

The **Clarendon House**
Short Story Magazine

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**Issue
14**



**Two gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet:
Peter Toeg and Alexander Marshall**

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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In this issue:

The Choices We Make by Peter Toeg

Peter Toeg journeys into the world of decisions made which alter lives, sometimes for the worse, sometimes for the better...

One Silver Dollar by Alexander Marshall

'I have no use for cities, or towns, or the desert, and not much use for folk anyplace. Cities and towns make me itch, the desert makes me sweat; folk make me wary. Give me the mountains anyday: the wind in the wild peaks, the crunch of the cold snow, the fall of rain in the woods and a crackling fire on the hearth...' So opens Alexander Marshall's foray into the field of Westerns in this action-packed short.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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**The
Choices
We
Make**

Peter Toeg



*"We accept the reality of the world with which we're presented. It's as simple as that."
-Christof in The Truman Show*

My father, the birder, who traveled the world searching for elusive species, ended up confined to a wheelchair, alert but closeted in his unresponsive body. Having lost almost all muscle control and speech, he struggled with his incapacity, especially in communication. His eyes wildly darted one day when I entered the room alone, agitation that told me he had a final message.

For me.

In his earlier life, he regaled us with stories of birds he encountered or the obstacles he faced in the bush, waving his hands and imitating birdcalls. Now, he could only speak with his eyes.

Father had learned voluntary eye flashing or eye blazing, a form of body language used by parrots. His pupils' rapid and conspicuous dilation and constriction were generally in response to external stimuli. We witnessed his unspoken emotions. I would not have believed it had he not demonstrated it one day long ago.

As my father's mind gradually deteriorated, my mother and I sat with him, tended to the feeding tube and ventilator, and adjusted his position. A hospice nurse would come to monitor his vitals and medicate him during the day. He sat or lay on the special mobile chair in the glassed sunroom of our house. It afforded him a view of spring coming alive and his precious birds flying and alighting.

Before his illness, he communicated with them verbally and employed bird calls. Birds occasionally alit on his hand that held seeds or on a nearby branch. I supposed he and they learned to bond.

One nature of two species entwined.

In the silence of his last days, my father and I created a simple means of communication, which required work on my part. His blinking once meant "yes" and twice meant "no." Finally, I validated the system by asking him questions with absolute answers.

The process took time, so I often ended up guessing his *questions*, which he could only answer with yes or no blinks.

But, again unspoken, he delighted in the plan. I knew. He had taught me to study people as he had birds.

I moved him to his office that one day at his request. His specimens: stuffed fowl (he'd not killed any of them), photos, and paintings, even his notes from traveling four continents adorned every available space.

But that day, I'd been watching his eyes and discerned that he was focusing on certain spots. I knew that looking at a window usually meant he wanted the wheelchair to be moved there. Not the window this time.

Moving him, as instructed, I realized Father's eyes had focused on an area of one wall adorned with photos of birds. I knew they were taken on a European trip years ago from what he'd told me on a better day.

For some unknown reason, sitting with Father in his office, I understood that he had a message to tell. Sampling a variety of topics and a multitude of questions, I concluded that one bird held a particular answer.

Mother was not with us that day, and I assumed this was important based on his rapid blinking, his way of strongly expressing the affirmative. "For me, a message?"

"Yes," he *said*.

"Does Mother know about this?" He apparently waited until only I was with him.

"Yes." Multiple blinks.

"Does this involve me?" A fair guess.

The lids did not move on his pale, drawn face. Waiting. "Yes"

I was piqued.

"A secret?"

"Yes."

At age twenty-eight, did I not know everything about our family?

"Does the secret have to do with the bird, Father?" I moved him closer to the photos and stood before him to read the answers.

"Yes," he answered with his eyelids occasionally fluttering involuntarily. After an hour of quizzing, I guessed he was fatigued. His eyelids were less responsive.

"Is it the bird you're looking at now?"





"Yes."

Four photos were in his eyes' view, all labeled as his habit. I used to laugh, wondering if he could ever forget a species or genus. His insight was astounding like the great John Audubon.

I found the bird after two tries. By then, my father was exhausted emotionally, an observation that spending many hours with him had shown me. He breathed on a ventilator; I had no clue, but the drooping eyelids told me as much.

Our afternoon time was over, but I had an answer, supposedly.

In that one bird.

Father died that night.

Entombed alive in a deteriorating body, I expected he would welcome death.

#

My father's obsessive study of birds often deprived me of his presence. My mother was a nurse, devoting long hours to the care of others. As for me, I was provided for all my needs and never despaired, but I knew we were never quite the family we could have been.

The father times we spent together in my childhood and youth were relegated to days or maybe a week or so each year when we explored the wild together. He'd share stories attached to every bird we saw as if fulfilling his role as a teacher.

He spoke enthusiastically of his feathered friends, dedication to searching for a species, and dropping everything when an opportunity to go abroad was presented.

He would point out "the elegant movement of the birds and the beauty and softness of their plumage." He called my attention to their show of pleasure or sense of danger, "their perfect forms and splendid attire." He would speak of their departure and return with the seasons.

At age fifteen, sitting with him on a log in a nature preserve on one birding trip, I revealed my intentions. "I want to be a doctor. I'm fascinated with biology, *human* biology. I want to help people."

He pondered that, never looking at me, And said finally, "I'm not surprised."

"And not study birds."

"Like birds, we do what we are called to do. It's the same across all species."

"I don't understand."

"You will. Someday."

#

Leo, my best friend and classmate through high school, had his complaints. His father was a doctor and was out much of his daily life for years. His mother, he said, was always on his case. On the other hand, being a housewife in Bowling Green in the mid-twentieth century had charm. She baked and shuttled us to ballgames and welcomed me for sleepovers during summers and holidays. I probably spent more time with the Drakes than at home.

"She's really a nice lady, Leo." He'd been complaining about her scolding him for being late to school that morning. She drove us nearly every day.

"Yeah, well, you don't live with her. What would you know?"

"She's nice to me." We were at our adjacent lockers, together like so much of our lives. Family meals and sleeping seemed to be the only times apart. He played second base, and I played short, waiting for the tryouts to begin. We were a natural double-play duo.

"Are you sweet on my mother?" Less of a question and more of a poke.

"That's a lame remark, even for you, Leo."

He flashed a big shit-eating grin. "I bet you are!"

"Grow up, Leo." I slammed my locker.

I had a crush on her.

#

My mother whaled into me when she discovered I made the JV baseball team, breaking the rule I'd agreed to long ago.

"We've talked about your heart and the strain. Heavy exercise and team sports are out." She was close to tears. "What were you thinking?"

"I just want to be normal. You told me my heart might never be a problem. You—"

"No argument. The doctor said not to push it. You heard him. It's congenital, and you can learn to live with it."





"I'm sixteen. I need to fit in with the guys."

"Leo, you mean?"

I didn't answer.

"You two do everything together—every *other* thing. Baseball is off-limits."

"Father would understand."

"Your father is off bird hunting for who knows how long. I'm in charge."

And that was a snapshot of my youth. At least, that was how I felt at the time. We had a spacious house and everything I needed. I expected a car when I got my license, and Father promised me as much.

Leo's mom would let me play ball. I knew that. But then, his father probably wouldn't.

He was my doctor.

#

It's funny how your world can be populated by just a few people in a city of 42,000.

Leo was my best friend. Like we were almost brothers. His mother was cool. His father treated me like a son and monitored my health. Even my father, when he was around, spoiled me. Mother had filled in for a missing father when I had strep and childhood diseases. So, having a nurse for a mother had benefits.

The heart thing was a bummer.

"You can live a normal life, Tanner," said the doctor repeatedly. "Just dial it down a bit on the heavy lifting. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir." I had a list posted on my wall; my parents made me memorize: "don't," "cautions," and "symptoms."

I'd complained to him about baseball at the next check-up, and he didn't budge. No surprise.

"Your mother's right. Listen to her."

"Yes, sir." Then I popped the question. "What about making love? Will I be able to do that without killing myself?"

"We'll discuss that another time." He started to turn away, the exam complete, then turned back. "You're not involved with a young lady right now?"

We talked for another twenty minutes.

Cool guy, Dr. Graham, and he let me call him "Doc."

#

The pact that Leo and I had made when we were twelve was in jeopardy in senior year.

"Ivy League?"

"You never told me you even applied." We talked after a ball game he had played in, and I observed, "We had a covenant: together in high school and college."

"My Dad is pressuring me. And no, I haven't applied. I'm accepted because of him."

It dawned on me. "Oh, legacy. That's it."

It was.

Silence.

"Say, what's a covenant?"

Leo ended up at Yale studying political science, and I went to Indiana State to complete my studies in physical therapy, not medicine, and dreams of being a doctor. I could have gone anywhere and maybe aimed higher with my academic profile. But the treatment was hands-on and satisfying.

By graduation, we both realized we were our own men with different desires. Unfortunately, it took that long to discover we had different political persuasions. He wanted to change the world through the "process" and do his part in a grand plan for prosperity.

I, the apolitical one, wanted to make a difference in the lives of people I encountered, whether in my work or the community—one person at a time.

Through it all, we remained close even to returning to our city and families to work. He became a political consultant, and I established my practice, supported at every step by Doc, now a mentor to me on things medical and otherwise.

"You still have time to advance in the medical field," he said. "You're brilliant, Tanner, and not locked into anything. Consider being a physician's assistant. It's less rigorous and time-consuming."

"Time is important, isn't it?" I asked, not waiting for an answer. "Especially when you have cardiomyopathy."



A background image of a fireplace with a roaring fire. In the foreground, a mobile phone is visible, partially obscured by the flames. The fire is bright orange and yellow, with dark logs visible. The overall scene is warm and cozy.

#

"We're proud of you, Tanner." My mother, now a retired nurse, said on the Thanksgiving after Father's diagnosis. I was twenty-eight. "You've made a good life for yourself. And Leo has, too."

I accepted that Leo was part of my side of life's equation. And to top it off, he and his parents later joined us for the feast. The doctor and Marie had supped with us on many occasions, almost like family. Easy chatter, always some bird references, but no medical talk. Well, some professional banter.

"I'm thinking of getting married," Leo announced as we awaited dessert. "She couldn't be here, but you'll meet her sometime soon."

My parents seemed thrilled that at least one of their two "sons" had made the big move. The doctor proposed a toast.

"Aren't you asking for my approval first, Leo?" I asked in mock sincerity. "I think it's appropriate."

That grin. "Is this a violation of our covenant?" he asked in almost genuine seriousness.

"What covenant?" my mother asked.

I laughed. "When we were kids, Leo and I agreed to, well, stay close and follow in each other's footsteps."

"And you have," said Mother. "We're proud of you both."

I pointed at Leo. "I'll release you for the marriage. You have my blessing."

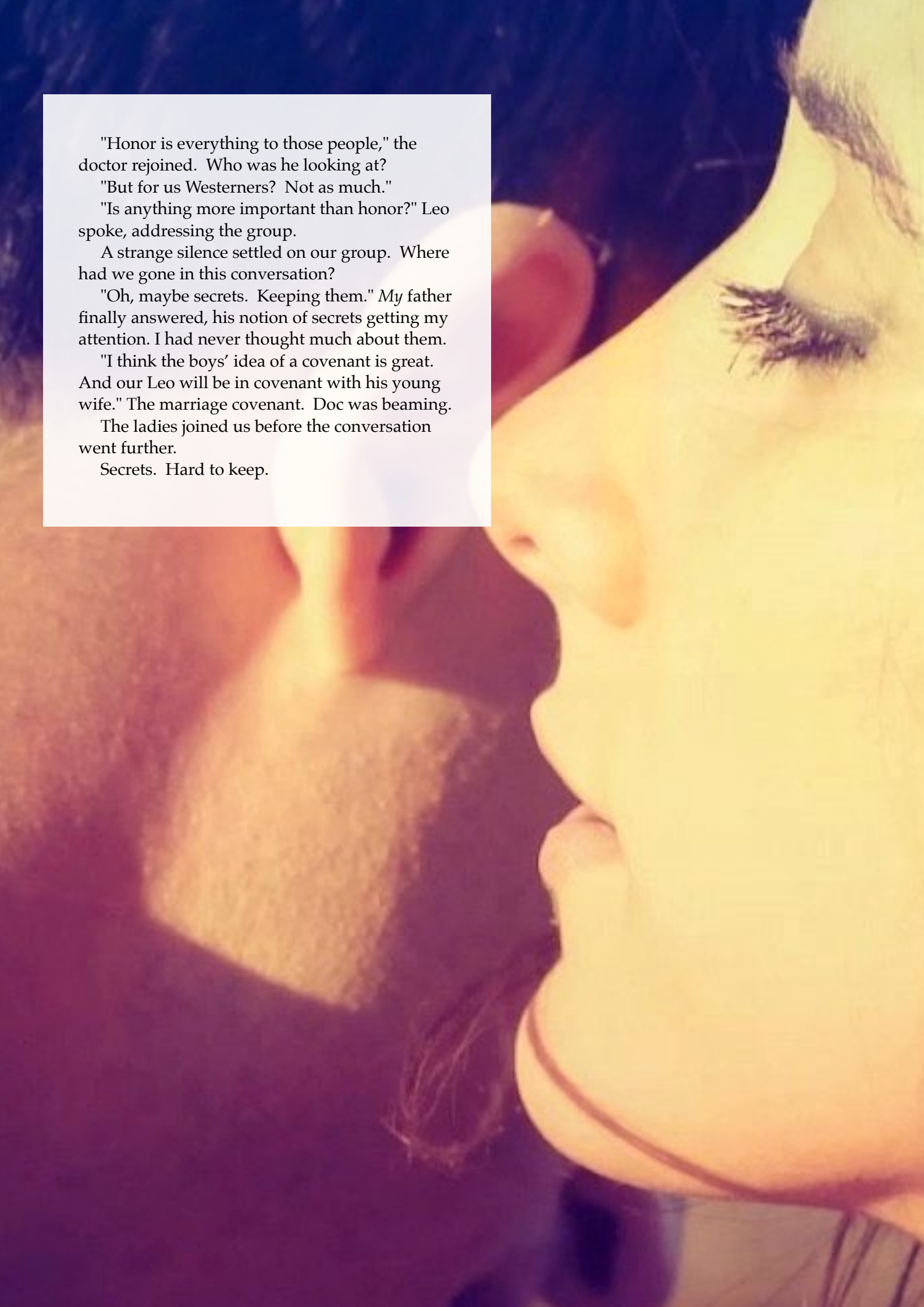
Mother took a group photo of us standing close. I wondered whether any picture of me would be my last, the persistent thought that my heart could fail without notice.

I managed a cheery smile for the photographer, dismissing the thought.

The ladies went for the pumpkin pie and coffee, and we men retired to the sunroom, where the standing fireplace glowed.

Father looked weary and a bit unsteady when he walked. My medical training and research told me this would be his last Thanksgiving. Doc eyed us, maybe wondering the same about me. A second father, our closeness growing.

"Covenants are until death." My father spoke first. "I've learned about them. A long-standing Arab-Jewish ritual. I spent time in the Middle East."



"Honor is everything to those people," the doctor rejoined. Who was he looking at?

"But for us Westerners? Not as much."

"Is anything more important than honor?" Leo spoke, addressing the group.

A strange silence settled on our group. Where had we gone in this conversation?

"Oh, maybe secrets. Keeping them." *My* father finally answered, his notion of secrets getting my attention. I had never thought much about them.

"I think the boys' idea of a covenant is great. And our Leo will be in covenant with his young wife." The marriage covenant. Doc was beaming.

The ladies joined us before the conversation went further.

Secrets. Hard to keep.

In the days immediately after my father's death, errant thoughts plagued me.

I remember watching the film *The Truman Show* at college. Truman Burbank, the star, lives in an idyllic town where nothing is real, all of this unbeknownst to him. It is an expansive, elaborate stage with everyone actors. He is confined to the town, placed there after his birth, and as he grows, the television world watches him for over twenty years. His daily life was on display, edited, to an audience he could not see. Unwittingly, he accepts his world, but the perfection gnaws at him. Ultimately, he discovers the truth, sparked by some innate human desire.

The show—the deception and manipulation—all served as a long-standing secret from Truman.

Yet, all secrets are ultimately revealed. It's said that not even two can keep a lie under wraps forever. Truth begs to be told: the biblical lamp under the basket is destined to give light.

I never thought the film was funny. Anyone taking control of a man's life seemed disturbing. He was taken from his birth parents to live with others who played the roles on camera. Maybe it sparked my latent questions.

Only I had no basis for believing that anything in my life was unreal.

Yet my father directed me to that photo of a bird with no explanation.

#



Before we laid Father to rest, I knew what he'd been trying to tell me. I had done the research and spent a lot of reflecting—and agonizing—in the preceding five days. Finally, I would get answers to my questions.

Leo. I needed to tell Leo of my suspicions and the plan. He deserved to know.

"That's crazy, Tanner," was his initial response. No surprise.

I showed him the photo Father had selected, a last act before dying. Then I told him what I'd learned about the bird in the photo.

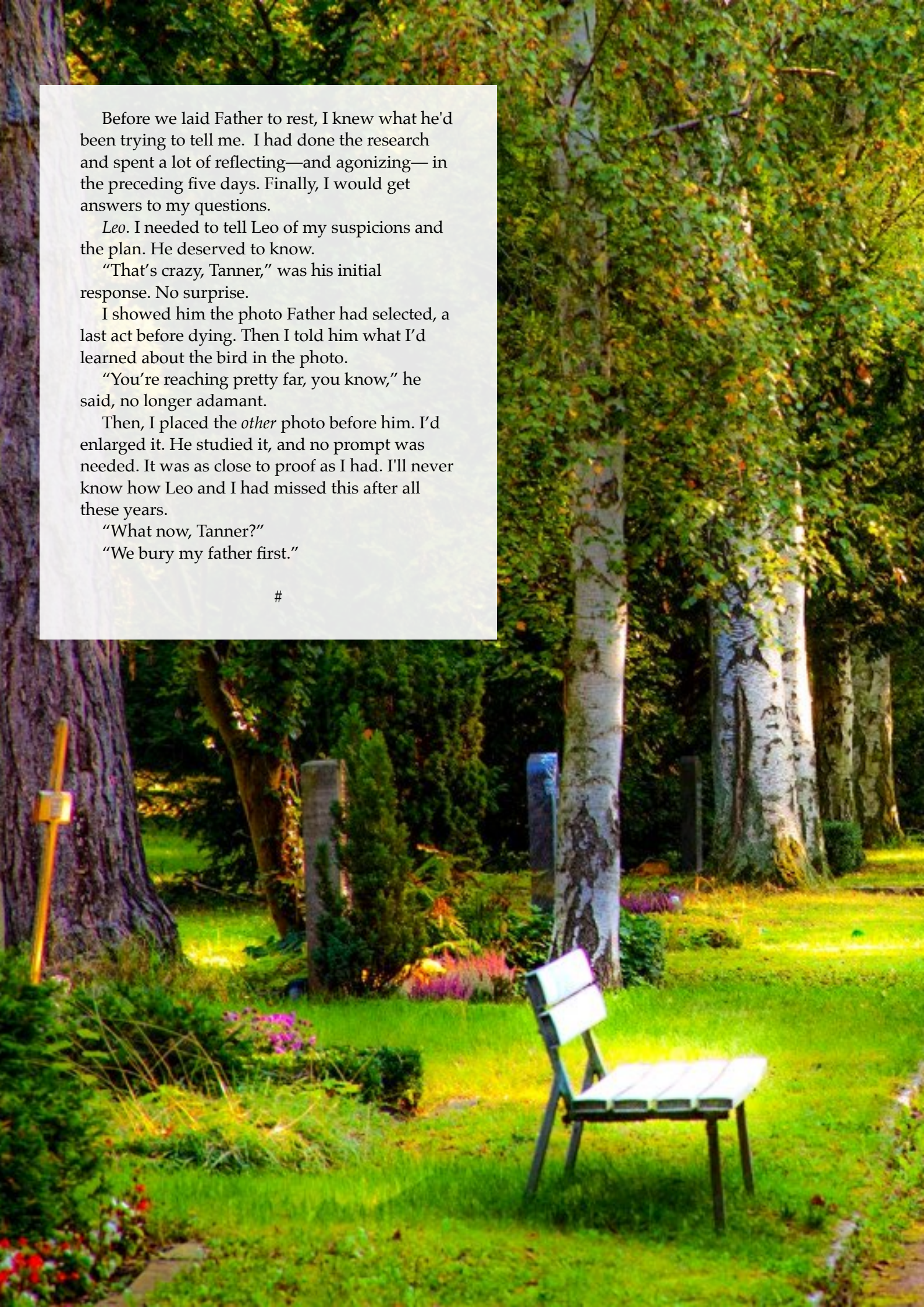
"You're reaching pretty far, you know," he said, no longer adamant.

Then, I placed the *other* photo before him. I'd enlarged it. He studied it, and no prompt was needed. It was as close to proof as I had. I'll never know how Leo and I had missed this after all these years.

"What now, Tanner?"

"We bury my father first."

#





The graveside ceremony was mercifully brief, for we had begun the grieving at the onset of Father's diagnosis. The second mercy, if it can be called that, was that he had not hung on too long with the swift progression of the disease—five months total.

Everyone close to Father cried at the grave. I observed everyone. Mother, Leo, Doc, and his wife. A few other friends attended, and they appeared appropriately solemn. I could see clearly; my tears had been spent.

Looking back as the service drew to a close, nothing changed. I loved Father, and his frequent absences may have contributed to my not seeing what I now suspected. Mother, Doc, and Marie provided a family. And Leo, of course.

Yet, everything changed my world with the knowledge Father imparted. Even then, I only had part of the story. I would not judge anyone on the facts. If I were sixteen, maybe I would, but not at my age, grown and independent.

The plan was simple. After the funeral luncheon at the house, the guests would leave except for those who cried.

As I asked, Mother, the doctor, and his wife gathered afterward on the expansive deck of our house I reckoned we could never afford. The evening had fallen, and despite the warm summer night, I was chilled, and my heart raced. The five of us sat in a circle in the glow of tiki lights amid the *ribbits* of crickets.

"Tanner," said my mother, "why are we here? Hasn't everything been said and done?"

"I'm sorry, Mother," I said. "It's been a long day, but we need to talk while we're together."

Leo looked beleaguered, and his mother confused. Doc had eyes on me. He looked serene, as if prepared for this day.

"Let me read a short excerpt from a paper Father wrote in Europe."

"Tanner?" Mother now looked alarmed, pale, and her hands trembling from the Parkinson's that would take her in time.

"Let me do this," I repeated. "I'll highlight the key passages." I picked up a sheet of paper and read in the light:

"This is as old as nature...how birds steal from each other... millions and millions of years of evolution. The cuckoo is one of the most grotesque...they lay their eggs in another species nest...their chicks hatch first, their babies push the other eggs out of the nest...and the hapless parents feed the wrong baby bird. Yet, cuckoos are a successful and sustainable evolutionary adaptation."

The doctor spoke. "Tanner, I hear what you're saying, but you need to remember humans operate in a different sphere. We have cognition—with purpose and vision. We are unique and—"

"Deceitful?"

The ladies gasped almost in unison.

"Tanner is looking for answers. As am I."

Leo's voice was steady. "Help us out."

"Leo," said the doctor, laying his hand on his son's shoulder, but eyes on me, sad yet maybe glad the decades-long secret was about to be revealed. "We've kept things from you. And from Tanner."

"Hear us out, son. That's all we ask." Mother, composed now, looked like she also knew this day would come.

"We?" said Leo. "So you and Tanner's family were involved in this—affair. And not a small one." Leo's voice rose an octave. "The bird reference makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Doc, a simple question so we can sort this out." Doc's hand was no longer on Leo's shoulder. "Is Leo your biological son?"

Leo picked up the photo that I'd shown him the day before. He turned it over and handed it to Marie, sitting beside him. "It's the photo of us all taken last Thanksgiving. Enlarged."

Marie fingered the photo, her head down. She put her hand on Mother's and gave the photo to her. I was sure that a tear had fallen on it.



Two mothers saw their sons in print, my features and height close to the Graham's. Leo looked remarkably like his mother—the lady I'd called "mother" all my life. I hated to put everyone through this, yet Leo and I had to know.

Doc broke the painful silence.

"You both were born within a day of each other." said the doctor. "Tanner was quickly diagnosed with cardiomyopathy. It presents even in newborns, often hereditary as in this case." The doctor spoke with the calmness and authority of his position, the emotions honed over years delivering bad news. "Our two families had been close before the birth, Eleanor being the head nurse at the hospital. She and Marie were friends."

"Two babies, one damaged, the other healthy, in the same pediatric ward," I said, feeling a tightening in my chest.

"The opportunity presented itself—"

"Opportunity? People's *natural* lives were at stake." I could not contain my outrage.

My mother stopped me with a hand up. "Let us explain." Her palsy was more noticeable in the hand. "We discussed a plan. Just an idea that grew. We were in financial straits, and I, the nurse, could insure your care. The Drakes would take Leo as their son. The—"

"So, it... It's true. You're not my father and mother," Leo said calmly.

"It all happened so quickly, Leo," said Marie. "And our pledge—covenant as you put it—was that we would all be the best parents to each of you. We are your parents. We raised you and met your needs. All of them. Most importantly, we love you. Has anything really changed?" She began to cry. "I had two miscarriages, and this was the last try. I could not—could *not*—lose a child again."

In a moment like this, when emotional bombs are dropped and the mind kicks into overdrive, words can sometimes outrun rational thoughts. I looked to Leo, having had some foreknowledge of the deception and time to think it through.

As a deception—and it was—I realized that maybe it was a loving act of sacrifice. At that point, I *wanted* to believe that.

We waited on Leo, all eyes on him. Both mothers and the doctor had to be relieved at this point. With the truth out, neither Leo nor I had stormed off the deck.

"You're not damaged, Tanner." He faced me. "You're a prince, someone I love like a brother. Our bond might never have happened. Maybe—maybe this was meant to be."

My instinct was to walk over and hug Leo, and I would, yet I needed to know more. I nodded my assent to Leo. Everyone exhaled, I'm sure, and I asked the remaining questions that plagued me.


"Whose idea was this?" I said to the parents, looking at them individually hard in their eyes like a prosecutor. "How did you pull it off? And also, what did each party get in the deal?"

Mother—as I knew her—took the first question. "The idea of switching babies had been around for years. Unintentional nursery mix-ups. Babies have mistakenly been switched to the wrong parents, usually briefly, until tags became the rule." She pointed to the doctor. "We'd both talked about what might happen if a mistake had *not* been discovered."

The doctor continued. "Your father told me about the mother cuckoo laying her eggs in another bird's nest." His voice broke: "We didn't know whether your heart would hold out. And how long? Marie and your father . . . I guess you could say . . . saved us, she being a nurse and—"

"If Marie was willing to give up her natural son, I would care for him." My mother spoke. Her voice was strong.



A silhouette of a woman with long hair lifting a young child into the air. The scene is set against a bright, golden sunset over a body of water. The woman is on the left, looking up at the child who is suspended in the air on the right. The background is a gradient of warm colors from the setting sun.

"We told them we could 'feather the nest'," said Marie directly, "and provide both boys a good life," Marie spoke unabashedly, and I figured then she was the force behind the plan.

"Did you pay off anyone in the hospital?" asked Leo. "To look the other way."

"No!" the doctor and his wife said almost immediately, and Mother shook her head.

"No one else could know," said Mother. "Four people keeping a secret as long as we did was amazing in itself."

"Maybe your father giving you a clue at the end shows how hard it was for all of us to remain silent and hold that knowledge every day so deeply."

The last question had been answered to my satisfaction. "Leo? Anything else to be said or done right now?"

He looked at my mother. "Do I call you *Mother* too?"

That would never be a problem.

#

The five of us became a tighter family and enjoyed even more time together. More meals and adventures than a single traditional family could ever have in the years that followed. Marie took on the affectionate "Ma" to distinguish her from "Mother" when we gathered. There was no confusion in their roles. Doc remained my mentor.

Leo eventually married, never forgetting his "brother," the covenant we kept. As fate would have it, he preceded me in death five years into the marriage, succumbing to a virus overseas.

In the aftermath of that night on the deck, when all was revealed, I did not want to question any of the parents again. The secret, now mine and Leo's, was set aside. Yet I still harbored that doubt that any two couples would ever exchange babies.

I trusted Doc to be the one to deliver the coda if there were one. A sliver of knowledge, some startling fact, to give understanding to the events, to break out with something new. Anything.

Ten years after the revelation, I often visited Mother in the assisted living facility she lived in when Parkinson's had reduced her movements and cognition. She fought depression and her speech and mind were declining. She lived in a world of shadows that sometimes chased her.

One day, in an unusually lucid moment, sitting in the sun, momentarily free of her ghosts, she offered the first words on the subject of my birth since that night on the deck.

"She would have killed." She blurted the words from her shaking body, breathing heavily and looking away from me, her tremors rising.

"Who killed? And why?" I said with no real concern, for she was prone to outbursts at this stage of the disease. I held her hand, and together, ours shook.

"No, not right. I stopped her. She-she wanted. I talked to the doctor." Mother, so frail, looked at me, fearful.

"Who, Mother?"

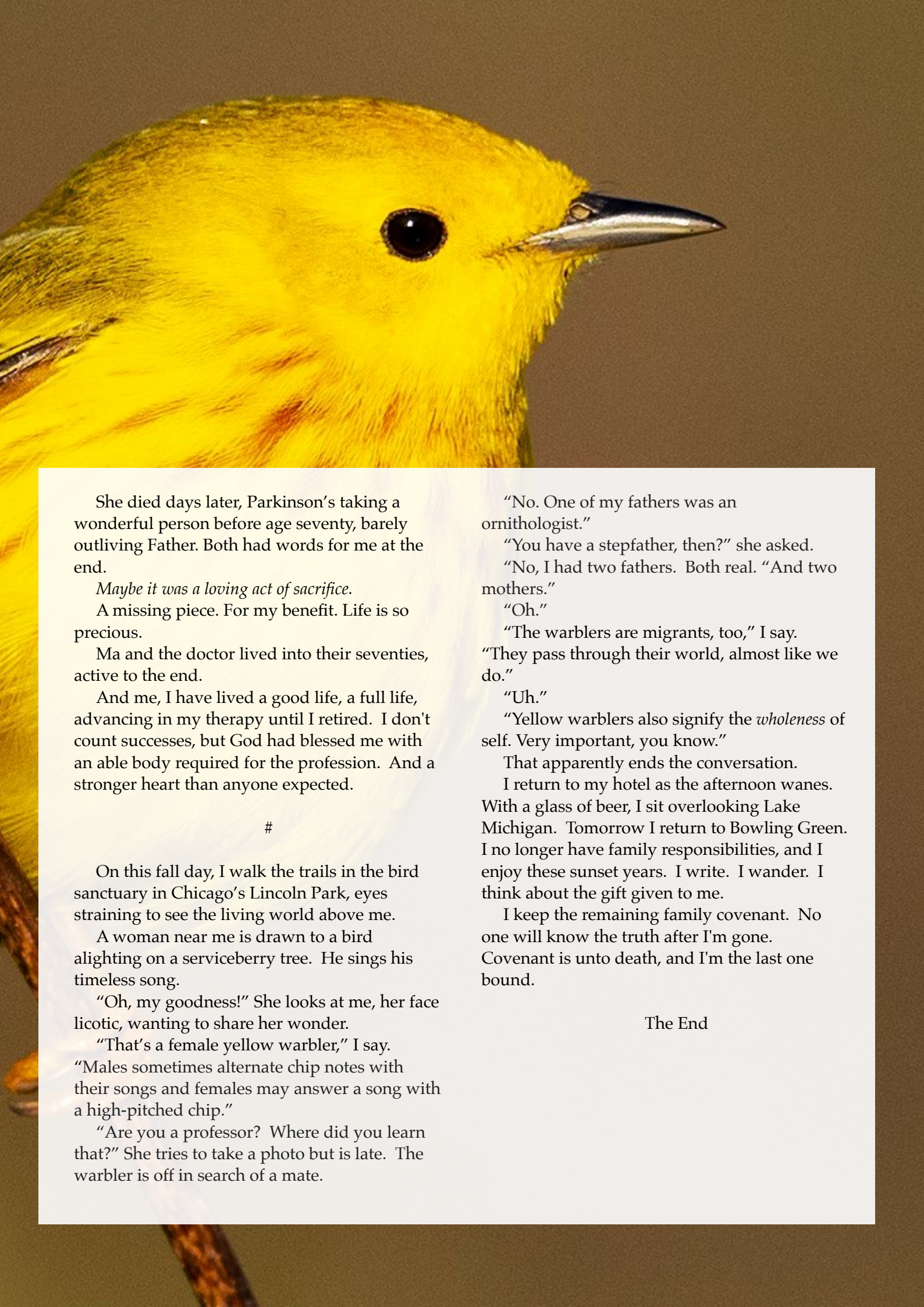
"Another way, I told her. Life. Don't . . ."

"The name. Tell me the name!" I was alarmed now.

"You."

#





She died days later, Parkinson's taking a wonderful person before age seventy, barely outliving Father. Both had words for me at the end.

Maybe it was a loving act of sacrifice.

A missing piece. For my benefit. Life is so precious.

Ma and the doctor lived into their seventies, active to the end.

And me, I have lived a good life, a full life, advancing in my therapy until I retired. I don't count successes, but God had blessed me with an able body required for the profession. And a stronger heart than anyone expected.

#

On this fall day, I walk the trails in the bird sanctuary in Chicago's Lincoln Park, eyes straining to see the living world above me.

A woman near me is drawn to a bird alighting on a serviceberry tree. He sings his timeless song.

"Oh, my goodness!" She looks at me, her face licotic, wanting to share her wonder.

"That's a female yellow warbler," I say.

"Males sometimes alternate chip notes with their songs and females may answer a song with a high-pitched chip."

"Are you a professor? Where did you learn that?" She tries to take a photo but is late. The warbler is off in search of a mate.

"No. One of my fathers was an ornithologist."

"You have a stepfather, then?" she asked.

"No, I had two fathers. Both real. "And two mothers."

"Oh."

"The warblers are migrants, too," I say.

"They pass through their world, almost like we do."

"Uh."

"Yellow warblers also signify the *wholeness* of self. Very important, you know."

That apparently ends the conversation.

I return to my hotel as the afternoon wanes. With a glass of beer, I sit overlooking Lake Michigan. Tomorrow I return to Bowling Green. I no longer have family responsibilities, and I enjoy these sunset years. I write. I wander. I think about the gift given to me.

I keep the remaining family covenant. No one will know the truth after I'm gone. Covenant is unto death, and I'm the last one bound.

The End

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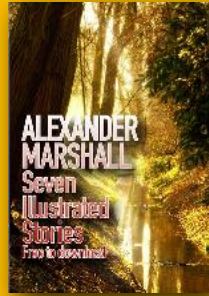
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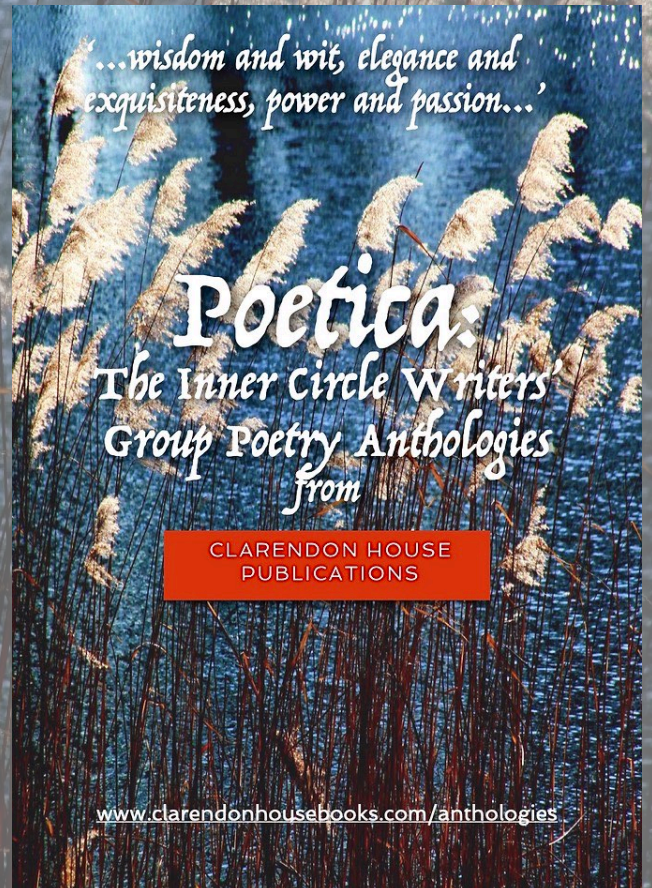
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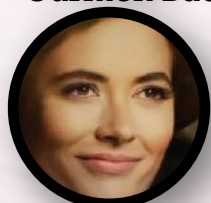
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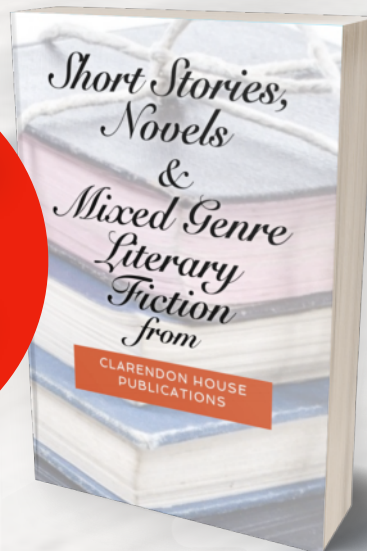
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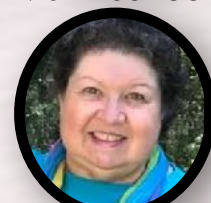
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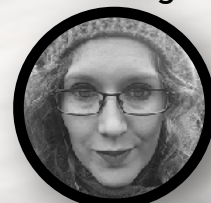
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**One
Silver
Dollar**
by
**Alexander
Marshall**



I have no use for cities, or towns, or the desert, and not much use for folk anyplace. Cities and towns make me itch, the desert makes me sweat; folk make me wary. Give me the mountains anyday: the wind in the wild peaks, the crunch of the cold snow, the fall of rain in the woods and a crackling fire on the hearth.

Such things I mused upon, trekking across the desert. It was only the thought of the mountains that was keeping me from falling from my mare, Sturdy. She had no liking for deserts either, and her tail was flicking like a whip from flank to flank as she paced through the shrub, bypassing Fort Laramie and sniffing ahead to see if she could scent the mountains of her home too.

Up ahead was a town where I figured I would have to stay the night. Sturdy's need for a watering, and my own, outweighed our dislike of such places; my shirt itched, my mouth was drier than sand and my head pulsed from the hot sun, and with every step I wished I hadn't had to ride all that way to

Cheyenne to sign those papers, even if it did mean that High Gulch was all mine now.

But out here in the West, I continued to muse, there was paper-owning and real owning. Putting my mark on a piece of paper back in Cheyenne meant nothing if High Gulch was burned to the ground or full of drifters when I got back. By the time I rode up through the gate it would have been nigh on three months since I rode out. Who knows what mighta happened by then?

I rode into that town real slow and found a place for Sturdy, seeing to her needs afore my own, then I headed over to the hotel. It was almost midday when I strode in: no piano was playing. The place was quiet, but one or two folk were sitting there in the shadows right enough, where it was a fraction cooler. One little group was playing cards over in the corner with about as much enthusiasm as a dead rattler; another gentleman in a long, heavy coat with a hat pulled down over his face looked like he had fallen asleep with his boots up on the table.

Now my pa had taught me that you can almost always tell the nature of a man by his smell, and I had always found that to be true. There was one man, a young fellow with sandy hair and a squint, sitting over by the bar on his own, and I could smell the sourness of his soul before I even got a good look at him. He wasn't looking at me, though - he was watching up the stairs, which wound up to a gallery level above. Some women were up there, the kind you find in places like that, all dressed up hot and fancy and showing too much leg. This young stud was eyeing them up, but I didn't see the usual flame in his face: it was more a cold contempt that writhed there, forcing a squint into a corner of his face as he looked up.

I avoided him and got a water at the bar, followed by a whisky. Afore I could drink the whisky, though, a gloved hand was sliding a folded paper across the bar to me. I looked up, and it was one of the women from the gallery, but her face was covered in a purple veil. She left the paper with me and withdrew quickly into a room at the stair's foot.

I opened the paper. It read:

'This is forward of me, I know, but I need your help. Please visit me as soon as you read this.'

Now I was not a ladies' man. The ways of women confused me more than the ways of bears during mating time in the forests back around High Gulch. Nor was I looking for trouble. If I followed her into that back room, who knew what was waiting for me?

But her purple veil got me. Why wear a veil in her game? I was always a sucker for someone else in trouble.

I glanced around the saloon and no one was paying me much attention, so I slid round the stairs and through the door.

She had her back to me when I walked in. It was a small, dark room, but as far as I could tell no one else was in it. I didn't rightly know what to say. She turned and took a step nearer to me.

'I... I saw you ride into town,' she said. Her voice was so light and soft that I could barely hear her through the veil. 'I have no idea if you can help me... but I am desperate, sir.'

'Matt King,' I said, taking off my hat. 'Call me Matt if it helps any. I don't want no kind of trouble...'



'I'm Lucy,' she said. 'Lucy Black. Or I was...'
I looked around. There were only a couple of plain chairs in there. I gestured to one and she collapsed onto it and began sobbing, holding a handkerchief under the veil.

'I don't know what to do, Mr. King,' she said.

Well, I sure as hell didn't, I thought to myself. I should have stayed out in the bar. I was just about to leave when she managed to say, between sobs, 'The man out there - did you see him?'

'The young, sandy-haired feller? Sure, I saw him.' I was going to add 'And I smelled him too,' but that didn't seem appropriate.

'His name's Caleb Fyre. He's a bad man, Mr. King. He came back into town yesterday, and I have been fearful for my life ever since.'

'Why? Do you know him?'

'He was here last fall,' she said. 'He was a... a client of mine back then. But he was not a client that a girl... well, let me just say that he was cruel. And when I tried to defend myself agin' him, he did this with his knife.'

She pulled the veil back over her head and her face shone out pale. It wasn't too bright in that room, there being only one small slit of a window at the back, but there was enough light to show me a long, ugly scar from her brow through the curve of her right eye all the way to her jaw. Her face had shrivelled into the scar like sand collapsing into a desert gully. And I thought it was a real shame, as the other side of her face was beautiful.

I looked down at the dusty floor.

'Well, that's a real hard thing, ma'am,' I muttered. 'A real hard thing.'

'Do you see why I am afear'd for my life? He's back here, sitting out there, and I'm sure he's waiting for me or will ask for me soon.'

'I can see why you'd be fearful, ma'am. But...'

'But what can you do for me?' she finished my question for me. Her scarred face collapsed into her hands. 'Truth is, I don't know, Mr. King. I saw you ride in, and you looked like a good man. There ain't no good men in this town, or I would perhaps have sought one out. But you're right, I don't know exactly what I was hoping for...'

She began sobbing again, but quieter this time.

'You ain't got no family hereabouts? Or place you could go?' I said, stepping nearer and putting my hand gently on her shoulder.

She shook her head, replacing the veil.

'No, sir. I came out West to get away from my family, and there ain't no one around here to whom I could turn. I have no horse nor any money to leave town - and I figure I would be even more likely to die if he found me away from others, out there on the road.'

'Caleb Fyre, you say? He one of the Fyre brothers?'

'I believe so, yes.'

'They're a bad bunch, all right. Word has gotten around about them and their antics. I daresay some lawman is looking for your Caleb right now.'

'Maybe so,' she said, looking up. 'But out here, the law is scarcer than rainwater, Mr. King, and we make do with the strength in a man's arm and whether or not he can shoot straight. You looked like a man with a good eye.'

'You want me to shoot him? A man has to have a very good reason to put a bullet in another. Not that what he did to you ain't reason enough...'
I added quickly, seeing her turn towards me. 'But I ain't no killer.'



'Right enough,' she said, pushing her handkerchief back up her sleeve. 'And I was wrong to approach you in such a forthright manner. I hope that you will forgive me.'

'Ain't nothing to forgive...' I was about to say, when the door of the room slammed open, almost pushing me into the wall.

'Well, what have we here?' said Caleb Fyre, thundering into the room and knocking the other chair over. His smell filled the space like a cloud, spiced with the scent of the whisky he'd been slugging back as he stewed outside, no doubt. 'I was here first, stranger,' he said, 'and I was waiting for this particular whore. She and I have some unfinished business together.'

I put my hat back on.

'I don't think the lady has any further business with you, sir,' I said. 'Maybe wait a while, till you cool off.'

Caleb laughed a squeaking sort of laugh then, like a rusty gate in the wind, and swayed a little, his squinting face cracking into I suppose what passed as a smile for him.

'Wait till I cool off?' he said. 'Do you know who I am, boy?'

'I sure as hell know you're about to tell me,' I said quietly.

'Caleb Fyre is my name,' he said, doing his best to steady himself on his feet. Even drunk, he was menacing enough: a well-built, tall

fellow, with two polished black six-guns strapped to his belt and a flame in his face to match his name. And his eyes, his eyes were as black as burned out coals. 'Does that name mean anything to you, muttonhead?'

'Sure,' I said. 'I know that name.'

'Did this slut tell it to you?' he said, and suddenly lurched towards Lucy, grabbing her shoulder and shoving her out of her chair and against the wall. He brought his other arm around in a fast swoop and wrenched the veil from her face. Her eyes were wide and a soundless scream came from her mouth. 'This ugly little slut?'

Any man would have had to do something. So I kicked the chair he'd knocked over in such a way that it slid across the floor and slammed into his shins, taking his feet out from under him. He fell heavily, but was back up like a rattler, teeth hissing.

'You filthy...' he began, and went for me, lunging his whole body at me. I was fast, but not fast enough to get out of his thick, lumbering way. The wall thundered into my back, his weight knocked the breath out of me, and things crashed down all around us. I brought both elbows down between his shoulders with as much force as I could muster, and that hurt him, but he grabbed me around the waist and threw me across the room nonetheless.





The bartender poked his head in and poked it straight out again - rather us wreck his back room, he must've thought, than wreck him. My back hurt from being slammed into, but I stayed on my feet and put my fists up.

Blood was streaming from Fyre's nose; he was snarling like a coyote and stinking worse. Why he never went for his guns puzzled me.

'You ain't leaving this room in one piece, muttonhead,' he grunted, and swung at me. His fist caught me on my left ear as I tried to dodge it, and all of a sudden the world was full of ringing bells. I went down and saw his boot coming for my face, but instinct rolled me out of the way and he missed.

I tried to get up, but my knees gave way. He picked up one of the chairs and thrust its legs at me, thinking to impale me - but I grabbed them instead, and used them to lever myself to my feet.

'Who are you, anyway, muttonhead?' he said as we wrestled with the chair between us. 'Just some lousy drifter with no place to go, no name? No one's afraid of you.'

'I'm not looking to make people afraid,' I said, pushing back at him.

'Then you're weak and deserve a bullet,' he said, and, shoving the chair aside, he went for his right hand gun. He was quick; before my eye could follow, his gun was out and I heard a shot. It was loud in that little room, and Lucy screamed - but when I opened my eyes, Fyre was on the floor, holding a bleeding hand, and his gun was over in the corner.

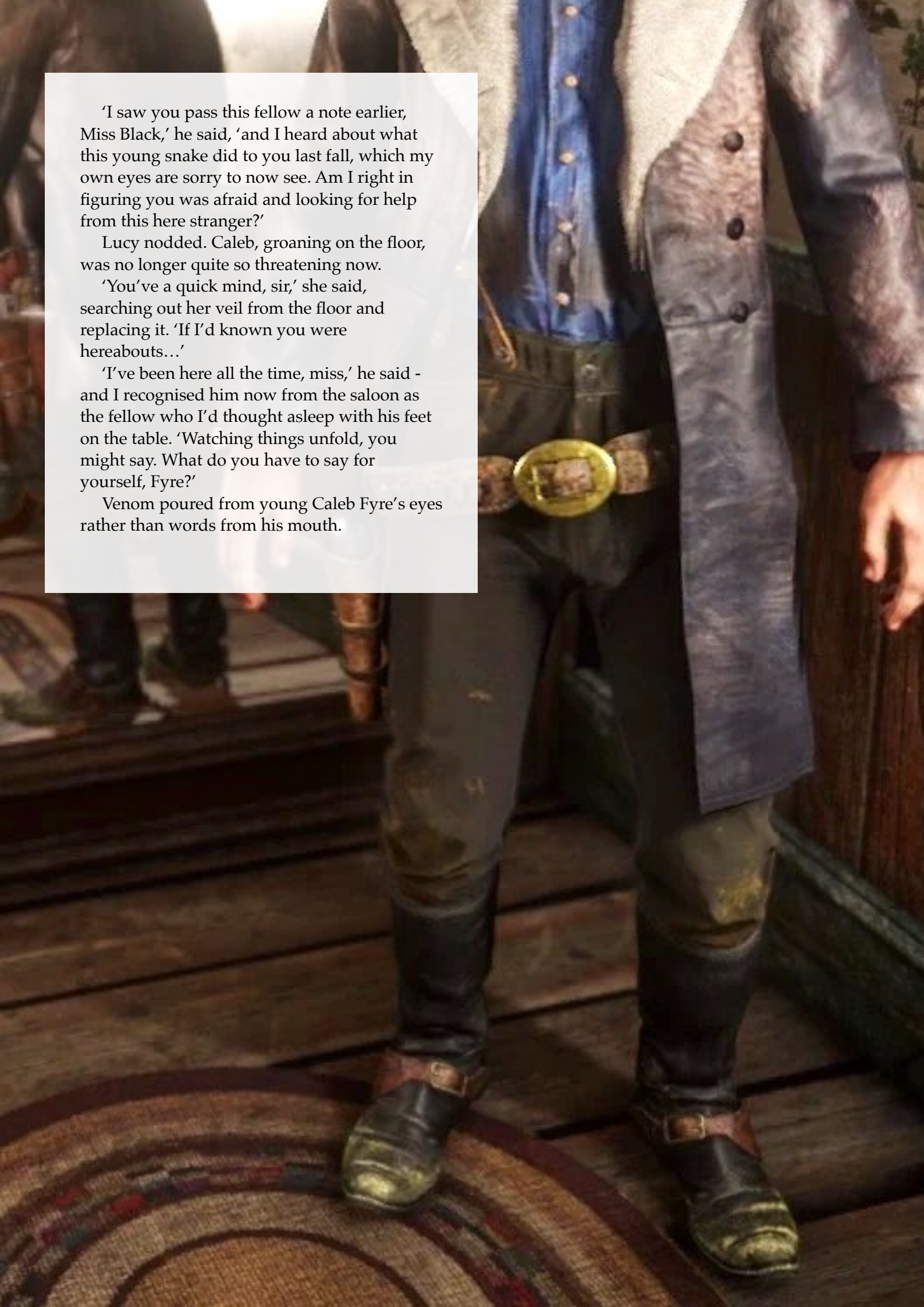
Someone was at the door.

'Stirling!' Caleb cried, looking up.

The newcomer stepped forward. He had a battered white hat and what looked like the remains of a dusty old dark blue uniform under a thick great coat. Too many clothes for this heat, I thought - he had travelled far.

'That'll be Captain Stirling to you, Fyre,' the man said. His gun was still smoking; it was he who had fired. His long brown hair drooped around his shoulders; a tawny, grey-streaked beard and moustache almost concealed a matchstick poking out from his lips. 'Now what in tarnation is going on back here?'

His dark eyes whipped from Lucy's scarred face to Caleb, to me.

A person wearing a long, grey, buttoned coat over a blue shirt and dark trousers with a large gold buckle. They are standing on a wooden floor with a circular rug. The background shows a wooden interior with other people's legs visible.

'I saw you pass this fellow a note earlier, Miss Black,' he said, 'and I heard about what this young snake did to you last fall, which my own eyes are sorry to now see. Am I right in figuring you was afraid and looking for help from this here stranger?'

Lucy nodded. Caleb, groaning on the floor, was no longer quite so threatening now.

'You've a quick mind, sir,' she said, searching out her veil from the floor and replacing it. 'If I'd known you were hereabouts...'

'I've been here all the time, miss,' he said - and I recognised him now from the saloon as the fellow who I'd thought asleep with his feet on the table. 'Watching things unfold, you might say. What do you have to say for yourself, Fyre?'

Venom poured from young Caleb Fyre's eyes rather than words from his mouth.

'I figure you're wondering where your brothers might be,' said Stirling, 'and how they might get on my trail when I ride out of here, ain't you?' Captain Stirling smiled. It was not a smile to fill a Fyre brother's heart with warm feelings, that was for sure. 'You be sure to say hi to Wilson, your elder sibling, now, won't you? He and I have had dealings before.' He holstered his gun casually. 'Now you had better crawl out of here and get that hand seen to by someone, before it turns as rotten as the rest of you. And if I find you in this town again, it won't be your hand I put a hole in.'

Fyre struggled to his feet - none of us were going to help him - and staggered from the room, dripping blood.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Stirling spoke first.

'I admire a man with the courage to help a lady,' he said, taking my hand, 'even when his heart is a-quailing. Captain Stirling. You heading north?'

I nodded.

'Care if I ride with you a while? I'm headed that way myself, and it might be good if we kept each other company at least for a little ways. Where one Fyre brother burns, another will be sure to be nearby,' he said, 'and we'll both need to be watchful for a space.'

I nodded again and he turned to Lucy.

'As for you, young missy, it's not my place to give you advice, but if you were a daughter of mine, I'd be telling you to get out of this town and head for someplace friendlier as soon as you can.'

Lucy's head dipped.

'I'm grateful to you, captain,' she said, 'but if I had a silver dollar for the stage, I would have used it by now.'

Captain Stirling turned to me.

'What say you, youngster?' he said. 'You were willing to risk blood to defend this lady a short minute ago - how about one silver dollar from your new-found fortune?'

'How...?' I began - how could this man know where I had been and on what business?



'Any man who rides into town with a new saddle but an old saddle blanket, new boots but old pants and a new kerchief but an old hat has just been someplace with money that he acquired recent-like,' he smiled, reading my thought. 'This lady can make better use of one silver dollar from you than any amount of your blood.'

I smiled and handed Lucy a coin from my belt.

'Make sure you get out of town soon,' I said to her. 'But even more, make sure you find a better life in the next one.'

I'm sure she blushed under that veil. I knew she wouldn't think I wanted a kiss from her, but

I took the matter into my own hands and bent and kissed her cheek through that purple lace.

'Thank you, Mr. King,' she said quietly.

'Call me Matt,' I said. 'Just once. You'll never have to again, as the stage heads east and I'm heading north.'

'Matt,' she conceded, her head down.

We emerged from the room to see relief on the bartender's face that there had been no more blood. All the town was awake and watching as we rode out north - me on Sturdy on the way home to High Gulch at last, and Captain Stirling... well, who knows where he was riding?



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