

Guarding What Remains
a short story



by
Ida Smith

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Dear Readers,

When I started writing this story, I intended it to be a bit shorter. But, the story had other plans and as a writer I have to listen to the story. I hope you enjoy "Guarding What Remains." This is copyrighted, so if you would like to share it please give your friends and family the following link;

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Sincerely,

Ida Smith

Guarding What Remains

By Ida Smith

“Teddy, stop your barking,” Eleanor tried to soothe the Spanish Shepherd, his white, tan, and black hair raised. Her gaze followed the dog’s focused attention into the pines. “It’s probably just a badger or coyote.” She hoped, remembering the cougar tracks the neighbors had seen down by the lumber mill last winter.

“Eleanor, hurry up,” William called. “Father wants us in the field.”

“Alright.” She took the steps two at time to the log home’s porch, grabbed her worn gloves off the bench by the door and scurried back into the yard to the still barking dog. Ever since the stock market crash two years ago, Father worried they would lose the farm. At first no one thought the events in New York would affect them clear out in North Idaho—but they had. Father’s worry increased last month when the bank closed. Even Mother seemed concerned.

“Come on Teddy,” Eleanor said, and ran to the wagon as her brown braids slapped against her shoulders. She joined her mother, and five siblings, as William, the oldest, flicked the reins and the horses stepped forward. “Teddy.”

The dog looked back at the hay wagon then continued his barking.

“Is Teddy not coming?” Eleanor’s little sister, Lilly, asked, her cloth doll clutched in front of her.

Eleanor wrapped her arm around Lilly to steady the five-year-old as the

wagon jerked and jolted. As the middle child, Mother and Father expected her to help with her three younger siblings so Rose and William could do adult work.

“He’ll come, he always does,” Mitchell said.

“Maybe he’s barking at a bear,” said Raymond, Mitchell’s twin.

Eleanor strained to see into the tangle of branches, needles, leaves, berries, and other plants bordering the north side of the garden. There, what was that? Something red, she squinted as the wagon neared the road, but whatever she saw had disappeared.

The twins poked each other first with bits of hay, then fingers, and finally fists.

“Boys,” their mother said, looking down from her seat next to William. Her stern look settled them down until she turned away.

Eleanor looked at the paved highway, the wild meadows, and the fields bordering it. A short distance away her father cut hay on his horseless tractor. She breathed in the strong, sweet grassy smell.

Her older sister Rose sat behind her, braiding Lilly’s hair. “Raymond, Mitchell, Mother said stop,” Rose reminded.

The boys looked at Rose, stopped punching and returned to poking each other.

A hawk circled above as William turned the wagon into the field. Everyone clambered down and all but Lilly, the youngest, grabbed pitchforks and began turning the hay cut several days earlier so it could dry. The sun rose higher in the sky and melted the cool morning air. By mid-morning, Eleanor was hot and the loaded pitchfork was already heavy in her young hands. She pulled the spare milk can from the shade under the wagon and scooped a ladle of water from it. First Lilly, then Mitchell, and finally her other siblings and mother joined her. Father arrived on the tractor from another field and Eleanor carried a cup of water and slice of cornbread to him.

Her father, Charles, removed his hat and wiped his shirtsleeve across his forehead. “It’s going to be a scorcher,” he said. The family gathered around him. “Kicked up a little fawn hiding in the hay before you all arrived. He scampered away. Pretty soon I saw his mother by the tree line.”

Lilly climbed onto the tractor and her father’s lap, her flour sack dress smudged with dirt. “Did it still have its spots?” she asked.

“Oh yes, he’ll have those for a few more months. He—”

“Father?” Rose stared past her father to the skyline behind him. “What’s

that?”

They all looked to where she pointed. There, above the tree line rose first one, then two columns of smoke. Though faint at first, they gained in density, height, and width.

“Oh no,” Mother said. “Charles, you don’t think...?”

“Everyone get on the wagon. William, get the water can.” Charles handed Lilly to Eleanor, jumped from the tractor, and ran for the truck parked on the edge of the field.

Eleanor lifted Lilly onto the wagon as the rest climbed up. A tightening lump grew in her stomach.

“Ho, let’s go,” William called. The horses started their usual slow trek back to the farm. “Faster.” He flicked the reins and their speed increased. Everyone held on, their gaze fixed on the growing plumes of blackening smoke.

“Why is there smoke?” Lilly asked.

No one answered.

The wagon bounced and rattled as William urged the horses on. With every step the horses grew more reluctant, shaking their heads, neighing, even slowing. Eleanor could see flames above the trees. The air became hotter the closer they got to the farm. She could almost taste the smoke. Though trees fenced off their farm from the road she could hear the snap and crackle of fire.

Several cars had pulled off the road. Eleanor recognized their neighbor’s Chevrolet.

William coaxed the horses onto the long dirt drive before they refused to move further. Everyone clambered down and walked to the yard’s edge. There they stopped. No one spoke. No one moved. Their cheeks flushed with heat.

Eleanor gazed from the house to the barn and back to the house. Her hands shook. She ran her tongue around her mouth—dry. Lilly wrapped her small arms around Eleanor and hid her face in Eleanor’s faded blue dress. Mitchell slipped his hand into Eleanor’s. Behind them, the horses stamped and whinnied.

Their neighbor, George, and several other men stood at a distance. A few had buckets but they hung limply from their hands.

The hissing, popping, snapping, and crackling of the fire as it chewed through their beautiful log home and nearby barn filled Eleanor’s ears.

George approached Father and Mother. “It was fully engulfed when I got here. It’s so hot we can’t get close enough to throw water on it.”

Eleanor glanced up at Mother, her tall sturdy frame motionless. She stared

through the fire as if in a trance. Her skin was ashen, her face older than just that morning.

“Maybe the money will be safe in that milk can,” Charles said to Mabel, their mother.

She didn’t reply.

Eleanor thought about her doll, and the pretty, green dress Rose had outgrown and given to her. She’d never even worn it. Now she never would.

There was a loud crack and the roof of the house fell in, spewing a wave of sparks into the yard and garden. One of the men who still had water in his bucket moved to douse what he could before the fire spread. The others ran to the spring. “William, get the water from the wagon,” Father shouted.

“All those pickles and preserves,” Mother said, her voice flat.

Eleanor’s stomach growled though she didn’t feel like eating.

“What are we going to do?” Rose asked.

Mother didn’t respond.

More cars stopped. Several men came, two with shovels. Others stood at a distance and watched.

“Mother, why is the house and barn on fire?” Mitchell asked.

Mabel only shook her head.

George’s wife, a plump woman with a worn apron covering her pale yellow cotton dress, put her arm around Mother. “Come on Mabel. Let’s find some shade. This must be a terrible shock. Come, I’ve brought some cider. Rose. Eleanor. Bring the young’ens.”

Rose turned to leave and Eleanor noticed gray tears streaming down her sister’s face. It was then she noticed the mostly small but sometimes-large flakes of ash on her arms and clothes, on Lilly’s hair and filtering down around them.

Eleanor started to leave but Lilly clung tighter. “I’m scared.”

“I know.” She released Raymond’s hand and picked Lilly up. “Come, Raymond.”

“I don’t want to.” He scooped up a clod of dirt and hurled it at the house.

“Raymond, come. You heard Mrs. Glendale. We should move away from the fire.”

“No.” He hurled another clod, then another. “I’m not leaving. No one’s doing anything.”

“Rose, come get Lilly.” Eleanor returned to Raymond who was now throwing anything he could find, rocks, leaves, even sticks. “It’s too late.”

“No, no it’s not.” He threw a few more handfuls of dirt that just rained to the ground in fine powder. He plopped down, pulled his legs to his chest and buried his face in his arms.

Eleanor sat down beside him. A sharp squeal startled them as a wall twisted and fell followed by another. A warm tear slither down Eleanor’s cheek and pooled on her ash-stained dress. She pressed her eyes tight. But the harder she resisted the faster they came. She wanted to run away. Run to her special spot near the spring and be alone, just her and Teddy. To bury her face in Teddy’s soft fir.

Teddy? Where was he? He should be here. She scanned the yard, garden, drive, and wood’s edge. She remembered Teddy’s incessant barking at something in the small woods along the north side of their house. Maybe it wasn’t a wild animal. Had he gone after whatever he’d been barking at? “Teddy?” Eleanor stood and looked frantically about. “Teddy? Teddy.”

Raymond looked up. “Where is he?”

“Teddy.” Eleanor ran past her father, through the garden, to the woods.

“Eleanor,” her father called. “Come back here.”

“But Father, Teddy’s gone. I’ve got to find him.”

“He’ll be ok. Go, get Raymond and stay with your mother.”

Eleanor stopped, “But Father, I’ve—”

“Do as you’re told.” Father turned to William, “See if anyone has any axes. We need to cut down those trees near the house before they ignite and we have a forest fire on our hands.”

Eleanor’s breath caught in her throat and hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She ran to their neighbor who was stomping out a small fire burning between the house and barn, “Mr. Glendale, have you seen Teddy?”

He stopped to mop his brow with a handkerchief, “I’m sorry Eleanor, I haven’t seen him.”

Eleanor felt a pang of fear grab her stomach and twist it.

“You’d better take your brother and go over with your mother.”

“I’m going to look in the pasture,” she said to no one in particular and ran past the burning buildings, their heat assaulting her on both sides.

“Eleanor,” someone yelled, but she kept running.

Just west of the pasture, dug into a low hillside, stood the root cellar. Eleanor veered to look inside. Maybe he was in there. She pulled the thick, wood door open, stepped into the dim entry, and opened the inner door. The coolness stung her hot skin; she inhaled the musty smokeless air. The cellar floor was empty—

devoid of the large milk cans Father and William placed there every evening after the family had milked the twenty-nine cows. Father had taken them, along with the cans from this morning's milking, up to the loading dock at Eastport as he did every morning. From there the train delivered them to Bonners Ferry.

"Teddy?" she said, hoping but knowing he wasn't there. She closed the doors, climbed to the top of the hill, scanned the pasture and called for the dog. A few cows raised their heads, looked at her, then returned to their grazing. A halting breath escaped.

Eleanor turned and looked down at what had once been their farm. Father had always warned them to be careful of the lanterns when they entered the barn in the dark. Hay burned quickly and now very little remained of the barn. Where they would milk the cows?

She looked at the house, tears streamed down her face. She couldn't believe what she saw—their sturdy, beautiful log home appeared to have melted. The windows were shattered and the roof gone. From where she stood, she could see the second story floor had disappeared. Several outside walls were gone and the remaining ones had shrunk. A tree near the back corner of the house was now on fire.

Eleanor crept behind the house toward the small grove of pine trees, a safe distance from the burning house. It surprised her how the trees muffled the splintering popping, and cracking of the fire. "Teddy. Teddy." A noise to her left caused her to stop and listen. She walked closer to the north side of the house. The noise was louder here. "Teddy."

Tap, tap, chink, tap. She strained to see and hear where the sound came from. *Tap, tap, tap.* It appeared to be closer to the house. Then she saw it—two men, on the edge of the grove. She didn't recognize them. One wore a blue plaid shirt, the other a tan shirt, their sleeves rolled up. They swung axes at trees trying to keep the small woods from catching on fire.

"Timber," one yelled and the tree fell parallel to the woods and house.

There was a crash as another wall of the house fell and pushed heat and sparks outward.

"Eleanor."

She turned. There, roughly twenty feet behind her stood Raymond.

"Eleanor. Wait for me."

"Timber," called the other man.

Eleanor glanced in the man's direction. His tree wavered. She watched as if

in slow motion it leaned in the direction of her and Raymond who ran toward her. “Raymond, no, go back.”

He stopped and looked first at her and then at the tree gaining speed as it fell.

“Get down, get down.” Eleanor motioned with her hand as she watched in terror as the tree fell toward her and Raymond. She crouched, her hands and arms over her head. Limbs, twigs, pine needles, and leaves fell as the tree sliced through the forest like a knife. It felt as though the woods were crashing down around her. The tree landed with a loud thud. The ground shook. More debris rained down.

She rose to her knees, coughing, and brushed twigs, needles, and lichen from her hair and clothes. “Raymond. Raymond, are you alright?” Her heart thundered in her chest. “Raymond.”

“Eleanor?”

“I’m here. Are you alright?” Eleanor scanned the grove then tried to climb on the fallen tree’s limbs to see him. “Raymond, can you stand up?” The tree shifted under her weight and she fell.

“No.”

Tap, tap, chop, tap.

Eleanor glanced in the direction of the men cutting the trees. “Raymond. Hold on, I’ll be right there.” She tried to move the branches out of her way but they wouldn’t budge.

“Eleanor.” His voice was shaky.

“I’m coming.” She looked toward the tree’s trunk and then the top. She’d have to run around.

Chop, chop, chink, chop.

“Timber.”

Eleanor cowered as she watched another tree shift, then fall into the open space between the house and woods. *Thud.* She ran to the top of the tree and then back around to find Raymond pinned under a branch. “Are you hurt?”

“I don’t know.”

She lifted the limb. “Can you move?”

He nodded and scooted out. “I just couldn’t get out.”

“Come,” she grabbed his hand. They ran around the tree and toward the front yard. They were about to step into the open when, “Timber.” Another tree fell in the yard. *Thud.* The ground shook around them. Eleanor tumbled into a large ponderosa pine fifty feet from what used to be the front corner of their house.

Raymond clung to her. She closed her eyes as dust and pine needles flew up. Nearby the flames that devoured the house dwindled and the men, including William tossed buckets of water on what little remained.

Eleanor bent over, still breathing hard. Something white caught her attention. There, on the ground was a cigarette butt. She picked it up. Examined it, looked back over the garden and yard and remembered Teddy staring in this direction—barking.

“Teddy. Teddy.” She scanned the woods still no sign of him.

“Teddy,” Raymond joined in calling for the dog but he was nowhere.

Tap, chop, chop, tap.

Before another tree fell, Eleanor and Raymond ran to the garden and front yard. At the garden’s edge she stopped. “Raymond, look.” The door of their chicken coop stood open—the chickens gone.

Men continued to throw water on the fire. Only the stone fireplace and part of the corner connected to it remained. Father stood talking to the sheriff. Eleanor ran to him.

“You don’t think there could have been a short in some wiring or a light or radio left on do you?” the sheriff asked Charles.

“No. We were planning to get electricity then the stock market crashed and those plans were put on hold.”

Eleanor fidgeted, wanting to talk, her gaze shifted between her Father, the sheriff, and the empty coop.

“I see,” said the sheriff. The broad shouldered man with a protruding belly eyed her. “Is there something you want to say there little missy?”

She nodded.

“What is it?” Father asked.

“Teddy’s gone and so are the chickens. And I found this,” she held out the hand-wrapped cigarette butt.

Her father glanced across the yard at the chicken coop then down at her hand.

“Can I see that?” The sheriff took the cigarette butt and looked at it.

“Anyone in your family smoke?”

Charles shook his head.

“Father, we’ve got to find Teddy.”

“Eleanor, he is the least of our worries right now.”

“But Father—”

“He can take care of himself.”

“So you just got paid yesterday?”

“Yep,” Charles pointed in the direction of what use to be the kitchen. “Hid the money in an old milk can like I’ve done ever since the bank closed.”

“These are desperate times. I’ve seen a lot more strangers riding the rails and a lot more crime since that fiasco on Wall Street several years ago. I really thought it would stay there. Who knew it would reach us?”

“Stealing our wages is bad enough. I can’t believe someone would be so heartless as to do this...our home...our livelihood...” Father shook his head.

Eleanor stared at her father. Until now, she hadn’t stopped to think how the fire had started, just that it was there—destroying everything they had. Despite the heat, goose bumps rose on her flesh. She slipped her hand into her father’s.

“Charles,” the sheriff said, “I know I’ve already said this, but I’m sorry. I’ll ask around, see if anyone’s seen anything suspicious. You folks have a place to stay tonight?”

“We’ll be up the road at the Glendale’s.”

The sheriff nodded.

From the field behind the burned down barn came the clang of Martha’s bell as the brown and white Guernsey led a procession of cows ready to be milked. Charles sighed.

Several hours later, Eleanor climbed in the back of the wagon with her siblings and took in the charred remains of what had been their farm. Smoke still wisped from hot embers and several men stood watching them.

In the field beyond, the cows stood looking offended as their milk lay in puddles around them. The family had filled what few buckets and milk cans that hadn’t burned or the neighbors had brought. In the end, there wasn’t enough and the cows needed milking. Eleanor cried as the milk squirted onto the dry ground, splattered onto her boots and legs, and soaked into the hem of her dress as it scraped the ground for lack of a milking stool.

* * *

That night Eleanor tossed and turned between several old quilts in the Glendale’s yard. Lilly lay between her and Rose and the twins slept at their feet. She pulled the quilt to her face and breathed in the clean scent. She fell asleep thinking of William staying at the farm with the Glendale’s

son, Johnny, who Rose hoped to marry. The boys were to keep an eye on the fire to make sure it didn't start back up.

But in her dreams the fire did reignite and she jolted awake to the smell of smoke in her hair and clothes. She looked around, trying to figure out where she was. The crescent moon illuminated the edges of the Glendale's house, barn, and other outbuildings. In the dark she heard muffled crying. "Rose? Are you awake?"

"Uh huh," her sister sniffled.

"What are we going to do? Where are we going to live?"

Rose swallowed and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "I overheard Father tell Mother that—" She began to weep again.

"Tell her what?"

Rose drew in a jagged breath. "That—because of the depression and the bank closing no one has any money."

"Everyone knows that."

"Eleanor, without money Father can't rebuild the farm."

Eleanor stared at the dark form of her big sister. Around them the crickets had quieted and somewhere a coyote yipped and was answered by another. She rubbed her chilled arms and smelled anew the smoke that permeated their clothes, hair, and skin.

"No farm?"

The dark form of an owl swept from a tree into a nearby field then returned to its tree—a small creature in its talons.

"Where are we going to live?"

"Spokane," Rose half-whispered half cried. "I'll never see Johnny again."

Spokane. The city was half a day's drive southwest of them. Eleanor had never been there but occasionally someone they knew went and brought home stories of how big and noisy it was, about all the cars, and the stores. She'd seen postcards of the waterfall and advertisements of women wearing nice dresses, men in suits, and even girls her age in pretty, slim cut dresses with lots of pleats, as Mother called them. Spokane where she knew no one and no one knew her.

A star fell through the sky—its bright light there one moment then gone. She thought again of Teddy. Where was he? She crawled back under the quilt, cold, sad, and more alone than she had ever felt.

* * *

In the morning, Eleanor rode in the truck with Father as they returned to the farm. Empty milk cans and buckets clanged and banged together in the truck's bed. Rose followed in the wagon with the twins.

"Why's Mother not coming?" she asked.

"She's staying with Lilly and Mrs. Glendale."

"Is she sick?"

"Sick?" Charles glanced at her then back at the road.

"Well, I don't know. It just seems like she doesn't feel well. She hardly talked at dinner and didn't eat anything. Raymond took three helpings and she didn't even correct him."

Charles pursed his lips. "Your mother, Eleanor, is having a hard time with this."

"What do you mean?"

"I think she's frightened."

"About what?"

"How we're going to care for all of you."

"Rose said we're to move to Spokane."

Charles sighed, "I don't see any way around it. All the money we had was in that house. I'm going to try and sell the cows and equipment but no one's got any money."

"There has to be some way. Can't we cut down more trees and build another house and barn?"

"Not before winter. It's a full time job cutting hay and caring for the cows. We'd be lucky to get a small one room cabin up. Can you imagine all eight of us in a tiny little cabin? No clothes, no cooking utensils, no quilts. No," he shook his head as he turned into the drive. "We're better off selling what we can and starting over in Spokane. Maybe William and I can find jobs there."

He stopped beside the house, not getting out, the truck still idling, and looked over the ruins. Eleanor stretched to do the same. Where the kitchen had been she could still see Mother's Monarch iron range. Mother and Father's metal bed frame sat in the living room. It must have fallen there when the floor gave way. Partially charred beams protruded at odd angles in various places. Here and there light caught on small pieces of glass or metal, but for the most part, everything was black and gray. Eleanor turned away.

Charles shifted the truck into gear, turned into the barnyard, and parked near the pasture fence. Behind them, Rose struggled with the horses. The smell of

smoke still hung in the air and they refused to move forward. Charles got out and assessed the situation. "Tie them up by the apple tree," he told her.

The cows waited in the pasture but seemed anxious. Flies, bees, and yellow jackets swarmed around the now curdling milk. William and Johnny appeared, each with a rifle.

"How did things go last night?" Father asked.

"Fire's cooling down," William said.

"Spent most of our time shooting at coyotes, foxes, badgers, you name it," Johnny said. "Every critter in the county must have smelt that there milk."

"You boys didn't shoot any of my cows now did you?"

"No, Father, we mostly shot in the air, too dark to see anything."

William glanced at Johnny and Eleanor was sure there was something her brother wasn't saying.

"It's going to be mighty difficult milking those cows with all that milk on the ground drawing bees and flies."

Charles unloaded milk cans from the truck. "Well they need milking and we need the money so we'll find a way," he said and handed a rope, wet cloth, and bucket to William. "Start with Martha. Tie her to the fence a ways from the gate." He handed the same to Eleanor, Mitchell, Raymond, and Rose.

Eleanor entered the field and skirted the white muddy patches. Bertha, a brown and white Guernsey, followed her. Eleanor tied Bertha to the fence, washed her teats and sitting on a piece of log her father had cut and brought to her, began milking. Bertha bellowed and swished her tail at a fly.

Eleanor thought about moving to Spokane. If Father and William were going to look for work then they wouldn't have their own farm, their own cows and chickens, maybe not even a garden. This may be one of the last times, if not *the* last time she would ever milk a cow. How odd. She had been milking cows every morning and evening since she was five or six—she counted in her head. That was six maybe seven years. She had spent half her life milking cows.

Bertha shifted her weight and her belly pressed into Eleanor's forehead. Eleanor didn't back away. She inhaled the cow's scent, felt the warmth of Bertha's body against her skin, the softness of her hide. Tears spilled from Eleanor's eyes, some into her milk bucket. She let go of Bertha's teats and wrapped her arms around the gentle cow. Bertha lowed and turned her head to watch Eleanor.

Eleanor didn't know how long she'd sat like that, the bucket firm between her feet, her arms around the cow, her face buried into its side when she felt a hand

on her shoulder. She looked up to see Father. He lifted her to her feet. She flung her arms around his solid frame. "I don't want to leave."

"There, there," he said, his hand smoothing her un-brushed hair. "None of us do."

"Why did this have to happen?"

"I don't know, honey. I really don't know."

She sobbed into her father's cotton shirt until it was wet and she could cry no more.

When she stopped, he lifted her chin with her finger. "Let's get these cows milked and you can ride with me to Eastport."

She nodded and returned to Bertha. They finished milking and loaded the two-foot cans onto the truck. Father gave orders to William and the twins to take water from the spring and douse all the hot spots on both fires so the family could later sort through the remains. "Rose I want you to collect whatever food we have stored in the root cellar."

"Yes, Father."

"What about Eleanor?" Raymond asked.

"She's coming with me," Father said.

Mitchell looked disappointed and Raymond slighted.

"You two have both come with me," Father said. "Eleanor hasn't come in a long time."

"Can you bring us some penny cand..." Mitchell stopped and hung his head. "Never mind."

Father muttered something then climbed in the truck. They rode in silence for the first two miles before Eleanor could gather the courage to ask what had been on her mind since yesterday.

"Father."

"Huh?"

"What do you think happened to Teddy? I called and looked for him in the woods." She paused and looked down at her dry, calloused, hands. "But I never found him."

Father sighed and she noticed his grip tighten around the steering wheel. "I don't know. Your mother said he was barking at something when you left the house yesterday morning."

"He was, and I tried to get him to stop and come but he wouldn't. I thought maybe there was an animal." She thought about the thing. What was it that she

saw? Should she tell him? Could she explain it? Would she get in trouble for not mentioning it earlier? A day later, she wasn't even sure what she saw. "He wouldn't come." Red. She remembered she saw red—or did she?

They arrived at Eastport, with its small general store and gas pump, railroad tracks, loading dock, and several other buildings. Up the road stood the Port of Entry where two Canadians checked cars entering and two American border officers searched returning vehicles for alcohol.

Father backed the truck up to a wooden loading dock near the railroad tracks. "You can go look around the store if you like," he said.

"Thanks," Eleanor said and ran to the wood-plank building whose second-story living quarters looked out over a sagging porch. A bell tinkled as she opened the door. The smells of flour, sugar, and pickles greeted her. She inhaled deeply and a pain in her stomach reminded her she hadn't eaten much for breakfast.

"Why, Eleanor, is that you?" said a thin woman with graying hair that poked out from a loose bun. The woman stood behind a short counter where she once had sold coffee, soda, and pie before people quit having money for such luxuries.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Oh my, I was so shocked when I heard about your home. How bad was it?"

Eleanor froze. She looked at all the wonderful things around her—several bolts of material, a few skeins of yarn, fishing lures, nails, tools, canned beans—and though the shelves were sparse compared to several years ago, it was still so full to her. "Bad." She hung her head. The enormity of their lack and poverty assaulted her. "Very bad."

She looked again at the material and remembered Rose's pretty, green dress that she would never wear. Outside she heard the train's whistle. "I'd better go." She headed for the door.

"Eleanor, wait."

She took a deep breath and turned. "Yes, Ma'am?"

"Here," the woman held out a jar of penny candy. "Take one."

Her mouth watered. She stepped toward the storeowner and reached out to take a piece then stopped and dropped her hand to her side. "Thank you, but I shouldn't. It wouldn't be fair to my brothers and sisters and Father doesn't have any money."

"Pssha," said the woman with a wave of her free hand. "Nonsense. You take a piece for now and I'll put a piece for each of you in a bag. It's the least I can do after all you've been through."

Eleanor looked at the woman then selected a piece of translucent candy. Outside the train's brakes screeched against the metal. Eleanor touched the candy to her tongue and her mouth watered. She licked it, then slid the piece in, ran her tongue over it, and moved the candy to touch every inch of her mouth.

The thin woman selected six more pieces, dropped them into a small bag and handed it to her. "Here you are."

"Thank you."

"These are tough times. Tell your mother I'm praying for your family."

"I will."

She smiled. "You be strong now, you hear?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Eleanor studied the train as she walked back to the loading dock. She felt so small. While the men loaded milk cans, they talked about the fire.

"I heard someone say two men in Chancy Thompson's beat up old truck crossed into Canada late yesterday morning," a railway worker said.

"Who'd he find to buy that piece of junk?" asked the engineer.

"Didn't buy it, stole it."

"Now that's desperate."

"That's not all. I heard tell they had some chickens in a small wooden crate and a long-haired dog like the one I've seen with you a few times."

"Teddy? You've seen Teddy?" Eleanor said, forgetting her manners.

Father glanced at her and she stopped.

"Were these fellows from around here?" Charles asked.

"Don't reckon so. Earl," he called to one of the border officers. "Earl, come here."

Earl, a hollow cheeked young man wearing blue suspenders sauntered over.

"Earl," said the railway worker. "Did you have a couple of men come through here yesterday morning in Chancy Thompson's old truck with some chickens and a dog?" He turned to Charles, "Was your dog black or white? I can't remember."

"He has a black, white, and tan mottled face, white around the collar and chest, and gray and black on his back. Long hair."

"Yeah, I remember seeing a dog like that. Real pretty. The men had him muzzled—said he had a tendency to bite."

"You saw him?" Eleanor leaned forward. "Was he alive? Is he alright?"

Earl shrugged his shoulders. "Looked alive to me."

“What about these men?” Charles asked. “What’d they look like? Have you ever seen them before?”

Earl shook his head. “No, no I...” he paused and rubbed his chin. “No wait, come to think of it.” He stared at the weathered wood of the loading dock. “I think I did see one of them last weekend—nosing around town. He was in the tavern, asking lots of questions and later I thought I saw him checking back doors. You know, wiggling doorknobs, seeing if any were unlocked.”

The railway worker raised his eyebrows. “There you go.”

Earl nodded his head. “You know, I thought he seemed familiar.”

“Did they happen to have a large milk can with them?” Charles asked.

Earl scratched his head, “I don’t rightly know. Seems like...well...may...I can’t say one way or another. Yeah, it’s possible.”

Charles stared at the border crossing. “Damn thieves.” He turned to the railway worker, “Can you tell the sheriff what Earl just told us?”

“Will do.”

“Come on, Eleanor. Time we get back.”

Eleanor walked to the truck. The candy was almost gone now but not the excitement that Teddy was alive. She looked up the road that disappeared into Canada. “Can we go look for him?” she asked her father when he started the truck.

“The man who burned down our house?”

She stared at him, confused. “No, Teddy.”

“Eleanor, they are probably miles and miles away by now. Who knows which way they went after they crossed the border.”

Eleanor slumped in the seat. She chewed the last of her candy, its sweetness spent. They rode the rest of the way in silence. At the farm, they joined the boys in dumping water on the still smoldering remains. Mother, Lilly, and Mrs. Glendale arrived with lunch and they sat on the grass and ate fried chicken and potato salad. Father told everyone about the two men Earl said had stolen Chancy Thompson’s old truck, their chickens, Teddy, and probably their pay from last week.

“Did Earl see a milk can in that old truck?” William asked.

“He thinks so, can’t say for sure.”

Mother sighed and collected plates.

“Don’t we get any desert?” Raymond asked.

“Shush, mind your manners,” Mother said.

“Oh,” Eleanor said. “I plumb forgot.” She dug the small bag from her jumper pocket and shared the candy with her siblings. The storeowner had even

given Eleanor another piece. “Here,” she handed the extra piece to her mother.

Mabel smiled. “That’s very kind of you Eleanor, but you enjoy it. It might be the last piece for a very long time.”

Eleanor thought about this as she savored the candy.

By mid afternoon, they were able to wade through the ashes and rubble. Father and William moved the Monarch iron range to the yard where Mother and Mrs. Glendale worked to clean it. They turned over chunks of charred wood, melted glass, and twisted metal as they scoured the kitchen area. They found Mother’s Dutch oven, iron skillet, and knife blades, their wooden handles gone. But where the milk can that held the previous week’s pay should have been, there was nothing. This news dampened their already down spirits and made the effort of finding anything of value even more necessary.

As the day wore on the water used to put out the fire evaporated and the ash rose in puffs as they stepped on or moved debris. Sometimes a breeze would kick up ashes and blow them in their eyes, mouths, and even up their noses. Eleanor tried to rub the flakes from her eyes, which only made it worse.

They carried Mother and Father’s bed frame to the yard along with the one Rose and Eleanor shared. Only the coils remained of the bedsprings, which they threw in a pile with other miscellaneous metal items they found.

“Where’s my bed?” Lilly asked as she walked the perimeter of their former house, not allowed to enter the ruins.

“It burned, just like ours,” Mitchell said.

“My quilt too?”

“I’m afraid so, sweetie,” Rose said.

Lilly’s little lip quivered, “But...”

“At least you have your doll,” Eleanor offered.

The five-year-old squeezed the rag doll with its brown yarn hair and ran off, “Mother, Mother...”

Eleanor lifted a charred board and found half a plate. She carried it to where her mother and Mrs. Glendale worked to clean salvageable items. “Look, Mother. Look what I found.”

Mabel took the ash and smoke stained white porcelain. She fingered it, rubbed some of the soot away from the hand painted pink roses and gold trim, then handed it back. “I don’t want it.”

“But Mother—”

“I don’t want it. Get rid of it.”

Eleanor took the broken plate, “Yes, Ma’am.” She looked at it. This had been one of Mother’s good plates. The ones she used for Sunday dinner, holidays, and when company or relatives joined them for dinner. Mother had always warned her to be careful when setting the table with these.

What should she do with it? Certainly not return it to the ashes. Why didn’t Mother want it? Eleanor took the plate and set it by the apple tree. As the day wore on, she added other things to the plate, a mangled spoon, a cup handle, a metal button, and an ice skate blade.

After several hours, they were exhausted. The day had been hot and the ashes, dust, and sweat caked to their skin and clothes. As Eleanor gulped water, she watched her family move about. They reminded her of ghosts she’d seen in a school play.

Charles had left earlier in the afternoon to see if he could find anyone in town interested in buying the land, farm equipment, and cows. He returned an hour before milking time. The children, ready for a break ran to their father.

“How’d it go?” Mitchell asked.

“Did you find someone to buy the farm?” Rose said.

Even Mabel and Mrs. Glendale who were about to leave to fix dinner gathered around him.

“No, nothing today. There are a few men interested in the tractor and wagon and several others who might take a cow or two. It’s just no one has any money. I’m afraid it’s going to take some time.” He ruffled Raymond’s hair and a cloud of ash lifted.

“My goodness you children are a mess,” Charles said.

“The washtub’s in the scrap pile,” Mitchell said. “Its side is smashed and has some holes in it.”

Mabel glanced at the pile of metal they intended to sell in town. “Might as well get use to being dirty. Did any of you find the scrub board?”

“I did,” Rose said. “It’s in the back of the wagon.

“We may be homeless, but we’re not going to look like a bunch of...” Father looked over his brood of dirt and ash covered children. “I don’t know what, but you’re a sorry sight for sure.”

William pretended to doodle on Eleanor’s arm.

“Stop,” she said and slapped him creating another cloud of ash.

“That does it,” Father said. “Children, hop in the truck.”

“Where are we going?” Eleanor and the twins asked.

“You’ll see.” Father turned the pickup north onto Highway 95.

In the pickup’s bed, the children exchanged glances. “Are we in trouble?” Mitchell asked.

“I don’t think so,” Eleanor said then looked to William for reassurance. He shrugged his shoulders. “You know Father, sometimes he gets odd ideas.”

Father turned off the highway and headed east.

Eleanor perked up, grinned at William, and leaned around the cab. “You don’t think?”

William put a finger to his lips to shush her. His eyes sparkled despite the dull gray of his face.

“You two know where we’re going?” Raymond said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” William said.

The pickup bumped along the road until it reached a small cluster of buildings called Addie. From there Father drove down to the Mojie River and stopped. “I think you children have earned yourself some swimming time,” he said as he shut the truck’s door.

The boys whooped and jumped from the truck feet running. They were in the water before Rose could voice her protest that they didn’t have their bathing suits.

Charles grinned. “Consider it laundry, bathing, and swimming all together.”

That explanation was good enough for Eleanor who was already on the beach and only lingered for fear of her older sister’s propriety. She ran into the river, her clothes heavy around her. Puffs of gray muddied the clear water like a storm cloud around her. The cool water refreshed her dry skin.

Sooty water dripped from her brothers hair and trickled down their faces. The sight made Eleanor laugh. Soon they all laughed. They giggled. They splashed. William slipped under the water, swam up behind Eleanor, and pulled her under. She popped up, kicking and splashing and soon they were all dunking each other.

“Just a few more minutes,” Father called. “We’ve still got cows to milk.”

Eleanor tried to rub the remaining soot from her arms and face. She untied her braid and worked the water through her long hair. On the return trip to the farm, she combed her fingers through the tangled strands and hoped it would dry before bedtime. The twins giggled and poked each other until they, like everyone else, settled into a quiet contentment.

* * *

The family searched the ashes for several more days. Occasionally they found something of value, a pistol, a metal picture frame with a photograph of their grandfather, a small figurine, and a toy car the twins fought over. At one point, William found a beautiful, hand-painted serving bowl with green edges and gold decorations that edged the hand-painted roses. It had survived a fall and was nestled in a spot that hadn't burned. This was the one item mother cherished. But mostly they found things like doorknobs, window latches, nails, and things they couldn't identify.

Charles sold the scrap metal to a welder. He traded the horses and wagon to the mercantile owner for three mattresses and a set of dishes. He sold a few cows to people who just wanted a milk cow and bartered a few others for quilts, canned produce, a salt-cured ham, venison sausage, and clothing. The rest he shipped by rail to the Spokane stockyard, hoping someone there would buy them.

A week and a half after the fire Eleanor helped load the mattresses, quilts, and food onto the back of the truck. They arranged, shifted, and rearranged things to make room for the kids to sit. In a corner, Eleanor hid the broken plate wrapped in a piece of cloth.

Once everything was loaded, neighbors and friends gathered to say their goodbyes. They filled two wooden crates with loaves of fresh baked bread, hardboiled eggs, ham, apple butter, honey, biscuits, smoked trout, carrots, tomatoes, pickles, and rolled oats.

They waved good-bye and headed south. As they neared what had once been their farm Father slowed the truck and pulled in. Eleanor looked first at William then Rose. "Why are we stopping?"

"I don't know," Rose said.

Charles stopped the truck and got out. He stood in the drive; his shoulders slumped. They all watched him.

Eleanor climbed down and stood next to him. She slipped her hand into his. They stood in silence for several minutes and looked over what had once been their lives.

"William," Charles said. "Get the empty milk can and fill it with some of that good cool spring water."

"Yes, Father."

“Let’s go pick your mother a rose.”

The other children joined them as they walked to the garden. Only Mother remained in the pickup. Father took out his pocketknife and began cutting yellow blossoms off the bush and handing them to Eleanor. When a thorn pricked her, she accidentally dropped the bouquet. As she bent to pick it up she noticed a movement at the edge of the woods. There, muddy and limping was Teddy.

“Aahha,” she gasped and flung the flowers at Rose. “Teddy.” She ran to the dog and flung herself on him. He flinched but didn’t growl.

“Teddy,” the rest of the children called and ran to him. “Teddy, you’re home.” They petted and cooed over him.

Teddy raised his head, his pale blue eyes looking at Charles who stood over them.

“So you made it back, ol’ Boy.” Charles knelt and lifted one of the dog’s paws. It was worn and caked with dried blood. “How far did you travel there, character?” He turned to William who had just returned with the water. “Better bring that over here, looks like Teddy needs a drink...and a bath if he’s going to ride in the back with you.”

Eleanor sat in the truck’s bed, her arms wrapped around the wet Spanish Shepherd. As the truck turned south onto the highway, the last thing Eleanor saw was the lone fireplace, blackened—standing like a soldier guarding what had once been their life.

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