

Bucket of Worms

The day's torrential showers began to simmer to a gentle drizzle that would eventually subside to a stagnant mist. Maisie Shrewsbury looked longingly out to her backyard through her rain streaked bedroom window. She teased the braid in her hair that her mother had perfected earlier on in the day. *It's finally letting up*, she thought as a hot breath escaped her mouth, shrouding her view. She pressed her hand to the cool glass, leaving a fogged imprint of her palm as she fled the window sill to her supplies downstairs.

Under the kitchen sink, Maisie retrieved her aluminum bucket, the one used as a catch basin for the leak, and a plastic jug with most of its label rubbed off over time. She hurriedly slipped on her olive green rain boots and pushed the slider open to the backyard. The air was thick and humid, the grass washed out and flattened by the summer rains still to begin the recovery process. Maisie took a deep inhale of the waterlogged landscape and focused in on her work. She placed the jug down with the bucket beside it and knelt to the soft earth with the soggy, saturated grounds leaching into the stitching of her jeans. Slimy wriggling bodies began to surface from the soil. With a calculated efficiency, Maisie began to pluck the soft bodies from the substrate, observing a momentary helpless squirm and struggle in mid-air, then dropped them into the bucket, *plunk, plunk, plunk*. She looked in on them and smiled softly. She loved them. It's not *their fault* for getting caught in the rain. She then added a few splashes of liquid from her jug, *glub glub glub*, followed by more wriggling captives, *plunk, plunk, plunk*. She peered in to watch for a bit before dumping the contents out, *bwoosh*, and starting again.

Meanwhile, several miles away Archibald Shrewsbury, a stern man not known for mincing words, had been hit with some burdensome news. The county railroad was complete. Wrenchman's Log Drive Co. has gone under. Today was Archibald's last day of work. One by one the workers were peeled away like dead skin from sunburnt flesh. Today was his day to endure the grip of the callused hand tearing away the old, dried flesh. It's not *his fault* for getting caught on the wrong side of innovation. Miles away, Maisie added. *Plunk, plunk, plunk*.

Shelly Shrewsbury glanced out the kitchen window at her daughter in the soggy lawn as she collected her worm farm. She giggled to herself at the sight and returned to her dishes. She looked up again and opened the window a crack. "Maisie, dear! Please leave your boots outside when you come in! No mud tracks, please!" Maisie raised a pruning, dirt-caked hand in response, dismissing her mother's concerns. Shelly giggled again.

Just then, a fiery barrage of obscenity came bursting through the front door. Shelly turned abruptly, knowingly, to a furious Archibald bee lining for her. What followed was an orchestra of distorted slurs and percussive hits emanating from the home that continued to crescendo, *thwap, thwap, thwap*, until a gentle waning of moans resolved a familiar ensemble. Maisie remained facing her bucket. A small tear welled and began to forge a river down her cheek as she envisioned her mother. It's not *her fault* that father has a temper. *Plunk, plunk, plunk*.

A quiet lull hung over the household as the symphonic raucous died to scattered mutterings. Archibald retired to a room with separate beds, slamming the door as he exited. Maisie looked back to see her mother through the kitchen window, head down, face red, but not of blush. She retreated to the back slider, abandoning her post as the warden of the worms. "Mommy, are you-?" She was cutoff as the sliding door shut behind her. "Maisie!" Shelly yelled, and accidentally dropped a glass to the floor which shattered to a million tiny shards. "Mud! You're tracking mud on my-!" Maisie moved quickly to assist with the cleanup and sliced her palm on the scattered crystal fragments. "I just-", she started. *Thwap!* The familiar sound echoed off of her cheek, her blush now matching that of her mother's. "Oh honey I-", Shelly started. Maisie looked away for a moment, allowing one more tear to escape her eye. Maisie sniffled and bit hard on her lip as she turned back to the sliding door. It's not *her fault* that Mommy gets frustrated.

Maisie returned to her bucket, resuming the growth of a wet stain on her bottom from the battered, weather torn lawn. She stared blankly at the contents of her bucket, her cheek roaring in pain. Finally, she added three more occupants. *Plunk, plunk, plunk.* She stares down at them softly and sniffled again. She reached for her jug and unscrewed the cap. The smell of the bleach was almost overwhelming. She poured it again into the bucket. *Glug, glug, glug.* A small stream of blood trickled from her hand and into the cocktail, forming a red swirl that disseminated into the brew. She watched as the worms writhed and danced. It's not *their fault* for getting caught in the rain. She smiled faintly and dropped three more worms in the bucket. *Plunk, plunk, plunk.*