

No Guts, No Glory

My sister Sally had been inspecting the Mayor's Palace for the past forty minutes. Her notebook was out, and every now and then she paused, tapped her pencil to her chin, and jotted something down.

"Still looking for clues?" I asked from my perch. I'd found an apple tree behind the dilapidated house she was exploring with a bough just wide and flat enough to lie on comfortably.

"Mhmm," Sally said. She nodded and strolled around to the far side of the Palace, even though she'd walked around the whole house at least five times by now. We'd dubbed it the Mayor's Palace because it was at least three times the size of any of the other abandoned miners' shacks we'd seen along this part of Porcupine Creek. It seemed only fitting that the guy in charge would have lived there.

Below me, Eleanor Rigby looked up and whined, cocking her head to one side.

"Well come on up then, Ms. Rigby," I told her, patting the empty spot next to me. "Come on!" Eleanor Rigby barked, and rose up, resting her front paws on the trunk. It was mean to tease her, I knew that, but I was bored.

A couple months ago, Dad sold the flooring supply company he ran with Pop Pop to lease a mining claim up here in Alaska—106 acres of forest and rock, plus everything we needed to build a gold trommel wash plant. Dad and Pop Pop say there's \$250 billion in the dirt here. You just gotta know where to look.

"Cassie!" Sally yelled. "C'mere, I found something!"

With a sigh, I sat up and swung down from the tree. So far this summer, my sister had found a piece of an old snowshoe, a dented tin cup, and a copper belt buckle scabbed over with green rust. She made meticulous sketches of these treasures and wrote down exactly where, and at what time, she'd found them. She claimed to be piecing together the "Mystery of the Missing Porcupine Creek Miner," as she'd grandly titled the first page of her notebook.

My sister stood in the largest room of the Palace, in front of what was once a fireplace. The brickwork in the chimney had almost completely caved in, but the hearth had been solidly built. Her hands were cupped carefully around a small object, which she held out for me to see.

"It's a brooch," she said breathlessly. It featured the profile of a young Victorian woman, carved in white stone and outlined with delicately wrought metal. Her gaze was demurely cast down, and the portrait's angle accentuated her perfect snub nose. Even I had to admit that it was lovely. "I found it in the fireplace," Sally said proudly. "I think this is my best find yet."

"Congratulations, Sally," I said dryly. "Now can we get the heck out of here?"

She nodded, and we started our walk back to camp. My sister was thirteen, only a year older than me, but she acted like she was younger. When they'd first begun planning for this three-month mining expedition, our parents and the other adults hadn't thought Sally and I were old enough to come, especially since Mom had to stay home with Pop Pop and our little brother Malcolm. But they underestimated how stubborn I can be.

I began pleading my case back in January. With Mom, I'd expounded on the educational and character-building potential this trip would have for us. Whenever Dad

was around, I listed all the chores Sally and I could be responsible for, assured him we'd stay out of the crew's way, and that we could take care of ourselves. He finally relented in mid-spring, and I knew it was only a matter of time until Mom did as well, but she had conditions. I had to promise I wouldn't let anything happen to Sally, and that I'd call her right away on the satellite phone if it ever seemed like Dad "wasn't acting like himself." By that, I knew she meant that I should call her if he got too drunk.

We got back around 5pm, and the crew—our Uncle Dave, his teenage sons Ryan and Dylan, and four of Dad's old construction buddies—had just started gathering around the campfire. After saying grace, we tucked into our usual dinner of baked beans and hot dogs, and afterwards, Sally and I did the dishes.

Our room for the summer was built from pine logs and a canvas roof stretched taut across the top. Sally and I slept on a trundle bed against the left wall, and Dad's bed was against the wall opposite the front door. There was a wood table and two chairs just to the right of the door, and small windows over the beds.

After dinner, Sally lined up her treasures on the windowsill at the back of the cabin, while I settled into bed with Eleanor Rigby.

Dad took his place at the table in the corner, shuffling through maps and account statements while prodding at his oversized calculator. After a few minutes he spoke without turning around.

"Alright girls, lights out."

We turned off our lamps, but Dad kept his on, as he always did. After a little while, he walked over to our beds to see if we were sleeping. I shut my eyes tight, and tried to match my breathing to Sally's, slow and heavy. I could feel his presence as he

stood over us. Once he was satisfied we were asleep, I heard him walk back to the table and uncork his bottle of bourbon—the pop of the cork, followed by liquid being poured into a glass.

Before we'd left for Alaska, I'd poured some of Mom's perfume on a pillowcase and stuffed it into the bottom of my suitcase. I pulled my pillow over my head and pressed my nose into it, breathing in deep. It made the back of my eyes prick with tears, but also feel weirdly good. Safe. I fell asleep before I heard him pour another.

The next morning, we woke up to the sound of someone knocking on our door. Dad was passed out facedown on the table, his arms outstretched, the fingers of his right hand still curled around his glass.

We heard a quick succession of banging followed by our Uncle Dave's voice. "Chris? Girls? Everything okay?"

Sally and I looked at each other. If we answered for Dad, it'd be a dead giveaway that something was wrong.

Another quick succession of pounding. "Chris? Open up, man."

Without a word, without even looking at each other, Sally and I got out of bed and crept over to the table. I poked Dad's arm. Nothing. I grabbed his shoulder and shook it. Sally stood by, watching, biting down hard on the knuckle of her right thumb.

"Girls? You in there?" Dave sounded worried now.

"Yep!" Sally chirped. "But, uh..."

She caught my gaze, wild-eyed. I shrugged in response, and then threw all my weight into Dad's ribs. He mumbled something and shifted slightly, but didn't get up.

“Sally. Cass. Can you please let me in?” Dave’s voice was measured; he was talking to us the way Mom did when she asked Malcolm to please brush his teeth and get ready for bed for the millionth time.

“We’re getting dressed, Uncle Dave,” I hollered. “Just a minute.”

Dad was talking to himself now, still half asleep, and Sally looked at me with panic in her eyes. I threw my body against him one last time, bony elbow first. With a loud groan he sat up, knocking over the open whiskey bottle as he did.

“Aw fuck.” He looked at me and Sally, his eyes stupid and vacant. We stared back at him, Sally open-mouthed. His gaze fell on his watch, then to the door, his awareness of the situation becoming clearer by degrees.

“Gimme a minute, Dave.” Dad lurched across the room to his duffel bag, pulled out a bottle of Listerine and swilled it back. As he did so, he looked at himself in the small camp mirror we’d tacked on the wall. He smoothed his graying hair back with one hand and swiped a stick of Old Spice under each armpit. He hadn’t showered for a day or two, and tufts of his hair stood up at odd angles. Behind him, Sally picked up the overturned bottle and empty glass and tucked them under Dad’s bed. The smell of Wild Turkey hung thick in the air.

Dad strode past us and opened the door, all smiles. He forced Dave along with him, away from the cabin, with the sheer exuberance of his stride. “Wasn’t in the mood for breakfast this morning,” he said by way of explanation, without pausing to allow for any questions. “Now where are we on fixing that shaker?”

The door banged shut after them, and Sally’s shoulders sagged with relief. She grabbed a used bath towel that was flung over the foot of Dad’s bed, and grimly dropped

it over the bourbon-soaked papers and maps, pressing down to blot them. I saw my reflection in Dad's shaving mirror. I looked limp and useless, standing next to his now-empty chair. Eleanor Rigby lay down next to me and let out a low kean.

"I don't think she likes the smell," I said softly. Sally didn't respond. She removed the towel from the wet papers, hung it over the back of Dad's chair, and opened the nearest window. I watched as she spread the damp papers and maps over his bed to dry, and then settled down cross-legged on her bed. She pulled out her notebook and began writing.

I cleared my throat, conscious of how loud it was over the soft scrawling of pencil on paper. "I'm gonna take Eleanor Rigby out."

"K," she said without looking up.

I paused for a moment, hoping my sister would say something else. But she didn't. And I didn't know what to say. So I left with Eleanor Rigby.

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For the next three nights, Dad limited himself to two cans of Coors Light a night. But on Friday afternoon, I noticed his truck was missing, which meant he'd gone to the makeshift general store up the road for supplies. And more booze.

That night, I heard the pop of the cork, and listened as Dad poured himself a glass. A tall one, by the sound of it. And I didn't go to sleep. I forced myself to stay awake. In my head, I silently sang through the first side of *Revolver*, my favorite Beatle's album. I heard him pour a second, and I started in on all the Johnny Cash songs I knew by heart. I'd gotten to the chorus of "Folsom Prison Blues" when I heard him pour a third. I opened my eyes and saw his head start to nod forward. The first few times his

chin fell to his chest, he jerked his head back up again. But eventually, he slumped forward over the table.

I rolled off the bed and onto my feet. I replaced the cork stopper in the bottle and quietly set it on the floor with the half-empty tumbler, well out of Dad's reach. His breathing was still relatively shallow. He hadn't fallen into a deep sleep yet. I gripped his burly shoulders, and leaned down close, my lips nearly grazing his ear.

"Dad," I said, shaking him lightly.

"Dad," I tried a little louder. I glanced back at Sally. She rolled over, still asleep. I wrapped my left arm around as much of Dad's torso as I could, and pressed my shoulder up under his armpit, straining to lift him up off the chair.

"Dad, please. Let's get you to bed." I heard my voice catch on the last word. He was snoring loudly by now, and he was just so heavy. I felt my lip quiver and took a quick, sharp breath in through my nose. I looked up at the white canvas ceiling, willing my tears to flow back into my head.

I didn't notice Sally come up behind me, on Dad's other side, until I heard her voice. "Let's go," she said cheerfully. "Time for bed."

With her working his other side, cajoling him off the chair, we managed to ease him up onto his feet, and he staggered across the short distance to his bed. But just before collapsing onto his air mattress, he grabbed at the nearest ledge to steady himself, knocking all of Sally's clues to the floor. He passed out facedown, with his shoes still on, and was snoring loudly again in seconds.

I pulled off his shoes while Sally robotically picked up her treasures and replaced them, one by one, until she got to the brooch. It had cracked down the center, right

through the carved lady's lovely face. She ran her thumb back and forth across the cracked surface a few times before finally putting it back on the sill with the others.

“Oh Sal,” I said. I put an arm around her shoulder, but she stood perfectly still, so eventually I withdrew my arm and retreated to my bed. I lay face up, my hands clasped over my belly, wide awake.

My sister stood there for a few minutes, looking at the items on the windowsill but staring past them. After she got back in bed, I heard her roll over to face the wall, and she started to cry—soft tears that quickly turned into muffled sobs. I felt something twist in the pit of my stomach as I lay there listening to her.

Without planning to, I got out of bed and grabbed the glass tumbler and bottle from the corner where I'd stashed them. I slipped out the front door and ran blindly toward the forest. Without a light or shoes, I stumbled through the trees, tripping over roots and rocks, flailing for balance as I kept the tumbler aloft in one hand and the bottle in the other. I could see moonlight filtering through the canopy up ahead, where the trees broke into a grassy clearing studded with small boulders. I hurled the tumbler at the one closest to me. The tinkling of broken glass sounded magnificent in the still night. The bottle came next. I held it by the neck and swung it like a baseball bat into a tree, feeling its weight slam into solid wood. The spray of amber liquid that burst forth caught the moonlight, and I watched it drip from the broken neck. For an instant, it was beautiful; but then I threw what was left of it at a rock near my feet, and it shattered into tiny shards that were swallowed up by the darkness.