

Lost and Found

Home cave.

Cold. Dark. Silent. Dying trees. No crops. Toxic yellow clouds of sulfuric acid rained down on monochromatic landscapes and dead cities. Poisoned. No food. No water. No color. Plunged into a dark, six-year winter, almost all of the seven billion humans were exterminated by starvation. The planet-killing asteroid struck the Earth with such force that everything within a hundred-mile radius was vaporized instantly. Choking dust and smothering shrouds of supervolcanic ash covered forests and croplands thirty feet deep for five hundred miles and up to two feet to continental coastlines.

Even now twenty years since the catastrophe, around fifty thousand scattered survivors across the globe scratched out a meager existence. Looting stores, warehouses and factories happened early on. Mining waste dumps and landfills occurred later. Some survivors dug up viable seeds, which they planted in guarded pockets of soil excavated from beneath the ash layer. If discovered, plunderers often killed sowers to devour the meager garden plots.

Beyond several hills in a cold, sparse Wisconsin valley, a young, malnourished mother with her new baby, Nadia, for ‘hope’, and grandfather inhabited a small cave for shelter with a trickling freshwater spring. Nadia never knew her father, and after turning three years old, her mother died.

“ ‘Spring flower’, that’s what she called you,” Grandfather always said. “Whole meadows of wildflowers returned every spring.”

Pondering the words over and over, ten-year-old Nadia sensed both comfort and loss. The wooden dolls Grandfather had carved differed in gender, complexion, posture and temperament,

depending on which uprooted stump or knotty limb he used. But the very different dolls in Nadia's arms, two boys and two girls, listening intently, all felt the same confusion.

"Fathers and mothers go looking for flowers but never come home," she observed to her concerned dolls. Neither Nadia nor her dolls had ever seen a flower. "Flowers must be hard to find," she concluded. Her companions looked anxiously at her. "Don't cry, I'm here," she reassured them, softly rubbing away furrows from their brows. Nadia had often smoothed galls, beetle scars, bothers and blemishes from their chiseled, angular faces and extremities through hours of loving play and gentle pumice stone grooming.

They watched as she departed on her daily task of collecting firewood. She always came back from her mission, but the dolls had seen many times day and night when she returned to the cave without as much as a twig.

At the hard mud hearth, she caressed a ruby pendent on its golden necklace dangling on her chest. How it sparkled in the firelight. It was all she had left of the love she felt for her mother, and more remotely for her unknown father. Gazing into the fire, she recalled Grandfather saying that her mother's matching pendant had been lost at the time of her death. A puzzled look clouded her face in reverie, then cleared as another thought emerged from the glowing red coals. She heard from as far back as memory allowed his assuring words, *There's plenty of love left in your red ruby for both of us*. Her half-dozing eyelids flickered.

"Together they're looking for red flowers, ruby red flowers ... no, rubies!" the throbbing embers whispered. The fire flared. Yet another perplexity swirled up as Grandfather's past voice echoed in her entrancement. "Never to go to the village waste dump! The landfill is dangerous!" Blinking awake, her mind grasped only a fleeting jumble of hazy images dissolving in a taper of smoke.

Claim jumper.

“I’m tired of stories,” Nadia snapped.

“Checkers or chess then?” Grandfather asked. Humming one of her favorite songs, he reached for the game pieces he had carved.

“So boring! Do we have to?” She rolled her eyes then looked away. Staring at the dolls, she pouted, “I’m not a baby, you know.”

“Another time.” He picked up a block of wood and began whittling. The dolls waited for Nadia’s brooding cloud to dissipate for a lovely tea party she had planned several days ago.

Nadia pretended to sleep until her Grandfather’s snores drummed steadily. She slipped out into the night as she had many times before. Exhilarated, she winked gaily at her imaginary star friends and sky animals.

“What will I find tonight?” she asked.

“We know what you will find. We see everything,” they nodded.

“How exciting! Won’t you give me a hint?”

They just winked and pointed the way.

“Well, all right, it’s more fun anyway.”

At the reeking landfill, Nadia tied a scrap of cloth around her head and pulled a triangle down over her nose to blunt the unbearable stench. Peeking from behind a row heap of rubbish, she crept on hands and knees to a low spot not yet explored. It was hidden in shadows of rusting hulks of abandoned cars and appliances, all jumbled in rotting, ashy filth.

“Something for my collection,” she anticipated while sifting and probing the foul surface with one of the knuckleheaded boy dolls. *Good for digging anyways*, she thought, thrusting its bald, lumpy crown into the ground. Now and then a wind gust sound or scudding cloud shadow

startled Nadia alert. *Don't be scared, silly*, she scolded herself, quickly resuming her digging.

Two hours later when the moon reached its crest, a dazzling reflection lit Nadia's face.

"Oh, such pretty colors!" she fluttered. A broken rainbow of stained glass windowpanes glinted in the fresh hole before her wide eyes.

In the same instant she quickened upon hearing an abrupt movement and loud shout from the other side of the row pile.

"Got you!" a raspy voice boomed.

From her knees, Nadia dropped flat, face down and trembling. With eyes nailed shut and fists clenched around the knucklehead's throat in tension, she fought the impulse to jump and run.

A hideous cry pierced the night as a heavy thud reverberated across the landfill.

"Thievin' lout's good and dead now!" the same voice shouted beyond the berm.

Holding her breath like a stone statue, her eyes shot open as an involuntary quiver jolted her violently. *What just happened?* her racing mind exclaimed. She and the digging doll remained rigid, breathless.

Other squatters sprang from their dump holes, running to gawk at a pale body sprawled in the rubble. A grizzled man with a bloodied shovel stood over the limp carcass.

"That's Willard! Stinkin' Willy!" one snarled in recognition. Rifling through pockets and stripping ragged clothes from the body, the dead man was relieved of all worldly goods.

"Dug his own grave, the dirty dog," another hollered, as the looters skulked back to their huts, leaving Stinking Willy to rot.

Nadia pushed herself up on stiff hands and sore knees, straining to detect any persisting danger. Hearing none, she crawled up the row heap and peered beyond.

“Oh! Is he dead?” she blurted upon observing the corpse thirty yards away.

“Yes. Greed turned his red heart black,” the sky animals and star friends murmured. She recoiled back into shadow, retching. Wiping her mouth, Nadia started to run in panic but halted after a few steps. A compulsion swept aside fear and judgment.

“The pretty glass!” She returned for the colored glass panes, binding them and her doll in the folds of her dress. Clasp the cinched bundle at her waist, she scanned left and right then fled toward the cave as the moon began to set.

Perfect palace.

After a hearty bush bean and dwarf pea soup from stored harvest of their tiny garden, their contentment swelled.

“I take your knight!” Nadia said gaily, grabbing the chess piece trophy.

“Check mate!” Grandfather countered, rubbing his hands in victory. At first she felt contrite and glad to be safe at home, playing with him and her dolls.

Setting up for another game after her king had fallen, a dreadful thought entered her mind. *A murdered body!* she shuddered in silence. *Can't tell Grandfather*, she reminded herself. *But still, I heard a man die. I saw him dead! Who? Why?* In a breathless pause, words echoed in the back of her mind. *Greed turned his red heart black.*

“You're trembling, child. Have you caught a chill?” Grandfather asked.

“Only a bit of a draft. I'll move closer to the fire,” she replied uneasily then added quickly, “Gonna beat you this time.” At Nadia's furtive glance, furrows appeared again in her dolls' foreheads.

Initially she considered her self-imposed denial of exploring the landfill as “grown up.” After two weeks, however, contrition and safety as well as maturity abandoned ship. Curiosity

and adventure, those familiar vagabonds escaping boredom and impatience, soon clambered aboard and set sail.

Grandfather's sonorous exhalations filled the sheets of his dreamboat. Blowing kisses to her sleeping dolls and tiptoeing by him, Nadia squeezed through the cave's hidden entrance. Like an explorer intent on discovery and navigating with celestial help, she tacked carefully into the night towards the landfill. Upon arrival, she began her practiced excavations anew.

What's this? she wondered, stifling a squeal of delight. Starlight twinkled from the fresh hole. Retrieving an armload of glass bottles of assorted shapes, sizes and colors, Nadia imagined them as containers of a queen's perfumes or a wizard's magic potions. Elated and laden to the gunnels, she contemplated where to hide her treasures.

"Come, follow me," Aquila, the Star Eagle, gestured, flying in a direction leading away from the landfill. Not quite an hour later she came upon a narrow passage between large boulders. She descended into a lobby mostly in shadow and protected by huge rock columns like giant sentries. Looking up through a twenty-foot wide opening, she saw the full moon's silver orb suspended like a shimmering pearl, upon which Star Eagle perched.

"A perfect palace, Aquila!" she exclaimed, exploring her new hideaway's rooms. After stashing her prized cargo in a crevice, she sighed in reluctance to depart. Waving to her sky companions, she steered for home, entered the cave and slipped onto her pallet. Safely docked, Nadia giggled with satisfaction. *My secret room*, she thought, *where I can do whatever I want*. As she fell asleep dreaming of crystal palaces, Grandfather rocked gently in his hammock yet at sea.

In three weeks' time, Nadia had constructed an ornamented ceiling in the aperture of the palace's lobby from her accumulated colored glass treasures. Using branches, mud putty, and

bits of twine, she lodged her stained glass pieces in a patchwork window. In crowning glory, she suspended her colored bottles like chandeliers in the royal retreat. During leisure residence at her palace, Princess Nadia imagined many vivid, wondrous tales, further coloring her life.

Grandfather commended her on keeping firewood stocked without being asked or complaining. The tedious chore had sprouted wings. Increasingly in each passing week her frequent restocking trips allowed Nadia to nest an hour or two in her secret sanctuary. As considerable time passed without returning to the landfill, thoughts of the dead man waned in her innocent mind, repressed by lively fantasies bright in her perfect palace.

Her chess game improved nightly as she fed the fire. But which game of chess? The light one played openly with Grandfather, or the dark one hidden deep within her?

Another discovery or two.

A powerful desire of new adornments and embellishments for her secret palace compelled a new foray to the landfill. Nadia searched and searched all night without success. The vexing dawn approached rapidly, then a muted shriek.

“The ruby!” she blurted impulsively.

“Who’s there? What dog’s diggin’ my claim?” a landfill squatter cried out from his hovel. “I’ll kill him who done it!”

“Pirates! I don’t trust none of you neither!” another inhabitant shouted at heads poking up out of the ground. “Anybody sets foot on my claim, I’ll crack his skull, just like ole Willy!”

Greed and angry agitation grew in the dim pre-dawn light. In murderous vigil, darting yellow eyes from each fetid dugout squinted to probe the ebbing night. At the edge of dawn, a dim almost imperceptible hint of color appeared in the grey distance. Yes, a sole, tiny splash! A suggestion of color flitted like a firefly, then disappeared. There it is again! Oh, yes, a dab of red,

a small red blur. And above an incessant, moaning wind in the foul air, a new sound! Unblinking eyes, diminishing silver ones from sky and horrid yellow ones from earth, turned quickly towards the sound.

“Mother’s ruby pendant!” Nadia cried out like a trumpet, holding it above her capped head to the sky in an exhilarated leap of joy. The bugling mingled with color only an instant. In that same moment the landfill vigilantes saw a red flash and heard the sound, an animated silhouette in the distance with a voice.

Roaring from their holes, the squatters erupted like banshees. Hot in pursuit, howls boomed across the ashen landscape.

Terrified, Nadia let out a wail and bolted. Clutching the glinting ruby pendant, she raced away towards the dead remnant of forest.

“Rubies? Rubies! Kill the thief!” shouted a rabid pursuer, hoisting a heavy shovel overhead as he darted after the robber. The wild mob tore after the fleeing figure, yelling and brandishing pitchforks and clubs.

“Quick! He’s gettin’ away with the jewel!” one grunted heavily. “Kill the snake!”

“I’ll have that ruby!” hollered another in delirium, continuing the chase.

Not daring a glance backward Nadia sprinted onward, frantic with gasping breaths and pounding heart. Murderous cries from farther away muffled as she gained distance.

“Dammit!” bayed a panting pursuer. “Where’d he go?”

“Lost him!” yelled another in fury. “Set traps next time.”

The huffing pack slowed to a lope and staggered to a halt, leaning on their rough weapons at the top of a denuded hill. Disgusted and grumbling in dejection, they trudged back to the landfill. Tramping over the scraggy ground, the ragtag posse delivered snarling accusations,

swearing viciously at each other for the failed hunt. Upon their return, the yellow-eyed squatters coiled up in their dens ready and eager to strike at any provocation.

“Never again!” Nadia admonished herself, shaking. “Still, I’ve found the matching ruby pendant.”

“What else have you found?” prompted Ursa, adding, “sun’s coming up.” The receding stars blanched and faded behind a purple curtain. Exhausted and out of breath, she crept into the cave just as Grandfather stirred. He sat up groggily rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“Up so early, Nadia?” he asked from the harbor of his hammock, pulling on the white ropes of his beard.

“I woke up shivering cold,” she lied. In the cave’s sanctuary, her jarring adrenaline rush began to fade. However, conflicting feelings of terror, euphoria, and shame swarmed in her brain.

“Must have been a nightmare. The log’s still glowing warm.”

“We need firewood, Grandfather,” she lied again, biting her tongue. In a dark corner, the wood crib was full.

“We’ll go together. I’ll look for some carving wood.” Grandfather let a vague thought of some question or lingering doubt go unexpressed. Old age, he shrugged absently.

Fighting to stay awake, Nadia blinked dry eyes in the sunlight. They ventured farther away than usual, separated to respective tasks, as both had gleaned most of the easily harvested firewood nearer the cave.

“I can’t hide mother’s pendant from him,” Nadia said to herself in torment. “But how do I tell him?” Confused and stumbling in fatigue, she broke off several small dry branches from a fallen limb.

Grandfather came to a ravine thick with dead brambles. A glint of glass caught his eye. From under brittle twigs, he picked up a single, hand-sized shard of amber-colored glass. He slipped it into a pocket. A half-hour later Nadia surprised him by carrying a sizable load of sticks tied on her back as penance.

“There you are, Grandfather,” she said swallowing a yawn.

“Quite a load. You’re growing taller and stronger.”

“No luck finding carving wood?”

“No, but look at this.”

Shocked that he had discovered a piece of her treasure she must have dropped on her way from the landfill to her secret palace, Nadia rallied alert and regained composure.

“It’s pretty. Can I have it for my dolls in the cave?”

“Yes, but it’s sharp. I’ll carry it in my pocket. After I sand the edges, it’s yours. This bleak world needs color.”

Light in the forest.

I’ll show him the ruby here in my crystal palace, Nadia decided. Weighing Grandfather’s possible delight against his certain anger, she could no longer repress her guilt of repeated lying and visiting the landfill.

During several firewood collecting excursions, Nadia made final preparations at the palace. The next day, feeling both hopeful and anxious, she set her plan in motion.

“Grandfather, I’m going for wood in a new place, not picked over, beyond where you found the amber glass. Will you come with me?”

“Sure.”

On their way, constantly rolling over thoughts of the matching ruby pendant, Nadia asked Grandfather about her mother.

“Dark chocolate eyes and long brown hair with golden sun streaks. Beautiful, like you.”

“I don’t mean what she looked like. You’ve already told me that.”

“Well, she liked flowers.”

“Already know that, too. What else?”

“She liked long walks in the forest. Adventurous type. She always brought home a colorful leaf or feather, or shiny rock, anything that caught her eye. As a young girl, she had quite an imagination, too. Seeing faces in tree trunks and clouds. Had names for each of them, pretending they were friends, and some enemies.”

“Enemies?”

“She’d act out whole dramas with make-believe characters pitting good heroes against evil villains.” Images of the corpse at the landfill, the murderous screams and her terror filled Nadia’s head.

“How did she die?”

“I don’t know.”

Walking in silence, thoughts of good and evil swirled in her mind. *Grandfather’s good. Right? Does he ever lie like I do? Will Grandfather forgive me? I have to know.*

Two hills farther at the mouth of a valley, Nadia pointed.

“This way,” she said, stepping ahead holding his hand. She led Grandfather to the familiar ramparts of her palace. “I think mother would have liked these big rocks. They’re like giant guards at a castle.”

“Indeed they are,” Grandfather replied as they passed the set of sentries.

“I have a surprise for you, Grandfather. I hope you like it.”

As they entered the lobby, dazzling colors painted their faces and walls in rainbows. Grandfather’s jaw dropped in amazement.

“How? ... what? ... it’s beautiful!” He turned to touch a violet-blue rock face, then an emerald green one. He looked up in astonishment at iridescent bottles dangling like sparklers overhead. Brilliant stained glass shone like cathedral windows he had once seen long ago. As he stood speechless looking up at the ceiling, she reached into a crevice in the wall.

With pleading eyes, Nadia watched him as he turned to her in awe. *He likes it!* she soared. He glanced upwards again and back to her. His green forehead, golden chin, blue shoulders, and red chest suddenly changed. A black shadow spread from knitted eyebrows over flaring nostrils and clenched mouth.

“No... Don’t tell me you’ve... You couldn’t possibly have...” Grandfather paused in shock and disbelief. “You’ve been to the landfill?” From the dark cloud of his face, a lightning bolt spat in fury, “You defied me!”

“I-I’m sorry, Grandfather...” Nadia stammered. “I was lonely, I was going on an adventure, looking for playthings for my dolls. Don’t you think it’s beautiful?”

“My God, child, you don’t know the danger, the risk! You could have been killed!”

Nadia paused momentarily.

“I wouldn’t have been the first one of our family to be killed there, would I?” Moving her arm from behind her back towards him and opening her fist, Nadia revealed a sparkling ruby pendant, an object of love once so familiar to him. “Would I, Grandfather?!”

“Why? Why didn’t you tell me until now?”

“Because you wouldn’t understand! I was searching for toys and ended up finding the truth about our family’s past...I heard a man die there. I saw his body. Tell me the truth! What happened to my mother?!”

Through her tears, Nadia watched the worst of the storm pass from his face. With his chin on his chest and eyes closed, Grandfather took a deep, heavy breath.

“Tell me what happened to her,” she sobbed.

With a heavy sigh, Grandfather began.

“I tried to stop them. I screamed for her to run. They clubbed me to the ground, leaving me for dead. I did everything I could, but...I couldn’t save her!” Grandfather cried out in anguish. He paused, his eyes cast down to the dirt floor. “I crawled through the ash desperate to find her.” Letting out a sob, he said, “I found her murdered body. Her throat cut and bruised from the gold necklace they tore away for the ruby. I didn’t want to believe it- I couldn’t stop shaking.” He paused for a moment. “They killed her for that ruby... And you were so young...I didn’t want you to know. I wanted to protect you.”

“Despite the greed that took them away, the matching rubies *are* your parents’ love for you, Nadia. Something precious to sustain you with love, not fill you with fear and hate. You must remember that.”

“What about my father? How did he come to have ruby pendants for mother and me? What happened to him, Grandfather?”

“After the catastrophe choked almost everything in ash, your parents and I scrounged to keep the family alive. Eventually, we came to this area seeking shelter and clothing. Scraps for survival. The landfill was already divvied up by then and had become killing fields. Still, despite the risk, your father was compelled to find necessities there. He did, too. Cooking pots, broken

bed frames, old blankets.” Drained, Grandfather closed his eyes and leaned against the lobby wall. Dusk approached.

“It’s getting dark, we should head back to the cave,” he said.

“Please, Grandfather, tell me what happened to him. I’ll build a fire. We can stay here tonight.” Nadia’s fire reflected all the colors from the glass ceiling and walls of her crystal palace. The sky animals and star friends watched from above.

Grandfather took the matching pendant from Nadia’s hand and slipped the necklace over her head, the two rubies resting on her chest.

“These jewels were his family’s heirlooms, a legacy of love he cherished. Your father presented the keepsakes to your mother to celebrate your birth, to honor the love of his new family. He loved you both very much, more than life.” Grandfather caught his breath. “Soon after making this special gift, he disappeared. On the last night I ever saw your father he told me not to worry, that he was going to the landfill to find a grate for the cooking fire, or anything else useful. He never came home.”

“Why did they murder him, too? He didn’t have anything worth stealing, did he?”

“Didn’t matter. Those cutthroats stole his life. Murdered him when they caught him poking around the dump trying to keep his family alive.”

“What right do they have to own the landfill? To kill my father!”

Gazing at the colors dancing in the firelight, defying nightfall’s darkness and past gloom, he pondered her question.

“Hate against love. Greed or generosity. Evil versus good. Your father was everything they were not, a good man. Like him, all we can do is try to do good.” In her Grandfather’s

loving embrace, Nadia lifted her head in thought, looking up over his shoulder at the brightly colored ceiling. *Do something good.*

On top the hill overlooking the valley, a scavenging squatter had ventured far beyond the landfill. In the distance at the head of the valley, he eyed a dim light emanating from the ground. He returned quickly to the landfill.

“Poacher fire!” he yelled to the other feral squatters, raising alarm. “Come on, this way!”

This time, they advanced in silence to catch the raider before he could flee. Dispersing to surround and cut off any escape, they scaled a circle of tall rocks from whose center emanated a glow like a volcano brimming orange lava. Reaching the rock rims, astonishing colors of light met their eyes. Initially wonderstruck, then wild with avarice, they clawed the colored glass panes greedily. Crashing through the ceiling, grabbing and tearing at the hanging bottles, they fell screaming into the palace lobby.

“Run, Nadia!” Grandfather yelled as he retrieved a burning branch from the fire. Nadia squeezed through the rock passageway.

“Grandfather, come with me!”

“No! Go now! Run!” She saw him swinging a flaming sword in wide arches as he stood blocking her pursuers.

“Kill him! Kill the raider!” echoed off the rock walls as Nadia raced away.

Tearing through the forest, she fled crying fearfully in panic. Exhausted, Nadia crouched to hide behind a clump of trees, shaking with fright. Through streaming tears, she turned looking back to see a great bonfire at the palace.

“Although it doesn’t seem possible, with time your eyes can see stars shine in the darkness. To find something good,” the sky animals posed gently. Sobbing, Nadia curled her head to her knees and lay in the undergrowth. *Something good? Nothing good can come of this!*

After wildly celebrating a successful hunt, the murdering squatters left the poacher’s body smoldering in the fire, lust satiated. Stuffing dirty pockets with loot, all but two of the yellow-eyed ferals returned to their rank holes. Landfill claims of the two missing squatters, whose charred remains littered the floor of the destroyed palace, were up for grabs the next day.

King’s ransom.

“Grandfather, what a horrible nightmare!” Nadia bolted upright from where she lay in the trees. Realizing where she was, the night’s trauma flooded her consciousness in a renewed torrent of tears.

“No! Don’t leave me!” she wailed. Crushed by loneliness, she collapsed. Hours later, she rubbed tear-streaked mud from her face. Stumbling through the forest, blind with despair, Nadia found herself at the hidden entrance to the cave. She crouched and entered. Cradling her frightened dolls on the pallet, sorrow and pain contracted the cave walls. Nadia shut her eyes, wracked in suffocating heartache.

“What’s to become of us?” she heard the scared dolls whimper. “We’re all alone. We’re so scared!”

“You’re not alone, I’m here now. We must all be brave,” Nadia said.

At the landfill, a fight broke out over spoils from the previous night’s marauding of the palace. Upset and dissatisfied with plundering only one small amber vial while others had done much better, a spiteful pillager spread foul, slanderous rumors.

“Rotten scum!” he bawled, jabbing a filthy, crusted finger into a hapless squatter’s chest.

“You stole that blue glass from me!”

Swinging an iron bar, he landed a vicious blow across the bridge of the falsely accused nose. With another strike, the maimed victim’s skull split open. A half-dozen men scrambled and clawed for the dead man’s possessions in the ensuing melee.

“Mine!”

“Not on your life! That’s my claim!”

Within ten minutes five more bloodied, lifeless bodies littered the waste dump. More, had the slaughter not been interrupted by a bellowing laugh from one of the murderers.

“Well, lookie here,” he pointed in disbelief. At the edge of the landfill, a girl walked toward them holding two shining rubies in outstretched hands. A dozen men watched in silence as Nadia marched forward.

“What you got there, darlin’?” the king of the hill asked. “A king’s ransom?” She turned her eyes to him and walked slowly to within two yards of where he stood atop a putrefying row heap.

“Ruby pendants,” Nadia replied evenly. By force of will she ordered her knees rigid and her feet planted firmly to the spot where she stood. She cast her eyes on the others. “I know who you are and what you’ve done. Look at yourselves, villains and murderers. But not anymore.”

“What makes you so sure?” he laughed.

“Because you won’t need to. These are for you.” Nadia called on all the inner courage she had to steady and fill her voice. “They are dear to me. I always felt the love of my family and goodness in them. I never thought I’d do something like this for the people that murdered my family. But I know greed turned your red hearts black. You need love now more than I do.”

Nadia stepped closer and opened the king's hard fist. She draped the two ruby pendants with gold necklaces over his leathery pockmarked palm, to snickers from onlookers. Without a word, she turned and walked away in the greying twilight.

“My dolls must be hungry. They need me!”

“Not only the dolls, others, too. Small children need you,” the star friends and sky animals said. “We'll wait to point the way.”

Rising from the dark cave with her dolls, Nadia lifted her eyes to the sky. All constellations had realigned, merging into a spectacular umbel of twelve bright silver darts and eight brilliant ruby red arrows. On each swept-back blossom of petals resembling shuttlecocks, a luminous golden tip converged to a point like a shooting star. In the sky dome, the astral flowers nodded easily, all pointing southward. In wonder, Nadia glanced down to see her dolls' faces shining with hope. A piercing thought entered her mind, *Finding good requires lots of patience and perseverance*. Turning eagerly toward the beckoning Star Flowers, she moved forward in the gentle night with her dolls warm and secure in her arms. Caressing them lovingly, Nadia said,

“It's not so hard to find flowers. You just have to know where to look.”

