

Hunting For Worms

Louisa Swann

Wren didn't usually stop on her way home from school. She had three miles to walk after the bus dropped her off and if she didn't get home in time to get dinner started, dinner would be late and Grandpa would be mad.

Bad things happened when Grandpa got mad.

So she hurry, hurry, hurried, stepping carefully over rocks and around potholes, gritting her teeth, working hard to keep her bad leg moving. She stayed in the middle of the road, avoiding the tufts of wild grass sprouting along the pavement edges and shoving up through the cracks.

They'd fix the road someday, her mom said. When more people moved to Minnow Lake.

She focused on getting home, saw herself racing up the steps and bursting into the kitchen, the way she used to do when she was six, back before the hospitals with their grumpy nurses and the tests with the long, long needles that hurt so bad, bad, bad she couldn't bear to think about it, before the doctors took her mother aside and talked in low voices, like Wren was a stupid little baby who wouldn't understand.

But Wren understood plenty. Like flying fists and unearned kicks and blood, blood, blood.

No more. She was twelve now. She couldn't run fast, but she could take care of things.

Like dinner.

A quick glance at the craggy mountain peaks towering overhead told Wren what she already knew: she was late. The school janitor found a boy locked in a supply closet after the last class, so the buses were held up while the teachers questioned the kids, all of them, trying to find someone to blame.

They always found someone to blame.

Wren knew what happened, but she wasn't telling. Bad things happened to kids who told.

Very, very bad things.

She ducked her head and picked up the pace, coaxing her right leg to move just a little faster.

Toe up, step like a goose, heel down, down, down to the ground, off the heel now and onto

the toe, push hard, repeat.

“We can rest when we get home,” she promised. “I’ll fix you a nice hot bath after dinner.”

A burning ache started deep in her calf and thigh, the kind of ache that meant a spasm coming on. She blocked out the sweet pine smell she loved so much and the warm spring sunshine and the tiny green and yellow warblers singing as they snatched bugs from the air.

Heel, toe, step like a goose.

But she couldn’t block out the baby robin crying at the edge of the crumbling road, its weak yet desperate peeps slowing her measured steps to a crawl.

Heel... toe... step like a goose...

“Hello?”

The sound stopped midpeep, but Wren wasn’t fooled. She moved to the edge of the road, stumbled over a piece of broken pavement, and peered into the grass. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

She moved back and forth, searching, searching, and finally found the baby bird lying among the weeds like a piece of crumpled toilet paper. Smaller than a tennis ball and not nearly as cute, the tiny bird looked like someone’d plucked it for dinner, then decided it wasn’t worth the effort. She lifted the baby carefully, cradling it close in her hands to warm the chilled body. The chick was so weak, so young.

She peered up, up, up, straining to find the baby’s nest in the nearby trees. Finally she spotted the bowl of twigs high in a pine so skinny Wren could probably push it over if she tried really hard.

“Your momma should be ashamed. You could’ve broken your neck, falling from that thing,” Wren said. The baby robin squeaked. “Shh. Don’t worry, I won’t put you back in that nasty old thing. You’re safe with me now. I’ll take good care of you.”

She found an old Starbuck’s cup in the bushes a little further down the road and tore the top half off. A soft layer of new grass made a comfortable nest for the baby. It gave a weak peep when she tucked it into its new home, but she didn’t have time to find something better and she didn’t want to squish it accidentally if she fell.

A cold breeze sifted through the trees, sighing, sighing. Wren shivered and held the baby close as she stared at tree shadows lacing the road, black daggers reminding her that she was late, late, late.