahlya gave him, maybe he could get one.

By the time he left for work, his head throbbed, and he didn't remember his decision to take the cat away.



Pressing her cell phone to her ear, Lucy lowered herself onto Jesse's soft couch, moaning in pleasure to be off her aching feet. Today she felt every one of her extra one hundred and forty-six pounds, and spared none of the details from Beatriz on the other end of the phone. "I'm having trouble with that, too. Bloating and gas are horrible, aren't they? My ankles are the worst. They swell like I've been feeding them. The compression hose do absolutely nothing, no matter how much I stuff my feet into them, or how high I prop up my legs."

Dahlya combed Twinkle's fur with a small pink comb. "Lucy, tell her about Twinkles. See if she knows anyone with mice."

"Smart girl," Lucy replied, then returned her attention to the phone call. "Beatriz, dear, the little girl I babysit, Dahlya, has a super mouse catcher. Remember, I told you about the cat they rescued? No, not Twiddles. His name is *Twinkles*." She listened for a couple moments, "No. I don't normally help on weekends, but Jesse was asked to work today."

Once the call ended, she announced, "Beatriz doesn't have problems with vermin. She pays an exterminator to come by her home regularly. But she says her son Jose has mice in his feed and corn."

Jesse caught the last of Lucy's words as he entered the front room. Bone-weary, he couldn't focus on much besides his aching feet and knees. Not only had he been expected to bag and stock, but he'd been asked to mop the floors. Apparently his boss had let the store's custodial contract expire. After Jesse had finished mopping, he'd been instructed to climb up a ladder and replace burnt-out light bulbs with new ones. Clearly, management were cutting corners in every possible way—a very bad sign. Every night, Jesse prayed fervently for the store not to close. Trying to force his mind off the ever-increasing stress pressing down on him, he asked, "Who's Jose?"

"My friend Beatriz's second son. Her oldest, Emilio, works for the street department in Lattin City. Jose works for Tulia Ranch and Stables in Tanner. Juan and Sofia, her youngest two, work for Lattin City ISD."

"It's good they've got jobs. What's that about mice?"

"I asked if she knew anyone needing a good mouse catcher to set things straight."

"You know Lattin City's forty miles away, right? Tanner's about the same."

"Uh-huh." The woman leveraged her body off the couch. "Oh, my poor feet. You know, I could stay on your soft couch forever, Jesse. Oh, well. I'll be back to enjoy it again soon, won't I? Beatriz is on this side of Lattin City, maybe thirty-five miles from us. Tanner's forty-eight miles away, I think."

Jesse plunked onto the couch and lifted his boots onto the chair Lucy had positioned for her feet. "That's too far to drive, Lucy."

"No, it's not. And it's not your gas money."

"I know that. Look, I appreciate you taking Dahlya to your friends in town. She's enjoyed visiting and helping out, but—"

"She's not just *helping*, Jesse." Lucy's tone was extremely gentle. "She's *working*, exactly like you. She knows how much money is needed. Don't you, honey?"

"Yes," Dahlya replied. "We need to work so we can buy food. And pay bills."

"Honey..." Jesse frowned and bit his bottom lip. "Working is *my* responsibility, not yours." What kind of father was he, making his baby worry about things like money and bills?

"Jesse," Lucy interjected, "she's learning habits that'll help her throughout life. Nothing wrong with working."

"She's *seven*," he snapped, and instantly regretted it. "I'm sorry, Lucy. My attitude was uncalled for."

"It's all right. I can see you're exhausted and have a lot on your mind." Bending to place a wrinkled hand on his arm, she winced. "I started working when I was smaller than her, helping my parents in a factory. We didn't make much but they needed my help. Jesse, every extra set of hands made a difference." Smiling at the tired father and beaming child, she walked toward the door. "See you folks tomorrow."





Jesse stood, grimacing when he put his weight back on his feet, and went after her. He shut the door behind him, so Dahlya wouldn't hear. "Lucy, I can't have you putting out your money driving her all over the place. Gas is expensive." He would *not* take advantage of anyone. It wasn't right.

"Driving gives me a chance to see friends I haven't visited in too long. That's good, Jesse. And my car's great on gas. Tommy—that's my oldest boy, remember—gave it to me for Christmas three years ago. I was used to larger cars, but he got me a mid-sized. I admit—he knew what he was doing. I love it. Did I tell you he helps me with my bills every month? I'm not really paying for the gas, so you're not taking anything from me, Jesse."

"But—"

"No buts about it, young man." Raising her voice a little, she put her hands on her ample hips. "Arguing with me won't get you anywhere, because I'm going to win, no matter what."

He broke into helpless laughter. "Okay, I'll shut up. But this isn't settled."

"Yes, it is." When he didn't respond, she added, "Wise decision. See you tomorrow."

"See you, Lucy. Thank you."

"Uh-huh."

On a Sunday two weeks later, Lucy answered her phone on the first ring. "Hello? Hi, dear. I'm glad to hear from you." She whispered to Dahlya, "It's Beatriz."

"Okay." Dahlya pulled a string along the floor. She'd attached a feather to the end. Twinkles chased it and pounced. In the time since he'd joined the family, his eye had healed. New, healthy fur had grown on his body, filling in most of the open patches. Only faint marks showed where prior wounds or missing fur had been.

"Really?" The babysitter's voice rose. "That's wonderful! And he said it was okay with his boss? Nice. I'll let the little one know."

"Is it work for us?" Dahlya demanded. Rising from the floor, she stood in front of Lucy. "Is it?" When the older woman nodded, she yelled, "Yippee!"

"Say, would today be all right?" Lucy asked Beatriz, then ended the call. "Her son Jose said they're still having trouble with mice and rats," she told Dahlya. "I mean where he works. Something's getting into the bags of feed, grain, and corn. They're sure it's vermin because of the droppings."

"What did the vermin drop? Is it important?"

"No, sweetie. Droppings are mice and rat poop."

"Okay," Dahlya replied, her tone matter-of-fact. "When do we work?"

Lucy studied her. Since the first time they'd taken Twinkles hunting and been paid for his services, the child had been serious about the going-to-do-a-job thing. "They said today is good. Jose told Beatriz his boss got real upset this morning. He discovered several new bags of food in storage had holes. Apparently, the exterminator they hired hasn't made a lick of difference. They're worried something might even bite the horses." With a little difficulty, Lucy lifted her slightly-swollen feet from where they'd rested and stood. "Are you ready, sweetie?"

"Are we going now?"

"Yes, we are."

An hour and two minutes later, Lucy stopped at a gate, and saw Dahlya's wide eyes studying their surroundings. The woman was just as curious. The large metal sign hanging over the driveway read, 'Tulia Ranch & Stables.' Lucy honked, just as Beatriz had instructed. Within a couple minutes, a young man appeared. Running up the road toward them, he opened the gate, shut it behind them, and vanished.

Pulling up to the log house directly ahead, Lucy parked but waited to see if anyone would appear. The man who'd opened the gate came up to her open window. "Hello. I'm Jose, ma'am. I guess you're Ms. Lucy?"

"Yes, sir, but it's plain old Lucy."

He offered her a quick handshake before smiling at the small girl who'd gotten out of the vehicle with a cat in her arms. "Are you Dolly? I take it that's Twinkles?"





"My name's Dahlya," she corrected him. "Yeah, this is Twinkles. He's very good at catching mice and rats. He'll do great work for you."

Chuckling, Jose nodded. "That's good to know. I'm sure he will." They all noticed a man striding their way wearing a denim shirt, jeans, and a cowboy hat. Jose squared his shoulders. "That's the boss coming, ma'am and little ma'am."

When he reached them, the block-shouldered, fifty-something man doffed his hat, and stated in a deep voice, "I'm Tulia." He shook hands all the way around—Lucy's, Dahlya's, and Twinkle's front paw, which he squeezed lightly. The man earned the visitors' further approval by scratching behind the cat's ears and under his chin, making Twinkles purr. "Mr. Twinkles, I assume?"

"Yes, sir," Dahlya replied, "but you can call him Twinkles."

"Thank you for having us, sir," Lucy offered. "Twinkles is an excellent mouser."

"Good. I don't want to appear unfriendly, but I've got to run," Tulia said. "I've got feed being delivered and a vet waiting to be paid, but I'll see you before you go." He left immediately, long strides eating up the ground.

Jose pointed toward a large stable nearby. "If you could start there, we'd appreciate it. I already moved the animals out. We're kinda busy today. One of our hands decided not to come in, so there's extra work for everyone. As soon as I'm done mucking out the other stables, I'll come back and check on y'all." He started to walk away, but turned. "I've put out chairs for y'all, and an extra one for your feet, Ms. Lucy. My mother told me about your troubles."

"I appreciate that, Jose." Lucy smiled her gratitude and squeezed his shoulder. "You're a fine man and a good son."

“Lucy? Dahlya?” Jesse hadn't seen them in the house or back yard. Not finding a note made him worry more. Fishing his cell phone from a pocket, he dropped it by accident. The back cover popped off and the battery shot across the floor. “Fumble-fingers,” he grouched at himself. But he put things back in place, and the phone worked fine when he called Lucy. “Everything okay?” Once he heard where they were and that the babysitter had forgotten to leave a note, he relaxed. “Okay. Sounds all right. Two or three hours more, you think?”

Within minutes, he lowered his body into the tub, loving the feel of the steaming-hot water on his skin. “My aches have aches,” he murmured, and flexed his toes slowly in an attempt to restore circulation and ease the pain. This was a daily routine, since his boots were too small and narrow for his feet. Despite being the wrong size, he'd gotten them used from a thrift store because of their good condition and low price—\$7.50. New ones had been outside his price range—still were, in fact.

Images of the boots he'd seen in an advertisement popped into his mind. Smiling, he imagined removing price tags and sliding his feet into comfortable boots that fit just right. Then he sighed. Daydreaming didn't help with money, and he made himself focus on other things. Christmas, for example. It was a little over two months away, and he hadn't gotten Dahlya anything yet. With the store having him work extra here and there, he hoped to set aside a few dollars from each paycheck. By the time Christmas rolled around, he hoped to have \$40 to \$50 put aside to get her something nice. He'd start checking out the thrift stores soon. Maybe they'd have a kid's game in good shape. A cute stuffed animal—a kitten maybe? He could grab her a few pretty shirts, and she loved books. For her birthday, he'd gotten her some for .59 apiece, along with pink shoes for a few dollars. Remembering how much she'd wanted the expensive pink Sketchers, he bit his lip. She'd *love* those, but he'd never be able to afford them. He could get her a larger number of less-costly things, and he didn't want to spend extra money on one pair of shoes she'd just outgrow soon.

Frowning now, he rubbed his temples and prepared to stand up. The hot water had lost its appeal.





After two hours at the stable, Jose reappeared with glasses of lemonade. "Mr. Tulia says these are for y'all. He'd like y'all to come in the house. He had the housekeeper do up sandwiches for us."

"How kind," Lucy responded.

"I'm hungry," Dahlya admitted, petting Twinkles. He'd just brought her another dead mouse and licked his lips as he looked at the body. "Twinkles is, too." She whispered to the cat, "What a wonderful boy you are. Good, good kitty."

"Great," Jose said, "because Mr. Tulia had some chicken fixed for Twinkles. I've got to run for a second, but I'll come to the house soon." He took off.

Lucy and Dahlya walked toward the log house at a snail's pace. Lucy's feet and legs still ached, so she couldn't go very fast. A note hung on the redwood door of the house, and read, "Ms. Lucy and Miss Dahlya, come on in. Tulia." As she opened the door, Lucy stared at the herd of deer etched on the embossed glass window. She whispered to Dahlya, "Be on your best behavior, dear. Mr. Tulia has a reputation for demanding the best. I'd say he can afford it, by the look of this fancy house, but I've heard when he's pleased with people's work, he sometimes helps them get more."

"Okay." Dahlya nodded. "Maybe he knows people who need help with mice and rats." She carefully wiped her feet on the thick mat inside the door, and murmured to the cat in her arms, "Be on your best behavior, Twinkles. We might get more work. We need the money." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I want to get Daddy a present for Christmas. I don't need anything, because you're the best present ever. But he deserves something nice."

Tulia stood as Lucy, Dahlya, and one cat entered his living room. His eyes twinkled as he looked down at Dahlya. "I hear you and your cat are doing excellent work for me, young lady. That impresses me."

"You're tall," she exclaimed, staring up at him with wide eyes. When he grinned and Lucy nudged her, she added, "Thank you, sir. We take our work serious—seriously. We try to do our best always," words she'd heard her father say.

The rancher's lips twitched. "I believe you." Leading the way to his kitchen, he gestured toward the table. "We have sandwiches and watermelon, so I hope you're hungry."

"I'm starving," Dahlya told him. "My tummy's growling."

Tulia chuckled. "Mine, too, young lady. Mine, too."

Lucy looked up at the lofted ceiling, the fancy chandelier, and the exquisite wooden cabinets and fireplace mantle, which she thought were hand-carved. "You have a beautiful place, sir."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I was lucky my wife had good taste, and knew how to make a house a home."

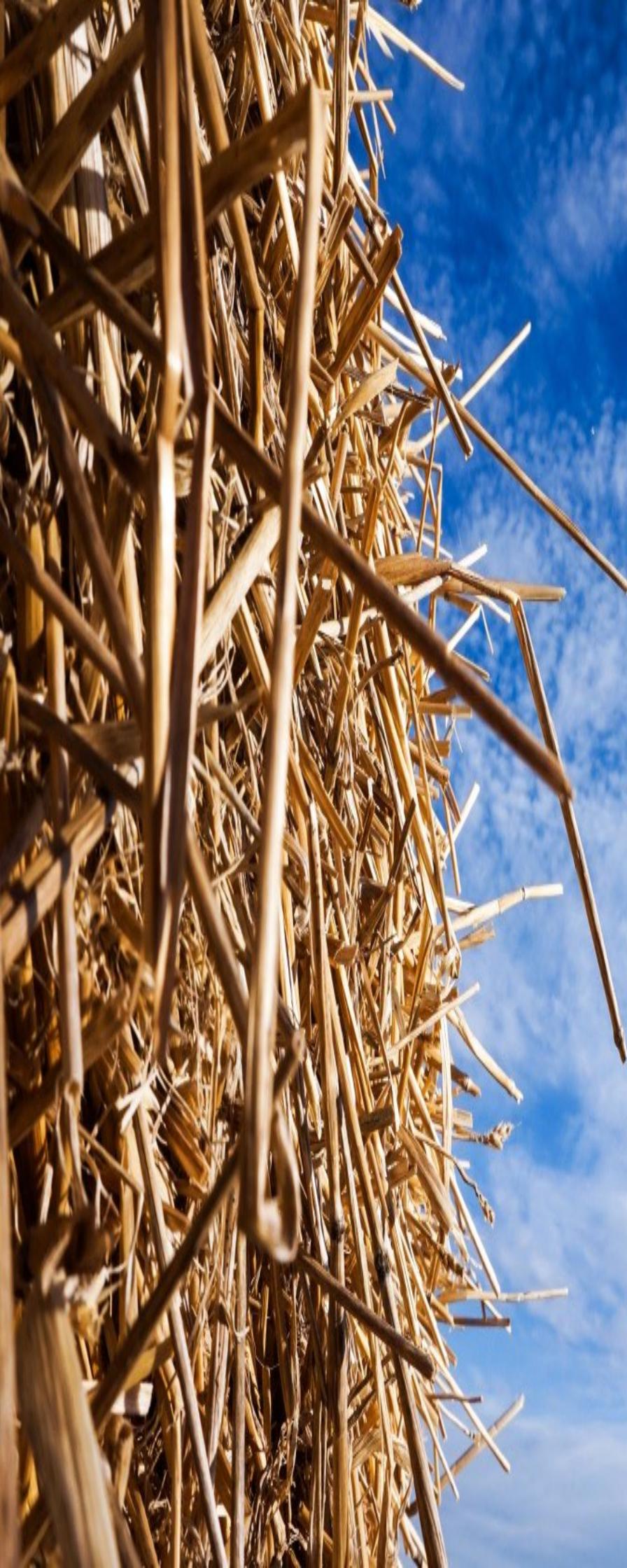
After they ate—a fairly quick affair, since everyone inhaled their food—Tulia asked Dahlya, "What's your fee for catching mice and rats? Do you have a set rate per hour or is it per body?"

Dahlya was about to respond, but Lucy beat her to it. Flashing the girl an intense look, she quoted slightly-higher rates than what they'd been charging others. "It's five dollars per mouse and eight per rat. We'd been charging a little less than that, but we recently raised our rates."

Tulia nodded without looking at her. "A bit higher than what I'd heard." He raised his head and smiled. "It's all right. I know you had to drive from out yonder to get here and you've been in the heat. And Twinkles is doing good work." Pulling out his checkbook, he thumbed to a blank check. "I'll make you a counter offer. Rats and mice are an ongoing problem for us. No matter how often exterminators come out, the numbers don't seem to go down. I caught one person red-handed putting out sugar instead of poison." He snorted. "I'm tired of paying hundreds of dollars for rats and mice to keep eating our supplies. I think the rodents might've doubled in number since the last exterminator. So, I rather appreciate seeing dead bodies. At least then, I have a feeling of improvement and change." Addressing Jose who'd appeared in the kitchen doorway, he asked, "How many did the cat catch?"

Jose pulled a small notepad from his pocket and reported, "Nine mice and three rats in two hours and thirty-three minutes."





Tulia made some notations on paper, then tapped his pen on the table. "Okay, at your rates, that comes to sixty-nine dollars." He studied Lucy briefly before turning his gaze on Dahlya. "What you charge would be a steal on my part, because I can see the results, but what you did is worth a great deal more to me. Every animal caught is one less that can keep breeding. So, I'll give you \$15 per mouse and \$20 per rat. That's \$195 and I'll throw in \$30 for gas and coming out as fast as you did."

"Wow!" Dahlya's eyes were huge. "That's a lot."

"Yes, honey," Lucy agreed. "It is." She offered Tulia her hand. "I see why people respect you, sir. You're an honest man."

He shrugged. "I try to be. Now, I can't guarantee I'll always offer what I did today, but I'll try to be fair no matter what." After Dahlya and Lucy nodded their understanding, he wrote a check and placed it in the young girl's hand. "Dahlya, when can you come back and do the other two stables? I have three total. Also, I'd like the house checked when you have time."

"We'll come back soon," Dahlya promised. She held the check tightly in her hand, bounced on her feet, then eyed Lucy. "Right?"

"Yes, honey. Real soon."

As the group exited the house, Tulia commented, "Too bad your wonder cat can't work with hay."

"Why?" Dahlya asked.

"Oh, a man called in sick today." Tulia frowned. "Probably drinking again. I tried to help him for his family's sake, but he ran out on them, too, and I won't be using him again. I need someone to load the hay bales out in the fields. If your cat was strong enough, I'll hire him for that, too."

"Twinkles can't pick up hay, but my Daddy can," Dahlya offered.

"Really?" Tulia cocked his head. "Does he have any experience with it?"



"Yes, sir." Lucy answered this time. "He's worked on two different farms, if I remember correctly. He ran a tractor, baled hay, and tended horses and cattle. The man works full-time now at a grocery store, but he might be interested in some extra work."

Tulia nodded and returned his attention to Dahlya. "When you come again, be sure to bring Twinkles, of course, but try to get your dad to come with you, too. If he's interested, that is."

"Okay, I will." Dahlya offered him her hand.

After solemnly shaking her tiny hand, the rancher added, "If you make a poster or announcement about your mouse-catching business, you can have copies made and put them around different towns. Advertising will get you more business."

"That's a good idea," Dahlya said. "Advertising is like commercials. I know what they are. I've seen them on TV." She beamed at him. "I'll do a poster. Thank you!"

'No. Thank *you*, little lady."



“My God!” Jesse’s mind went blank, and his mouth fell open as he goggled at the \$225 check Dahlya placed in his hand. Comprehension hit, and he realized he held slightly over one-third of their \$600 monthly rent. Then his mind flashed to his own earnings—\$7.25 an hour for forty hours a week, minus deductions.

“Mr. Tulia needs someone to help pick up hay,” his daughter told him. “He wants Twinkles and me to work in his other stables. And his house. He told me to bring you, if you want to help with the hay.”

Jesse swayed on his feet and had to steady himself. This was the answer to his prayers. He’d been looking for part-time work in town for weeks with no luck, praying just as long for some kind of opportunity to make extra money on the side.

Dahlya danced away, giggling over something.

Jesse’s eyes lit on the main cause of this good fortune—one injured cat he’d almost given away. He took a deep breath and released it tremulously. Picking up Twinkles, who meowed at him, he petted the furry head.

Fortunately he didn’t work tomorrow, so he decided to drive to Tulia’s ranch with Dahlya and Twinkles.

Lucy agreed with his decision. “I’ve enjoyed driving around, but I’m so darn sore. You go on, and I’ll just keep my feet up and relax.”

The following morning, Jessie arrived at the locked gate of Tulia Ranch and Stables, where Jose met him within minutes. Jose in turn pointed out the next stable needing de-mousing and de-ratting. He told them he had to deal with a mare who was foaling, made quick introductions when Ben Tulia strode over to join them, and vanished at a run.

"Look, sir." Dahlya pulled a page she'd prepared at home from her pocket, unfolded it, and held it out to Tulia. Her eyes flashed with excitement. "Look what I made!"

The rancher accepted the slightly-wrinkled sheet, and read the printed flyer aloud:

Mouses and Rats Cot Reel Cheep!

Small mice and rats had been hand-drawn across the page, along with a contact number.

Jesse tensed. What would a rich guy like Ben Tulia think of a child's efforts with crayons and paper? Although Jesse gave the man credit for not making a face or saying anything critical, he figured Tulia was used to expensive, perfect things. Personally, Jesse was proud of Dahlya and would defend her to anyone. At the same time, he'd noticed the misspellings and that some "mice" were smiling.

It amazed him when Tulia grinned at Dahlya and said, "You did a good job." When Jose reappeared, breathing hard, Tulia winked at the man.

"The vet's got everything under control, sir," Jose reported. Then he turned to Dahlya. "Boss

man told me to do up an announcement for you. It's in the house."

Breathing easier after hearing the rancher compliment his daughter, Jesse found his opinion of the man rising. "Thank you very much, Mr. Tulia," he said softly. "You, too, Jose."

"No problem," Tulia replied. To the girl beaming at him and her father, he whispered, "Personally, I like your announcement better than Jose's." Reaching for his shirt pocket, he whipped out a pen and asked, "May I see your flyer again, Dahlya?" Once she handed it to him, he held it carefully and penned beneath the notice, "Endorsed by Ben Tulia, Tulia Ranch/Stables." Then he added his signature and phone number. Giving it back to the girl, he told her, "You can get copies made up. In fact, I've got a copier in my office. Ask Jose to make you a hundred copies before you leave. No, I guess two hundred would be better. We'll stick a few up ourselves, and make sure folks who come here get some." His eyes met Jessie's. "It's free advertising for me, too, I figure."

Seeing the happiness in his daughter's eyes, Jesse felt his own eyes stinging with the first haze of tears, and he didn't know what to say. He smiled when Dahlya hugged the surprised Tulia around the waist and told him, "Thank you, Mr. Tulia! Thank you so much!"

"Thank *you*," Tulia replied, then remained beside the girl's father and watched her walk off with Jose toward the second stables. "I can see how proud of her you are," he told Jesse. "She reminds me of my sweet Judy. She's been gone a long time, but her face is as clear in my memory today as it was before she passed."





"Your daughter, sir?" Jesse asked.

"No, my granddaughter. She was the spitting image of her mama, my daughter Leslie. They both died in a car wreck years ago. Gayle was with them—my wife. She lived only a few days longer than they did."

"I'm sorry, sir," Jesse said, feeling a sudden kinship he'd never expected with this successful rancher. "My wife died two years ago, and... it was rough."

"Still is sometimes. We don't always know what's going to happen in life, do we? But you've got a sweet little girl there. Consider yourself fortunate."

"I do, Mr. Tulia. I really do."

"Ben," Tulia said. "Call me Ben. Come with me. I got some work needs doing, and I think you're the man for the job."

Tulia walked away.

Jesse felt something at his feet. Glancing down, he saw Twinkles winding around his ankles. He bent to scoop up the cat, scratched the itchy sides of his face and under his chin, and was touched to hear instant purring. "You're something special, Twinkles," Jessie murmured. "A blessing. I don't know what we would've done without you, and you'll always have a home with us." He kissed the animal's head, then looked up see Tulia had turned back to wait for him. Jesse set the cat down, and hurried to catch up.

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November Moon
by Sharon Frame Gay



The moon's on its way to November, sailin' a sullen sky. I think the whole world breathed a sigh of relief tonight when the major told us to find shelter, get some shut eye before tomorrow. We're too close to the enemy for camp fire, all of us hiding behind trees and under bushes, keeping as quiet as smoke, settling into the dirt and leaves like animals on the prowl.

We walked many miles tonight after the battle yesterday. So many men are dead. The crick is running red with blood, and I'm thinking it's good to cross it in the dark so I don't have to see it. Funny how blood looks the same, no matter who it comes out of, whether you're a Yankee or a Rebel. We all bleed and die the same. None of it makes much sense any more.

I came here all the way from Georgia. I always wondered what was over the next hill, but never thought I would see it through the

sights of a rifle. It seemed like my whole town joined up for the cause. I marched for three years with my cousins, neighbors, and friends, priding ourselves on how far we ran in a single day, the proud sons from the Georgia Clay. Now most of them are gone, making clay in a different field, bones bleaching in the sun.

The worst battle was a few weeks ago. Those Yankees found a tree line at the edge of a corn field on a hill to gather themselves, and our damned fool of a colonel sent us in there to bring them down, like hounds after a treed bear. It was a turkey shoot for the boys in blue. They picked us off as we ran towards them, fools all, knowing we were running face on into death. We gave as good as we got, though. Our Rebel yells echoed up the knoll like a wild cat in the Carolinas. The enemy drew their heads back like turtles, and hid, popping out long enough to shoot. Only a few of us reached the



edge of the forest, and they were dispatched within seconds.

It was a massacre, to be sure, and I can hardly believe I'm still among the Quick. I fell into a ravine with my old friend Bret, trying as hard as we could to dig into the soil and hide. A bullet whizzed by my head so close I felt the air slap my ear like a hornet. They say you never hear the bullet that kills you, but this one seemed to whisper "Next time, Rebel boy." I turned to Bret, said, "Well, shit, that was close",

and saw that his face was blown clean off. It took everything inside of me not to jump out of that little hole and run away, but I buried my face in the leaves and prayed for darkness to come, and when it did, I cried like a baby.

Since then, we've been on the march. There have been a few fights along the way, but we stick to the woods and creep along on our journey further up and into Virginia. We venture out at dawn and pick our way through the fields, the sound of dead men everywhere.

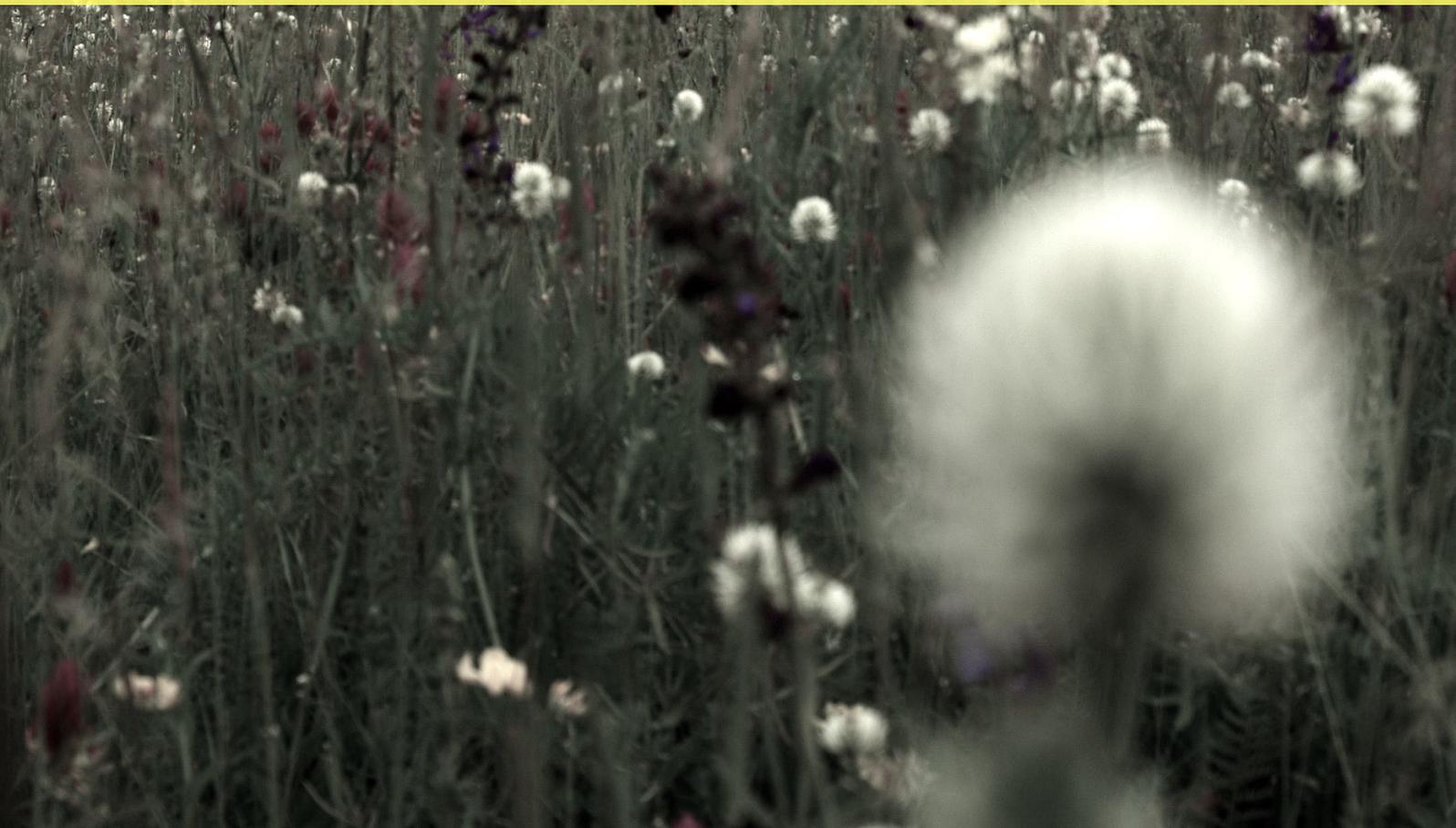




Gases, the old soldiers tell us. Those are just gases comin' out of them bodies, all blown up like bullfrogs. But to me, it sounds like ghosts crying to be let out, so they can go on up to wherever they're going, and their bones can commence to the business of letting go of the thing we call living.

I looked down in the darkness and saw my boots in the moonlight. Got them off a Yankee

soldier not ten days ago. He must have died soon after joining up, because the boots still had a bit of a spit shine on 'em. Now they're mud caked and worn. They fit me pretty good, but I had to stuff the toes with pages from the Bible I keep in my back pocket. I hope the pages ain't the ones that said "Thou shalt not kill." I keep wishing I had a horse to ride, but for now these boots will do.





I miss my horse, Frost, and wonder if he was taken by the Yankees and turned into a soldier horse. Old Frost, he learned to stand still when we went hunting with Tick, my favorite dog. My old rifle picked off squirrels and birds for supper, and Tick and Frost and me wouldn't come home until we got something. Good horse, good dog. I miss them.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a tintype of Sarah. I run my finger over it in the darkness and know every angle of her face. I've known Sarah since we were both little kids, running through the fields after her daddy's plow, the clay soft like pillows, great waves of dirt parting in the middle like the Red Sea. I'll never forget the day I held her face in my hands and touched her lips with mine. Her hair

wound round my fingers like vines, holding me against her until we both ran out of breath and there was nothing left to do but go home to our families before we shamed ourselves.

I don't know why we didn't marry. Wish I had left a bit of myself back there with her. Give her my name at least, though I was poor as could be. I pray she's safe tonight as I stare up at these stars and think to myself that we're living under the same moon, only mine's as bloody as Harvest. I dream of her by the fire, a book in her hand, rocking gently at the end of the day, and I hope she remembers me from time to time. I whisper, "Sarah, don't wait for me," and feel a heaviness in my heart like the slow beat of a funeral dirge.



Tomorrow is a big day, the Colonel said. We've been picking through these woods for weeks now, on our way to some vast field near a little town they call Cedar Creek. You can tell that everybody's all stove up about it. The officers are slipping from tree to tree, whispering to each other in hushed tones. We all strain to learn what they're saying, but can only hear the sighing of the wind through the Loblolly pines. It sounds like ladies crying.

I dig a small hole next to me, then kiss Sarah's picture and lay it gently, face up,

covering it with dirt, leaves, and pine straw. I can't bear to think of carrying it into battle with me tomorrow and have her hear my last cries, see me take my last breath.

My name's in the Bible in my back pocket. I hope somebody finds it and lets them know back home. I pray they let her down gently when they find Sarah on the porch and tell her that her Billy is gone, struck in mid heartbeat in a field of grass, as far from home as I ever have been. And I hope she will remember this moon, on its way to November.

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

SHARON FRAME GAY

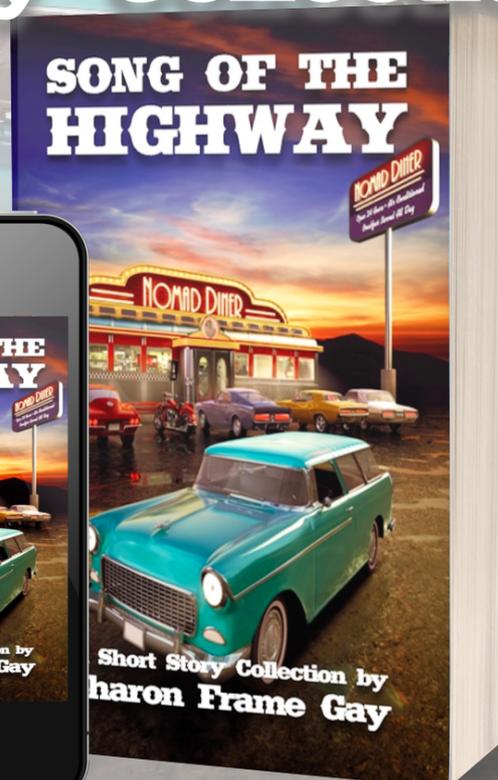
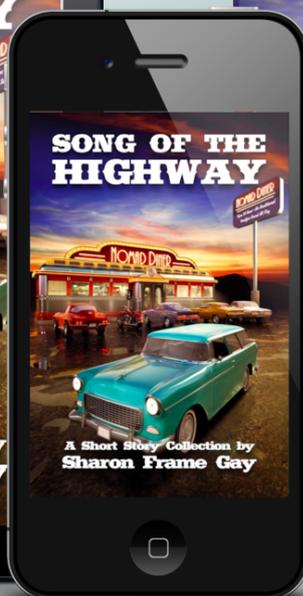
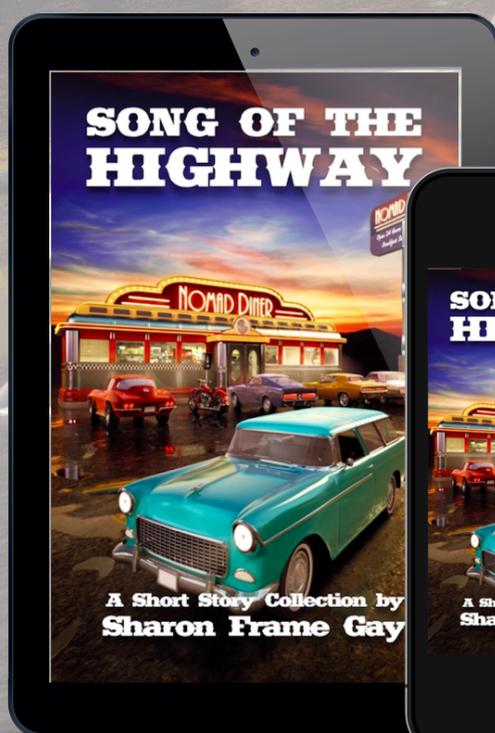


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MISSING

NOTES

**A Slovakian
Tale**

by Alexander Marshall





‘Now listen, girls,’ father began, in that cold tone to which we were used, as he turned in his seat to briefly face Sofia and me sitting in the back of the moving car (before turning back, his token eye contact accomplished) ‘when we get there, you should remember that there’s another guest, a man called Ivan, with whom you should have as little to do as possible. There’s nothing wrong with him as such, I’m told — just that he likes to run away, they say. He probably has mental health issues. While I’m discussing the project with Delphine and Boris, try to keep yourselves entertained as much as possible and leave everyone else alone, understood?’ I was 28 and Sofia was 18, but we answered ‘Yes, Father’ as though we were both eight, knowing what was expected. To protest even slightly, to ask questions, would have resulted in subtle consequences, tiresome tirades, a straining of the atmosphere beyond its usual limited elasticity. We were both tired after the plane flight and didn’t need any of that. Instead of asking, I tried to recall why we were there: Father was an international music director; Boris was someone high up in the Eastern Europe classical music scene; they were getting together to prepare a series of concerts; Sofia

and I were there as window dressing. And I almost said ‘widower dressing’ because in part that’s what we were: two forlorn daughters, brought along for the ride to make the point that Father was single now after mother’s death. We underlined the point in his life continuum: he was alone and burdened with children.

As he had spoken, I’d seen a robin flashing along by the side of the car - red, brown, flit, gone. It reminded me that it was still the middle of winter.

Boris was indistinguishable from every other high-ranking musician — big, bearded, boring. Delphine paced towards us as the car pulled up and seemed more like a snow leopard, each paw carefully placed in the snow, her body tensed and ready to pounce. Inside, warm, drinks, chatter — I stood by a long window looking out onto the frosty forest, snow smothering the gaps, yearning for the silence outside.

Lunch was dull: too little food, too much chat. Sofia barely ate anything. I drank a little too much. Ivan, a lank, long-haired spidery sort of man with his head wrapped in what looked like twine and his clothes all grey and brown and twisted, sat off to the side on a seat all his own. When Delphine — I presumed she was his





mother or an aunt — invited him to the table he snapped back, 'I sit here!' I thought it odd that I had understood what he had said, even though it was in another language. His eyes were half-closed, his face in constant motion, twitching, smiling, scowling. We were not introduced. It was as though the family had a moody dog that spoke.

'Damn!' my father muttered, looking through his briefcase in the corner of the room when we had finally finished eating. 'Some of my notes are missing!' He wasn't talking to me. I don't recollect him ever talking to me. I just happened to be there to hear him. A search ensued, to no avail.

That night, lying fully dressed on top of a huge, soft bed, looking up at a large skylight which was half-covered in snow, I grew more and more tense, until my body was as rigid as wood. I got up and went out through a back door. Almost lost in the trees, Ivan was already running away, his long, thin body stalking through the snow at a pace neither quick nor slow — a studied pace, as though he walked to irregular music. I followed him through the trees, sure that he could hear the crunch of my boots. Losing sight of him, I crunched faster and then stopped: there he was, sitting with his back

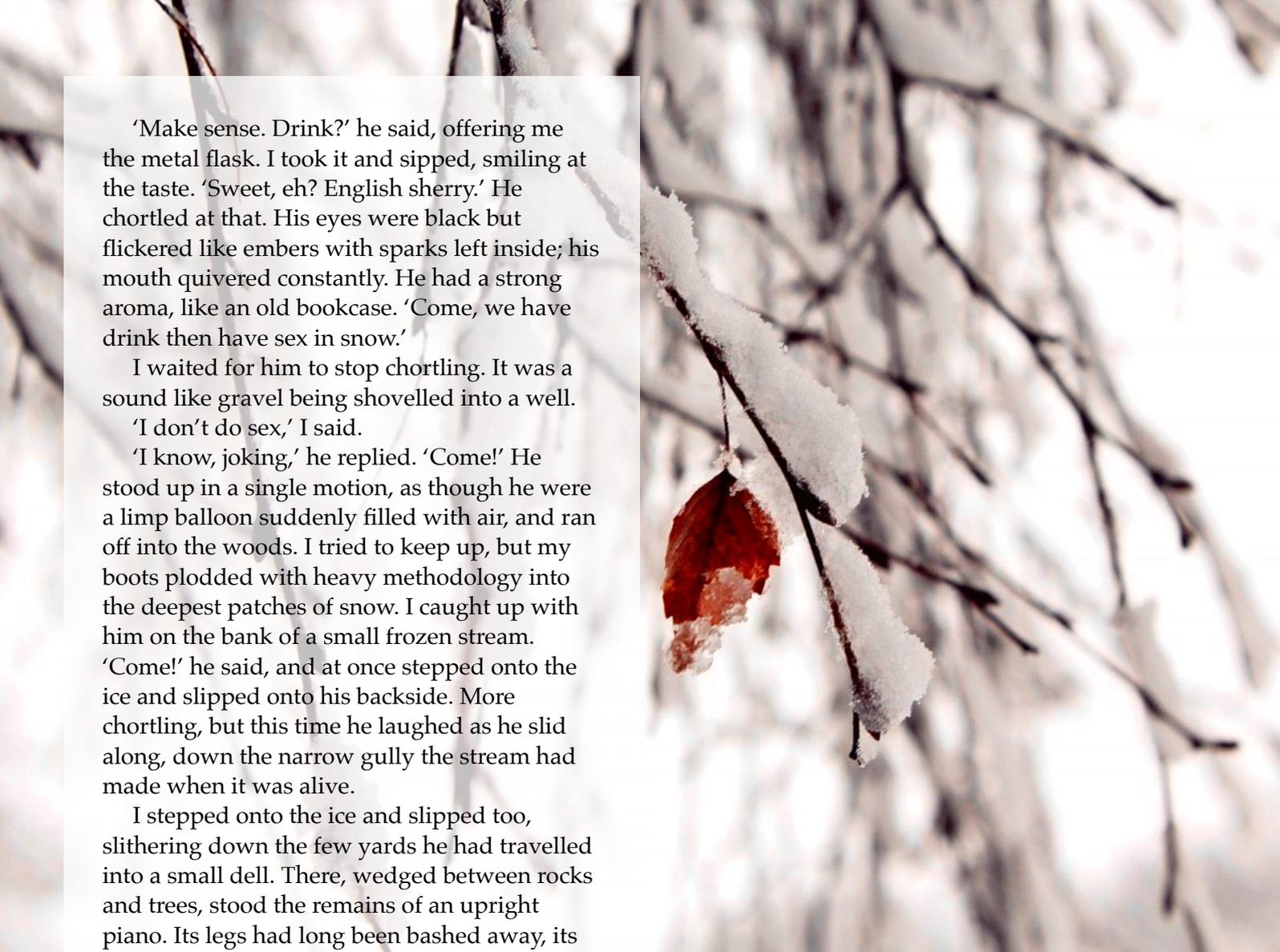
to a tree, looking at me. No, not at me, but over my shoulder, staring into space.

'Christmas legend,' he said suddenly, glancing at me then returning to look at space — no, not at space, as I saw when I looked over my shoulder for a second: at a robin, which was sitting on a snow-painted bough a few feet away. 'Robin rested upon shoulder of Christ on cross.' Ivan nodded and sipped something from a flask he held in mittened fingers. His whole body seemed to flicker and move, alive with itches. 'Sang to relieve Christ's suffering. Blood from crown of thorns stained chest; since then, all robins red-breasted.'

'It's actually orange,' I replied, walking over to him and squatting at his side. 'A robin's red-breast is actually orange. The English language didn't have a word for the colour "orange", so things that were really orange were often called red instead.'

'What you call oranges?' Ivan asked, smile alternating with scowl.

'We did have the word for "orange" as a fruit. The colour orange was not named as a colour in English until the 16th century. The name for the colour comes from the fruit.'



‘Make sense. Drink?’ he said, offering me the metal flask. I took it and sipped, smiling at the taste. ‘Sweet, eh? English sherry.’ He chortled at that. His eyes were black but flickered like embers with sparks left inside; his mouth quivered constantly. He had a strong aroma, like an old bookcase. ‘Come, we have drink then have sex in snow.’

I waited for him to stop chortling. It was a sound like gravel being shovelled into a well.

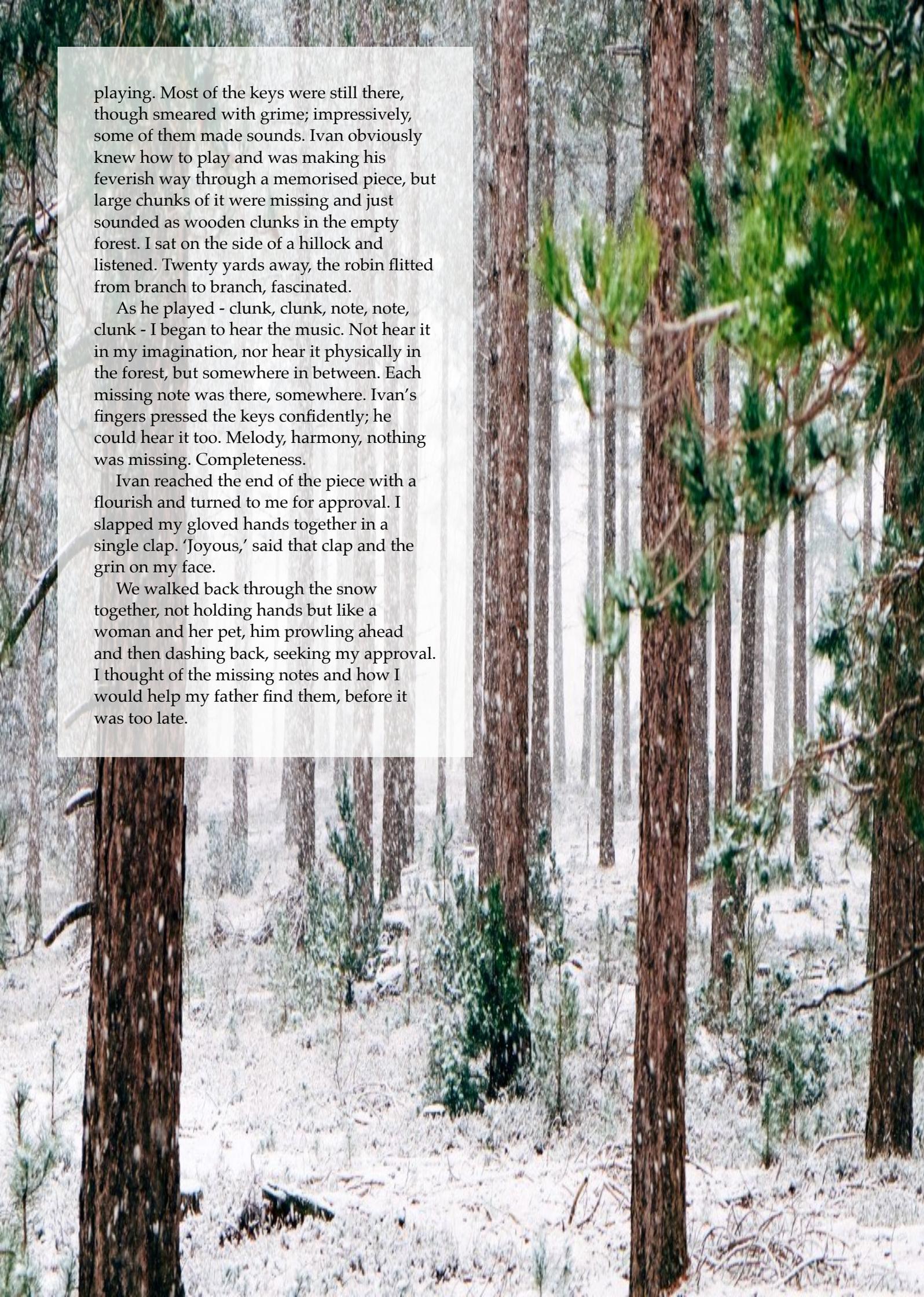
‘I don’t do sex,’ I said.

‘I know, joking,’ he replied. ‘Come!’ He stood up in a single motion, as though he were a limp balloon suddenly filled with air, and ran off into the woods. I tried to keep up, but my boots plodded with heavy methodology into the deepest patches of snow. I caught up with him on the bank of a small frozen stream.

‘Come!’ he said, and at once stepped onto the ice and slipped onto his backside. More chortling, but this time he laughed as he slid along, down the narrow gully the stream had made when it was alive.

I stepped onto the ice and slipped too, slithering down the few yards he had travelled into a small dell. There, wedged between rocks and trees, stood the remains of an upright piano. Its legs had long been bashed away, its varnish eroded until it looked almost as though the tree had extruded it from its core. Ivan sat on a rock which either he or someone else had placed in front of the keyboard and opened it up. Without looking at me, he plunged into





playing. Most of the keys were still there, though smeared with grime; impressively, some of them made sounds. Ivan obviously knew how to play and was making his feverish way through a memorised piece, but large chunks of it were missing and just sounded as wooden clunks in the empty forest. I sat on the side of a hillock and listened. Twenty yards away, the robin flitted from branch to branch, fascinated.

As he played - clunk, clunk, note, note, clunk - I began to hear the music. Not hear it in my imagination, nor hear it physically in the forest, but somewhere in between. Each missing note was there, somewhere. Ivan's fingers pressed the keys confidently; he could hear it too. Melody, harmony, nothing was missing. Completeness.

Ivan reached the end of the piece with a flourish and turned to me for approval. I slapped my gloved hands together in a single clap. 'Joyous,' said that clap and the grin on my face.

We walked back through the snow together, not holding hands but like a woman and her pet, him prowling ahead and then dashing back, seeking my approval. I thought of the missing notes and how I would help my father find them, before it was too late.

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What Happened To Asher

by Emily Fluke



At nine, I asked mama what marriage means. She told me that two people love each other and they decide to be together forever. I asked mama a lot of questions. My life filled to the brim with questions. They overflowed like the toilet when I tore out my IV and tried to flush it down. Questions spilled out of me as vomit does every time doctors put the gas mask on my face. But the biggest question of all wasn't about what it means to be married. The scariest question wasn't even related to the medicine and surgeries. At nine, I asked mama what happened to Asher.

I shared my room with Asher. It was the sterile, plain corner of the hospital that we claimed as our own. Mama hung all of my fairy drawings with medical tape at the end of my bed. Asher lined his collection of socks along the shelf in the little sliding closet.

'You're weird,' I said with a giggle and pointed to his pile of socks. Asher shot me a glare, then shoved another pair into an empty pillowcase. His black hair bounced from the jarring movement. He must be feeling pretty good today. The dark curls never moved when Asher had a fever. Instead, the hair plastered to his damp forehead, looking dead.

'At least I'm not a little baby who has her mommy here all the time!' he said. My mouth dropped open. I tore a piece of paper out of my sketchbook, crumpled it up and threw it at him. It fell short of his face, hitting his stomach and falling to the floor. Asher stuck out his pink tongue, then kicked the paper under his bed. When mama walked into the room the smell of

old food and dish soap drowned out the bleach and plastic that surrounded my life.

'Hi!' Asher said nearly shouting for mama's attention. She ruffled his hair as she walked by.

'Ew, don't touch him, Mama,' I said. She responded with a raised eyebrow and collapsed into the chair next to my bed.

The stains from washing the dishes of rich people's fancy meals covered her blue T-shirt. 'He's weird and gross and icky and collects socks like a dog!'

'That's enough!' mama shouted before saying my full name, first, middle, and last through her clenched teeth. She grabbed my arm and whispered into my ear. 'Asher doesn't have a lot of things to treasure. He keeps the socks the same way you keep every single little stuffed animal you've ever had. Don't you dare tease him.'

I slumped my shoulders at the lecture but peeked over at Asher while mama kept talking. He always hid the socks in a pillowcase and stuffed it in the back of the closet so the nurses wouldn't take them away. He caught me looking at him and stuck out his tongue again. I tried my best not to giggle so mama wouldn't get mad. He smiled knowing he was about to get me in more trouble.

Mama just didn't understand that Asher liked it when I made fun of him. She didn't know him like I did. Since we both suffered from the same congenital heart disease I insisted we were soulmates. We compared IV poles, scars, and even scared a nurse into thinking we traded medicines. I grew tired of the pranks quicker than he did. Mama told me boys take longer to mature. Asher was only eight anyway.



Asher's daddy came to visit once. I pretended to be asleep.

'Where's mom?' Asher spoke over the rhythmic beeping of our heart monitors. I heard a sigh then his daddy's voice whispering.

'Your mom isn't coming,' he said. Shuffling caused me to peek one eye open. I saw his daddy for the first time. The man was tall; dark spots poked out all around his mouth, on his chin, and crawled up the side of his face disappearing into the dark bush on top of his head. Most of the male doctors had clean-shaven faces and I'd never seen my father. Asher's daddy looked scary with all the facial hair. But he knelt down by my friend's bed. He stretched out one hand and wrapped it around his son's. Then he glanced toward me and I snapped my eye shut.

'Mom is gone,' his daddy said again. 'She's not coming back. I'm sorry.' A snuffle broke the silence that followed. I wanted to see if Asher was crying but refused to blow my cover. I kept my eyelids squeezed tight.





'But my surgery is tomorrow,' Asher's voice got louder with each word.

'That's why I came to see you tonight, Ash. I'm sure the doc knows what he's doing. Don't you worry. I'll be here when you wake up, okay?'

But he wasn't there. I never saw Asher's daddy again.

Two days before Asher's big open heart surgery we snuck out of our room and stole a VHS tape off the playroom cart.

Asher started describing crazy creatures for me to draw. He got tired of fairies and told me I needed more imagination. I argued. He laughed at me. Then I pushed him and he pushed back. I screamed then dared him to take the video 'Lord of the Rings' off the cart. He stuck his nose in the air and marched out of the room. I ran to the edge of the room standing on the door's threshold and peeked out. He glanced back at me as a nurse's voice wafted out of the next room. I waved at him to keep going.

Mama didn't allow me to watch the movie before. This time she was at work and wouldn't know. She said I could when I turned thirteen like the rating suggested. I woke up sweaty and crying that night with images of screeching goblins.

Asher sat up on the edge of his bed rubbing his eyes.

'What's wrong with you?' he asked. I pulled a blanket over my head but knew he could still hear my sniffing. I felt my mattress slump as Asher climbed into my bed. He didn't even bother trying to see my face but put his arms around me, blanket and all. 'It's okay,' his voice sounded muffled through the fabric. 'I was kinda scared of the monsters too. But dragons and stuff aren't real.'

'There weren't any dragons,' I curled my fingers over the top of the blanket and peeled it back to reveal my eyes.

'Uh uh,' he shook his head. 'Balrog is just like a dragon. He breathes fire and everything.'

'But they're not real,' I repeated the phrase trying to convince myself.

'Nope,' he said. 'I wish surgeries weren't real either.' I finally threw the blanket off my arms. It was my turn to hug him.

Though his body was warm he trembled. I heard snuffles and squeezed tighter. Only two days until Asher's big open heart surgery.

I begged the nurses to let me go into Asher's post-op room. Miss Cait unhooked my heart monitor and pushed my IV pole alongside me as we took baby steps down the white hallway. Sun shone through the windows, bouncing off the linoleum floor, nearly blinding me. Mama always kept the curtains drawn in my room. The bright light surprised my unexpecting eyes.

The sticky bumps on the bottom of my socks squeaked across the floor as I shuffled faster. I couldn't wait to tell Asher that the pediatric unit playroom had new magazines. We loved to sit together on the cushioned window seat in the sterile playroom and play the find-the-differences game with the pictures in the kids' magazines.

When we got to the room Miss Cait broke my heart.

'We cannot go inside,' she said. 'Little Asher is still in very critical recovery. We must only look from here.'

So I stood on my tiptoes. I stretched my feet and legs as tall as they would go and peeked into the narrow window slat on the door. The glass clouded with my hot breath as I stared at my friend. His tiny unconscious body sprawled across the pale sheets. The hospital bed propped him up in the sitting position. Even under all the tape, bandaging, and wires, I swore I saw a smile. I squeezed my eyes shut. There stood Asher, in medical armor, battling the dragon of disease, and winning. When I opened them again I traced my finger around in the fog my breath created on the window. Miss Cait had to shuffle her large hips fast to keep up now. I skipped, my socks squeaking with each hop. Before we rounded the corner from the PICU I glanced back at Asher's room. The heart shape drawn in the fog had almost disappeared now. I shrugged, knowing Asher saw it through his closed eyes.



That afternoon I asked mama if Asher's parents would bring him a treat soon. Mama always brought me treats after surgery. She surprised me with craft beading kits, butterfly clips, and Harry Potter books. Mama shook her head and told me that not all parents came to the hospital as much as she did. I wanted to ask mama more but Miss Cait poked her head in. Asher had woken up and asked for me.

I hopped off the bed and scurried out of the room. This time I didn't wait for the adults. I shoved my own IV pole along and hurried out of their sight. To some, the long hallways and identical doors seemed a maze. I knew this maze like the back of my IV-banded hand. With the door to the refreshment room cracked open, I slipped inside. A burst of cold air reminded me of wind I once felt in the mysterious outdoors. Pudding cups lined the refrigerator. I snatched two and rushed out in time to meet mama and Miss Cait. I heard them say something about Asher and surrendering. I refused to believe it. As a strong warrior, Asher would never surrender to the dragon of disease.

They immediately stopped talking when I approached.

As I suspected, Asher had a smile under all the pain. I plopped down on the edge of his bed and tore the lid off the pudding cup. I knew Miss Cait wouldn't mind that it was my third pudding of the day.

Asher tried to sit forward to eat but when he moved, his nose scrunched up like a little bug on his face. He twitched and gasped then laid his head back against the white pillow. I scooted my butt closer toward the head of the bed and thrust the spoon toward his mouth. He scowled.

'I'm not a baby.' He took the spoon and licked the thick chocolate glob off.

'I never said you were.' I stuck my nose in the air and peered down it at him. He handed the spoon back and I scooped a big glob out for myself. 'Actually you're not even close to being a baby. You're braver than all the hobbits and elves and dwarves and wizards.'

'I am?' Asher's green eyes widened into giant circles. He stared at me waiting for confirmation.





'Uhuh.' I licked a smudge of pudding off my top lip while nodding. 'Surgeries are scary like dragons,' he agreed.

'No,' I argued. 'Surgeries are good and helpful, like the wizard who saves the day. Sickness is what's scary.'

'Oh.' He dropped his eyes down at the bandaging on his chest. He lifted his hand, bringing an IV tube with it. I watched as he traced his fingers along the medical tape.

'Disease is like a dragon,' I continued. 'It's what's after us. Remember to never give up, okay?' Asher smiled, but I didn't believe the words. I felt the electrical patterns in my chest strike pain with each heartbeat. My own surgery was scheduled in four weeks.

'You're pretty like an elf,' Asher interrupted my fearful thoughts.

'What?'

'When you smile, you're pretty like the lady elves. Or a princess. You're more like a princess because you don't have pointy ears.'

I felt my cheeks burning and looked down at the almost empty pudding cup. My heart pounded but I could no longer blame it on the defects I was born with. I glanced back up at Asher. Even with his dark hair plastered against his forehead, he was nice to look at. My head

spun but my body felt warm like a piece of pie or a mug of hot chocolate.

I scraped the spoon around the plastic packaging and lifted it above my head. With pursed lips, I bubbled my best airplane sound and flew the utensil around in the air before shoving it in Asher's face. We both laughed so hard the chocolate goo slopped onto his bandages. I couldn't wait to tell mama that Asher called me a princess.

My last surgery came fast. At ten, the doctors cleared me to be at home full time with only regular checkups. At thirteen, I needed one more surgery to replace a valve in my heart. I pushed it from my mind until the week it was scheduled.

Asher and I kept in contact with letters. Miss Cait broke the rules and continued giving me his address. He moved around a lot. Mama said he didn't live with his parents anymore. His handwriting looked like lines chickens scratch in the dirt. I could read it though. He told me about school, about doctors' appointments, about how he missed me. For a while, we ended up in the same school district and I got to see him at lunchtime. I wished for us to be in the same class. I even scolded him for not being smarter and skipping a couple grades. Now he moved a few towns away again.

I sat in a bed in the surgical waiting room and doodled in a brand new sketchbook. I drew a circle, then some ovals, and vertical bridge to lips. I had no talent for faces. I spotted the cheeks with dark freckles and scribbled in wavy hair on the head. Squinting, I could almost see Asher.

Mama swished the curtain and walked back into the waiting area with a cup of coffee. I crumpled up the drawing and shoved it under the sheets. My face burned as a smaller figured followed behind Mama. Freckles disappeared in a crevice on the left side of Asher's face as his crooked smile spread. I blinked, wondering if I imagined him.

'Hiya,' he said. His twelve-year-old voice squeaked and cracked. My heart beat so hard I thought it would burst from my chest and the doctor could do the surgery right there in the waiting room. But it didn't. Instead, I rubbed my sweaty hands against the hospital gown before scrunching my nose up at Asher and sticking out my tongue. He copied my actions and just like that I could have sworn we were back in that old room we shared. Mama hummed a low laugh as she

relished my happiness. She would do anything to make me feel better while in the hospital. I bared my teeth at her in a big grin.

'I'll let you two catch up. I'm going to make a phone call to your aunt. She wants to visit after your surgery.' With that, mama swished through the curtain again. Asher reminded me that dragons are scarier than surgeries. I argued against my own logic so he insisted I draw one. Then, he said, if I saw one and wasn't frightened, then the surgery wouldn't be scary either. I sketched a fire-breathing beast but drew zig-zagging lines from its mouth instead of flames.

'I'm scared,' I finally said. Asher nodded and shrugged.

'I've been scared too.'

'Like before your surgery?' The memory brought back how warm it felt to hug him. A tornado ripped through my stomach then calmed to restless butterflies.

'Or like when they told me my parents weren't coming back for me.' He twisted a wavy chunk of hair around one of his fingers.



'You were scared?' I asked. He shrugged and we fell silent for a moment.

'I thought I would be alone forever or something,' he said.

'Oh,' I picked at the medical tape on my hand. 'You'll just have to get married someday.'

'What?'

'Yeah. Remember how Doctor Hanley's wife came to the hospital with all those donated toys? Mama told me they were married. Then she told me that marriage means two people are together forever. So you'd never have to be scared of being alone.'

'Oh.' It was all he said. I continued scribbling lines as scales along the dragon's back. 'I'm not scared of it anymore.'

'That's good,' I said without looking up from the sketchbook. I stopped drawing when I felt Asher still looking at me.

When I realized what he meant I blushed but didn't look away. He smiled and his dimple swallowed the freckles again.

The curtains whooshed as a nurse pushed them all the way open. Mama stood next to her.

'They're going to take you in now,' she said. I swallowed a lump and glanced at Asher. His half-smile melted down to a plain face.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'll get some pudding and bring it to you when it's over.' I nodded but couldn't manage a smile.

Other medical staff joined the nurse and they wheeled my bed away from the wall and through double doors. I glanced back at mama and Asher.

'You'll be okay,' he said with a crack in his voice. 'I know it because we are going to be together forever!' The gray doors swished shut as I caught his last word.

The nurse patted my arm mistaking my sigh as fear. To her shock, I smiled at the nurse. The surgery meant I just had a few hours until I saw Asher again.





'You wouldn't understand what it's like to have your parents abandon you,' Asher said. His strong clenched jaw did not match the sensitive soul inside. I could see right through his thin veil of defense. He lifted a wiry arm and ran his fingers through the thick black hair that covered his head in waves. Asher's teenage hormones raged with anger. Normally directed at his parents, he now focused on me. The high school's hallway cleared out. We were the last students left on campus that Friday afternoon. How ridiculous of me to believe Asher would be my date to Senior Ball. It's not like he hadn't been my date for every Homecoming dance during our entire high school career or anything. It was useless to disagree. Asher's jaw flexed and moved side to side as he ground his teeth together.

'You're not my girlfriend,' he repeated. The phrase hurt worse than it did the first time. I curled and uncurled my fist, resisting the tears that burned in my eyes.

'I never said I was,' I argued. 'I wouldn't want to be anyway.'

'So you can't get mad that I can't call this a relationship.'

'I'm not mad, Asher. I mean,' I hesitated. 'I just wanted to know what this was.' I waved my finger in the air between us; I could almost feel the tension that thickened it.

'I don't do relationships. Besides,' he sighed. 'I don't even know if the foster home will let me go to the stupid dance.'

'"The foster home"?' I raised an eyebrow while repeating him. 'You won't even call them by their names now?'

'Why even learn their names if I'm only going to be there for a month?' I wanted to slap him. Then kiss him. Then slap him again. He stared out the grimy window at the flag that whipped on its pole, marking the front of the school grounds.

'Oh, get over yourself.' I dropped folded arms and rolled my eyes. The tears that threatened them dissipated as irritation with his immaturity took over. 'Get your own ride home.' I spun around and walked toward the opposite side of campus.

As I walked the echoing halls, I called a friend. I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Asher had left the building, then let the tears loose. I begged her to let me go to the dance with her and her boyfriend.

'What happened to Asher?' she asked. She let me cry on speakerphone for a few minutes before insisting she hook me up with her boyfriend's brother. At least then I'd have a date for the dance tonight. I agreed but suddenly felt guilty.

Asher's brilliant green eyes flashed in my head. We did everything together, everything. After Asher's last surgery his parents surrendered him to the hospital. I remember mama explaining to me what that meant. I argued with her that fighting dragons only happened in movies. She told me they could no longer cope with his sickness. As I grew older I realized it was more the financial burden than the emotional that caused Asher's parents to dump him. By then we were already hooked as best friends. It wasn't until Asher became a teenager that hatred toward his parents grew into an unrest that threatened our friendship.

That night the high school's hallway filled again with students. I wore a red strapless dress that reached the floor. My date had curly blond hair that he pulled into a bun on the top of his head. It matched mine, which caused me to scrunch up my nose. My friend noticed and demanded I stop thinking about Asher. He was my perfect opposite. The dark hair contrasted my light locks. My heels were not tall enough to help me see over the crowd so I flexed to my tiptoes. I scanned the hallway searching for Asher's face but saw nothing.

Inside the gym, we danced and laughed. My date talked about himself a lot, his plans to attend college on a sports scholarship. Asher always wanted to play baseball but his weak heart wouldn't allow it. He couldn't even participate in regular physical education classes, much less play a sport. When my date brushed his rough hands against my cheek my attention returned to the present. He pursed his pink lips and leaned down toward my face. I forgot to close my eyes as he pulled my chin up to meet the angle he tilted his head.





'Excuse me!' a voice shouted behind him. My date whipped his head around. Asher stood several inches shorter than him but somehow looked threatening.

'Yo, bro, you're interrupting here!'

'Can I cut in?' Asher asked with polite words but I could see his eyes narrowing. A smile twitched at my lips as I tried to keep from jumping into his arms.

'Dude, no,' my date said. He shook his head then turned back toward me.

'That's my girlfriend you're dancing with,' Asher said. My date turned his head halfway and snorted a laugh.

'I don't want to dance anymore —'

'Ignore the guy,' my date interrupted. A curl escaped his tightly wound bun. He nodded his head to roll the hair away from his eyes.

'No really, I'm done,' I said but he pushed the hand on my lower back tighter and smashed me against him.

'She said she's done,' Asher stepped closer to us.

'Leave us alone, weirdo,' my date gripped my hand with the force of a vice. Asher grabbed the guy's bicep and ripped him from his hold on me. Caught off-guard, my date took a step

backward before balling a fist and swinging it at Asher's face. I screamed. Asher ducked. He couldn't get in a fight, not with his condition. Although I wouldn't stop him; I hated when people told me the same. We had heart disease, we were not dead. Asher stood back up and made contact with his returned punch. His fist smashed into my date's mouth but he responded by grabbing Asher's other arm. Asher grunted in pain and was instantly subdued. By now others noticed. Chaperones ran in and pulled the boys apart. My friend stood at my side and recognized the confusion on my face.

'Are they okay?' she squeaked.

'I don't know,' my breath shuddered.

'Asher shouldn't be getting into a fight. He's gonna, like, die,' she said.

'No,' I disagreed. 'Asher's perfectly capable. I don't know why he looked so hurt.'

When the chaperones ended their lecture both boys were free to go on the promise of good behavior. My date walked over to his brother, rubbing his jaw. I ran over to Asher. My heart pounded as I remembered what he called me. He clutched his hand over his forearm and winced.

'What the heck is wrong with you?' The urge to slap him then kiss him came back again. He groaned in response. A twitch of dark eyebrow revealed the pain he tried to hide. I peeled his fingers from his arm to see blood and markings underneath. 'A tattoo?' I looked back up at him. He nodded but grimaced. It was brand new, and my date had clawed at the open wound. Asher grabbed my hand and pushed through the gym doors. They swung shut behind us as we entered the cool evening. He showed me the markings on his arm, a crude drawing. He explained that his neighbor was a retired artist. The shape of a small black dragon snaked across his forearm. From its open jaws came the up and down zagging lines of a heartbeat. At the other end of the line was a simple heart. My eyes filled with tears as I recognized the artwork.

I had drawn it after my last surgery. His green eyes met mine when I looked back up.

'You're crazy,' I said.

'Yeah, probably,' he agreed, then smiled.

'You're supposed to say: "Yeah, I'm crazy about you",' I said. He laughed and shrugged.

'You already know that, though.' He put a hand around my waist and pulled me toward him. 'Princess.' Asher cupped the side of my face with his other hand and we kissed. It wasn't our first and wouldn't be our last.

'Where are we going?' I asked. I was tempted to lift the blindfold covering my eyes and peek out the car window. It took a couple of bribes to my coworkers and a bout of begging my boss, but I had managed to get the weekend off as Asher requested.

'Just be patient,' Asher said. I leaned toward the left as I felt the car take a turn. It slowed to a stop and I heard the click of the key turn the engine off. Asher shuffled then shut his door. A few moments later mine opened and he took my hand. His fingers intertwined mine and curled with a warm, firm grasp. I climbed down from the truck with his help and he led me along. The hard ground beneath my feet indicated a cement sidewalk.





When he took the blindfold off, my heart sank. We stood at hole number nine at our local miniature golf course. Mama had hinted that Asher planned something special for tonight. I took her giggling to mean he might make an exciting declaration of love or a deeper commitment to our relationship. Instead, it seemed to be nothing more than a typical date night.

Asher walked down the green lane intended for golf balls while leading me along. At the end, we stood in front of a small gray and green building that was designed to resemble a castle. A rhythmic creaking came from the miniature doors that opened and closed, waiting for someone to knock a golf ball through.

A giggle bubbled behind us. I glanced over my shoulder and gasped. Several friends and family members stood at the other end of hole number nine. Mama was right in front of everybody with both hands clasped together in front of her chest. I looked back at Asher and shrieked. He put a hand down to balance as he rested his knee against the greenery.

He lifted a tiny box toward me from his kneeling position. The crude black tattoo still etched on his arm brought me back to high

school. The wind blew his button-down white shirt open revealing the zipper scar that lined his chest. That brought me back to childhood. My hands clasped over my mouth when he finally spoke the expected words.

'Will you marry me?' His rosy cheeks contrasted the wavy hair that blew around on his head. I nodded. My friends squealed. Mama flashed pictures of us. After he stood up, fit the diamond ring on my finger, and kissed me, I asked about the mini golf place. He laughed and called me his princess again.

'This was the only castle I could find around here.' He pointed to the building at hole number nine. My cheeks burned, whether from excitement or embarrassment, I didn't care. We continued kissing while friends and family congratulated us. The night turned into a party at the miniature golf course. We celebrated while catching up and taking pictures. I couldn't stop staring at the ring on my hand; I hadn't even noticed who was missing.

'What happened to Asher?' my aunt asked. I glanced around the group, realizing his absence. Everyone joined me looking around in confusion.

'Oh, he's over there,' I pointed. Asher walked over to a little bridge to grab a runaway ball. He reached into a bush but then yanked his hand back. He clutched his chest and leaned forward to balance on his knees.

'Asher?' The words escaped my mouth at a whisper. 'Asher!' I ran toward him, recognizing his fighting face. He tried to bury the pain away and shook his head but it overtook him. The group rushed over after me. Someone said to call 911. I glanced up at mama.

'He said his heart was palpitating a lot lately. I just thought he meant he was nervous to propose,' she said. Her voice shook with her hands. I put my arms around Asher and held onto him until the sound of sirens filled the air.

At our wedding Asher called me his princess. I loved the nickname. Asher fought the dragon of disease every day for his princess. He wielded his strength and fortitude with a heart full of magic. The magic, he said, came from me. I knew Asher would never give up. For me, he would keep smiling under all the bandages and wires, under all the pain.

Again, I sat on the edge of Asher's bed. We shared one spoon between two pudding cups while waiting for news on a heart transplant. Asher hated waiting. He wanted to fight, always fight. But even under the medical armor, Asher looked weak. The dragon grew stronger than ever before.

I lay next to him on the bed. I caressed his overgrown wavy hair. He hummed the tune from a famous fantasy movie, our favorite. The low vibration buzzed in my head as I laid it against his chest. Even the steady sound faltered in weakness. I hid my face in his neck. Asher asked if I was crying. I lied. He tried to brush the tear away but his hand stopped just before my cheek as the IV line pulled short. I gathered shuddering breaths and swallowed. Two decades of fighting and Asher never gave up. I refused to believe he suffered here for me but refusing it didn't make it untrue.

The rhythmic beep of his heart monitor caused me to drift off. When I woke I found Asher drawing sharp breaths. He winced with each one. The beating on the monitor no longer followed a steady pattern. Asher kept fighting but I couldn't bear to watch the dragon hurt him anymore. I smoothed back the unruly wavy hair flat against his head and kissed his hairline. His eyes were closed but I knew he could hear me.



'I'll be okay,' I whispered. 'Surrendering isn't losing because dragons aren't real.' The doctors rushed him to surgery when his heart weakened further. I waited, as I always did, but this time Asher did not return to me. With my blessing, he had put down his weapons. Finally, free from the fight, Asher would smile. For the first time, his smile would not be through a cloud of pain.

Through the grapevine, I heard Miss Cait planned to finally retire. She must have been ancient now. I traveled back to that old children's hospital. I carried only a picture frame with me as I rode the elevator to the top floor. The pediatric unit smelled the same. The sterile burn of bleach wafted in as the elevator doors opened. The playroom looked updated but still had a pile of magazines next to the window seat. I swallowed a lump in my throat and walked to the nurse's station. Miss Cait had lost her plump figure. Now she shuffled even slower with a more petite, frail body. Her bright red lipstick spread across her face in a wide smile when she looked up at me.

We caught one another up on the last two decades of our lives. She still snuck children extra pudding cups. I shared with her that I kept in contact with many of my fellow PICU friends. And at twenty-nine years old the same question haunted me.

'What happened to Asher?' she asked. When I told her, she apologized and grasped my hands in her knotted fingers. I shook my head, refusing her sad words.

'It's okay. Really, I'm okay,' I said. And I was. I twisted the ring around my finger. The diamond sent glinting specks of light all around the linoleum floor of the hospital hallway. Mama told me what marriage means. Asher wasn't far away.

Every day he fought for me but when he stepped down I picked up that sword. Fighting to keep his memory alive meant I was no longer his princess, I was a warrior. When two people love each other they decide to be together forever.



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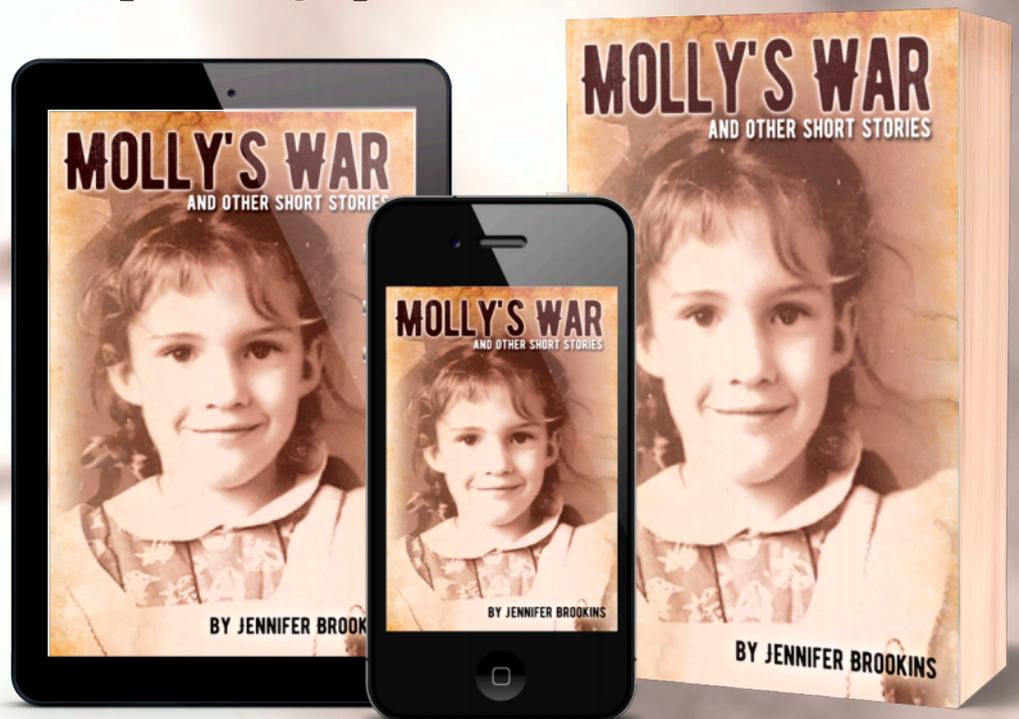
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Torii is thin and hungry. Very thin, very hungry. She's in her domain of wrecked houses and mudslides, a short but treacherous scramble from the shellfish factory. Sea fog carries and spreads the rancid stench of imports processed a little too late. The factory ejects its waste even later. The noxious effluent is pushed up and down gullies by streams and tides in turn – as if both want to repel it.

It's night time and starlit but dark enough for Torii's black clothes and rudimentary charcoal and oil makeup to render most of her exposed skin invisible in shadow.

She's still alive after nearly a week of hiding. One particular person yearns to stroll back into the company home while dangling Torii's severed head from a hand and boasting about it to the mistresses and potential employers.

Torii is not popular. Intelligent and quick to learn she generates resentment and hatred among her fellow pupils. Whole gangs of would-be elites would love to torture and kill her.

Though she could as easily kill them, Torii knows better. She refuses to leave this world as damaged as it's trying to make her. She won't kill, won't torture. Escape and evasion are all

she has – and she's good at both. Suicide is her most likely fate but not yet, not until the last moment when all possibility of hope is lost. She believes there may still be things to learn, even enjoy, in this otherwise nightmare life.

Poised, she loves the way tendons stretch in subtle movement. She's perfectly balanced on a ruined wall, one of endless linked walls harbouring wrecked roofs and the sucking mud which flowed from the heights, filled the harbour and turned most lagoons into deadly mire – her safe places.

She can smell food, the usual trap for potential victims. Someone is cooking meat, though she can't see any revealing glow of fire in the haze or fog. Torii moves upwind, deeper into the ghosted ruins. She's confused. No one comes here, not even the boldest members of the gangs have dared venture so far into an area from which few return.

Her mouth waters; she trembles with hunger. Avoiding one gang meant flight and abandonment of the food she'd stocked up for this critical week of secrecy. She's fugitive, furtive and desperate.



A zephyr caresses her face and brings the scent anew. She sniffs the air. There, upwind, silhouetted, the building with smooth stone walls and ruined tower stands on a low pinnacle. Her citadel, her private refuge, a place she's decorated with images of the mother she can't remember. On the pinnacle surrounded by thorny trees, somewhere behind the arched windows, someone is preparing a meal.

Mud slid over that fang of rock, tearing the building apart, but most flowed around either side; in bright sunlight it looks as if the pinnacle wears a smooth scarf.

Underfed for years but always intrepid, Torii's desire for secret places has made her stealthy and athletic. A rat would make more noise if it followed her routes across broken masonry, the tops of roofless walls. She drops, crouching in an empty window, rocking on the sill.

Her secret way to the summit is undisturbed. Cobwebs and hair, carefully hung between twigs, have not been pushed aside or broken. She wonders how the person reached this desolate building.

Torii squeezes under thorns; they stop most people but never her. Scaling a buttress and hugging the spike of the ruined chimney, she studies the quadrangle. The person is easy to see as Torii knows this place intimately. A small person, hooded and cloaked, crouches over something from which blossoms smoke, rising and fading into invisibility before it reaches the curling mist.

In public Torii's hair and skin mark her out as different, strange, a mutant, someone to mock and hate, but her eyes are unusual too. She can see in the dark better than anyone she knows. On a wall there's a new painting among the murals of her dream mother. Moving over crumbling masonry to study the painting more clearly, Torii sees this portrait is better, more defined than her crude attempts with soot, chalk and fish oil. The person depicted looks older and stronger than the pictures Torii paints of a young victim trapped in a breeding initiative – a girl of Torii's own age forced into pregnancy by a guild of cruel women. Exactly the sort of women who join, and are corrupted by, the gangs nurtured within company homes for children.





Awe and resentment make Torii hiss as she takes in the portrait created on stucco. Whoever painted it has uncommon skill. Torii seethes with jealousy – tinged with admiration.

The crouched figure looks round and lifts a knife. She's younger than Torii and hunched, looking tense.

She appears small and weak, things Torii has learned to assess. Easy prey, easy to kill, easy to rob, maybe easy to scare and dominate to use for a while.

The girl relaxes after glancing around the area with cautious movements. Torii waits for several silent breaths, creeps until above the girl – and drops, crouching, in front of her.

To her amazement the girl fails to look terrified. Instead she lifts the knife in one hand and a small one-handed crossbow in the other, the sacking covering dropping away. "I heard you all. Some of you will die, the others will be scarred. Some I will blind."

Torii freezes, stunned, and leans back on the wall. For no reason she can understand, she laughs. Shaking her head and gathering thoughts, she asks, "Was it you who did that?" She nods at the new painting.

"I could kill you now!" The girl's hissing words seem purely defensive. Torii feels no threat.

"Go ahead." A weight presses on Torii's soul. She buries her head in her hands. "But can I have some of your food first? I haven't eaten for so long."

The girl asks, "Are you going to kill me ... rob me?"

Torii sees reflective skin and eyes – things she wishes she had. "Please, can I eat something? Please ... oh please?"

The girl studies Torii, takes a stick from her tiny fire and holds it out. "I'm only cooking it little bit by little bit. I was trying not to be seen."

Torii pushes the sliver of meat into her mouth, moans and cries, "More, please more." She passes the stick back. "Oh..." The joy of eating and of gulping real meat overwhelms Torii. "Thank you ... please ... more."

"I have some berries and another whole seagull. How many of you are there?"

"There's just me, only me." Torii rests her head against the wall behind. "There was only ever just me." It comes out as a whisper. "I'm called Torii, for what it's worth."

The girl stares at her, wide eyes, mouth hanging open. Shaking herself, she impales another strip of meat on the stick and holds it over embers. "I'm Soo. I did have a bigger name once, like you. Are you dangerous?" She digs in a pocket, her gaze never leaving Torii, tension undiminished. Holding out a hand, she says, "Berries."

Soo's generosity and confidence mixed with vulnerability – and her weapons – startle Torii. "Thank you, Soo."

"There's loads of meat and I can make new bolts to kill seagulls. I'm not very good at making them though. I can never get two to fly the same."

Torii is unable to make sense of Soo's tone. There's a suggestion of something she can't identify. Torii looks around the walls, at the temple she's made, to distract her from a wave of confusion and unfamiliar emotions. Fury and despair swamp everything. She curls into a ball, jerking as tears erupt.

Soo's hand pats Torri's head, disturbing the scarf wrapped around it. "More meat," Soo says. "Is that your? ... your hair is black! How did you do it?"

Torii wipes tears into the ragged sleeves of her company home shirt. "My hair is black." She lets Soo cope with that.

"Black?"

Torii pulls meat from the stick and pushes berries into her mouth. "Yes."

"Why?"

"It's black. There is no why."

"All the time?"

Generosity and spontaneous unguarded speech present new experiences for Torii, things against which she has learned no coping mechanisms. She relaxes against the wall. "What are you?"

"You're from the school, aren't you? I want to go there."

Torii watches as Soo cuts more raw meat from the seagull carcass and winds it around the stick. "So, we both want to know about each other. I think that's scary." Rule one in Torii's world is never to give information about yourself. Anything can be used against you. She studies Soo and is unsettled by a confident openness she's never come across before. Curious to see where it leads, Torii chooses only to give information Soo would learn anyway if she entered the company home. "All right, I'm an orphan sent to the cohome, school, as you call it. I'm fifteen, nearly sixteen, and waiting for my pay. I have so many debts..."

Soo freezes and stares at Torii. "They pay you? Please tell me everything."

"Oh, Soo." Torii sighs. "They pay but they take away more. We're slaves like everyone else."

"Do they teach you how to read and write?"



Torii splutters, a breath of warmth and humour tentatively invading her tone. "It's a cohome! They teach you how to behave. They teach you how to believe the things they were taught to believe. They want control of everyone ... total control of mind and body. If you behave, and survive the gangs, you may just learn a bit of reading and writing." Torii feels a worm of doubt and hope inside her. "I can teach you all that. Numbers too." She pauses, biting a lip. "Is that bit of meat for me?" Soo twists the stick in flame, fat popping and spitting.

"I need to go to school. My mum said."

Torii gasps. "Your mum ... you have a real mother?"

"Stop it!" Soo shouts, dropping the stick and scrambling to the nearest corner. She curls up, shaking with shuddering sobs.

Torii panics; she doesn't want to waste food so she lifts the meat from scorching embers.

She's also terrified of approaching Soo and damaging the mysterious bond growing between them. "You ... do you want this food?" Torii's hand shakes with her own desperate need as she says it, "I can bring it to you."

Soo sits up, stiff and pale, starlight glittering on tears. "My sister said that when she was hungry too!" She frowns. "You're really hungry aren't you?"

"I am ... oh ... can I have just a tiny bit?" Torii holds it at arm's length, scrambling to Soo. "Quick! Take it. I don't trust myself!"

Soo snatches the stick, struggling to unwrap the steaming meat and stuff it into Torii's mouth, sweeping up the dribbling oil and guiding it between Torii's lips. Soo giggles. "I've never seen anyone so hungry. Come back to the stove. I'm going to feed you till you burst!"



Torii found mushrooms after Soo told her what to look for. Soo collected more berries – there are no nearby seagulls to shoot. Still a little hungry but hidden and out of danger, they lie pressed side-by-side. Bright stars sometimes show through breeze-torn gaps in the fog and bestow their own peace and infinity on the tiny corner space safe from mud. Soo says, “This is like having a new sister. I like you.”

Torii cringes. “This has been a good night and a good meeting. I like you too, Soo.” She sighs. “You ... you are special and so different to anyone I’ve ever known. This is like having a sister, like I imagine having one. Now I’ve had a sister for a moment. You can’t imagine what that means to me. I could die content now.”

Soo sniggers; she’s barely understood the lifelong loneliness behind Torii’s words but still feels something. “Not a moment! Please, can we be friends? Can you really teach me reading? I can do numbers a bit. Can I come to your school?”

After a deep sigh Torii says, “I think I can teach but I’ve never really tried. You do not want to come to the cohome. It’s why, one of the reasons, I want to escape or die or... I can’t stand it any more.” She puts a finger over Soo’s lips.

“It’s supposed to be a good school. That’s what it claims but it’s a training place for moderators ... not real mods but their subservients. Utterly awful ... we’re taught to be ... I can’t even say. It’s disgusting, the way they want me to behave.” Torii pushes her head into Soo’s shoulder. “I don’t want to be that bad for my whole life. I don’t want it!”

“Tell me more. Why are you dressed all in black? Why are your face and hands all covered in blackness? Are you a robber?” Soo waits for an answer but nothing comes. “Tell me about your mother.” She jumps at Torii’s answering wail.

“I don’t know my mother. She probably died! I’ll never know.” Torri leaps up and turns away, pressing her forehead to the wall.

Soo asks, “Who is in the paintings then? Did you do them?”

Torii struggles, not with Soo’s words but her tone, plaintive, tentative. She hits the wall, dust falls in whispering lines. “Yes! But I don’t know what she looked like,” her tone deepening to a growl of overwhelming fury.

Soo stands and hugs Torii from behind. A tight fierce hug. “Don’t be upset. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”



Torii has seen people being hugged but never experienced it. Every nerve shouts 'danger!' but she fights the impulse to strike out, to hurl Soo into deep mud and death. Instead she sinks down trembling and crying.

"I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry. What did I say wrong?" Soo strokes Torii's arm. "You're cold. I'll make a bigger fire. Is it safe?"

Torii breathes herself calm. "I think it's more dangerous not to have one. This night is colder than ever. Try under that bit of roof. I've made fires there before and they are difficult to see because it's the lowest. But there's only a little space to lie down. The mud beside it is very deep."

As Soo busies herself with spars of broken roofing, splinters and tinder, Torii looks up at a pall of thickening fog. "I'm planning to escape after they pay me but before anyone can take my money. I just don't have anywhere to go. I want to be free – or dead."

"You can be free if you're a sailor." Soo studies Torii. "But you have to be strong and know about ships."

"First I need to survive until tomorrow. This is the end of final week. The senior girls who are leaving prey on juniors, taking money, forcing subservience agreements on them, even killing them. I've hidden. I hate to think what has happened to people but at least they haven't got to me."

Soo frowns, worried. She glances at Torii several times. "Is it dangerous all the time? Why don't you have even a sword?"

Soo making fire without matches, teaching how to find food, talking of swords, hugging, Torii struggles to cope with all of this. Soo seems so young, so small, so capable, so confident. "Soo, what are you?"

"An orphan now. They hanged my mother and sister ... and all the crew. But my mum made sure I never got caught." She sobs as quietly as she can. "There was a fire on board. Some sails burned and we couldn't get away fast enough."

"Your mother was a pirate?" Torii struggles to keep the shock and contempt from her voice.

Soo rolls her eyes, and spits in fury. "I thought you went to school! Don't you know anything?" She chips flint against a segment of horseshoe and waves her free hand over a pile of brown dust.

"I don't know anything much." Torii isn't sure if she said that out loud but knows her lips moved. "It's a cohome, Soo. I'm not sure what you mean by school though I've heard the word. They make us work, work so hard. Sometimes it's making clay, sometimes doing things to shellfish. It's all hard. It's supposed to be a good place ... but they don't really teach us much. I think all they want to make is factory workers or people for mods. It's the moderators in guilds who buy the most promising pupils."

"Can you get me in?"

"You don't want to go there."

"I need to. Winter is coming and I'll die without food!"



“Getting you in would be easy because I’ll be in my final year and can champion you ... after tomorrow. Some of the mistresses like me even if no one else does. I could help ... like I could get you past the girls waiting to trap newcomers as slaves and take them away.” Torii shudders.

“There are some who just want heads still dripping blood.” Torii’s eyes flood. “Did I get sent to the wrong life or is everywhere like this?”

“You say things like my mother did.” Soo catches her breath. “Please get me into the school.”

“I will, Soo ... but it’s not good in there and I won’t be able to protect you.” Torii cringes at her own words. “I get bullied. I’m weak. I just hide when I can.”

“Will you be my friend?”

Torii tries to wipe tears away but more come. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what you mean. You use the word friend like it’s something nice and not just the leader of a gang. Help me understand. Is it someone you can trust with secrets?” Torii shakes. “I don’t know.”

“My mum had friends ... they all died with her.” Soo pauses, watching Torii. “Was that the wrong thing to say?”

“No, yes, I don’t know.”

Soo looks around, as if trying to see into fog. She asks, “Don’t you have any weapons at all?”

Torii straightens, arms stiff down her sides, fists clenched. “No ... no weapons. I hate them!”

Soo stands and hugs Torii again. “It’s all right. I’ll look after you. I will, I will.” She snatches up

her crossbow and knife. “Did you hear something?”

“Just then? Yes, there’s one person coming in this direction.” She nods to the west. “There are two or three more but they are far away,” she points south west and purses her lips for a moment, “going away from us. Soo ... no one comes here. We’re in trouble. We must get out.” Torii jumps up ready to leap over a low wall. “This way, quick.”

Soo throws more wood on the fire. “No! Stay where you are. This will lure the one on her own.” She scurries into the dark and fog.

Torii feels confusion and humiliation. It has never occurred to her to fight back, only hide. She lifts a broken spar, and shudders at the thought of hurting someone with it – even an enemy. Waving the stick she thinks: What is a friend? I still don’t know what Soo means but it sounds so different to what I know. She’s a pirate! but I don’t seem to understand that either. I can learn so much from her, learn about the world I want to escape to.

Only one person would trail so far into the mud land to pursue Torii. One girl, desperate to become an assassin, needing a trophy head. Mara has bullied and taunted Torii as long as she can remember, formed whole cliques to acquire power over people in Torii’s dormitory. People who attack with needles at night, glue in hair, rats, alive or rotting, pushed among sheets. Torii has always been the tearful and cowering victim.



Mara has bet everything she possesses, wealth and credibility, on bringing Torii's head back to the company home.

Banging the spar against a wall, Torii feels weak knowing Mara, who only has cruelty and hate in her otherwise empty soul, will want to inflict pain. Torii sobs and whispers, "Mara, I could be just like you ... what does life do to us? How much torture have you suffered to be as you are?" She drops the stick and sits against the wall, head on her knees. "Kill me if you have to, Mara, however you want to. I can't hurt even you." Torii's tears soak her cottom trousers. "Yes, kill me. I've just promised to help a girl into the school because ... because I need to learn things she knows. It's going to be years of torture for her. This makes me too evil to endure being myself."

Flames rise until Torii panics they'll be seen from far away. She smothers them with mud. Someone is very close and making a lot of noise. A voice hisses. "It's me!" Soo creeps over to Torii's side. "Here!"

In the light of struggling embers, something is thrust into Torii's hand. "What? A bag of money? Why are you giving me this?"

"You'll know somewhere good to hide it. We can share it. Wait, I need to clean this bolt. I lost the other one. I got a knife you can have too." Soo dips the bolt into mud, flicks it off, turns and places the knife in Torii's other hand. "It was hers."

Torii stares at it. "It was mine first. Mara took it from me last year. What did you just do?"

"That's a silly question."

Torii hugs herself. "Yes, sorry."

Soo sits, leaning her head on Torii's shoulder. "I've thought of something. Can you get to Red River from here ... I mean without going by sea?"

"Yes."

"I remembered there's a place you can go to in the desert to collect special metal and sell it for

money. You have to go to Red River first. One of the crew went for a while and came back with enough money to buy all sorts of things. She said it's very dangerous and I think they probably don't let children go. I think there are no bosses or mods."

"The trenches! Yes, I've read about them in news sheets. I didn't think of that because... She, your crew member, came back? So many people die though ... not that that's a huge problem for me now. I've more or less given up."

"You can read news sheets? If you read them can you learn to read other things?"

"Once you learn to read you can read anything. Everything uses the same words."

"Will you put your arm round me?" Soo presses against Torii.

"Yes, here. Like this?"

Soo nods. "You go to the trenches and write to me. If it's all right there, will you come and get me when I'm old enough?"

"Is this like being friends? Is that the sort of thing they do?"

"Yes!" Soo chirps, "and they stay friends for ever and ever."

"Soo, I need to learn from you about the world. In return I'll teach you reading and writing and numbers. Tomorrow I'll get you into the school. In a month or two I'll claim my money, escape and come back for you as soon as I can. Watch out though; you don't get all the letters people send to you, well, I don't. They're often stolen before I see them. We'll have to work out codewords or people will know what's happening."

"This is like planning a course through treacherous shoals in bad weather!"

Torii draws a pencil and tattered pad from her trouser pocket. "It's a plan and it starts now. Make some more light. It's time to begin work on your reading and writing."



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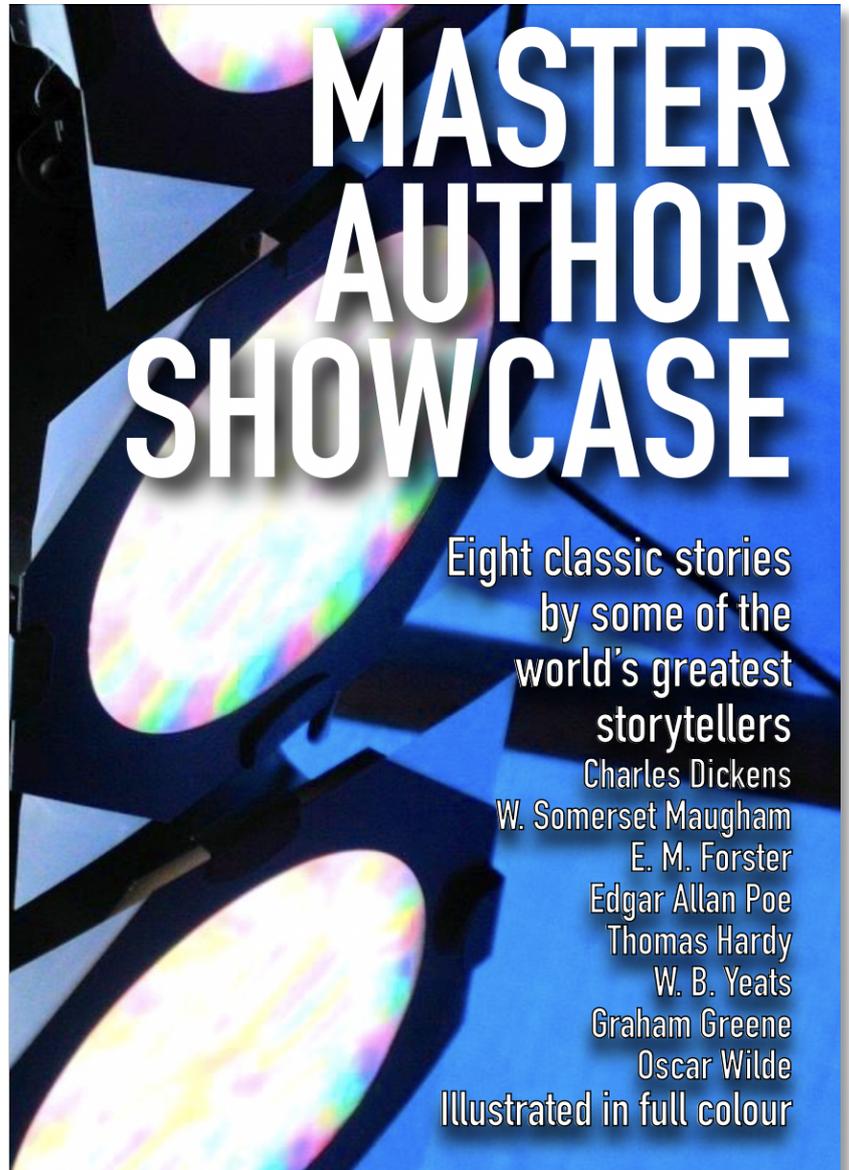


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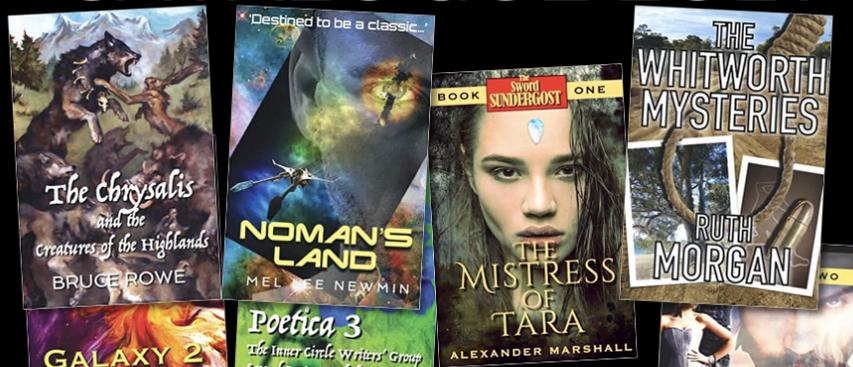


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