

Chapter One

I must establish up front—to prevent any dashed hopes or misplaced anger—that I am not the raffle baby. Please do not be discouraged by this, for I promise you: fairytale, lullaby, soliloquy, myth. As you will discover, I am a man of precision. I will give you words. But only the ones you need. Hold out your hands. There. Now. Let's begin.

Most days I sit on the front porch of my cottage with my *Reader's Digest* and a cup of coffee, and whether it be day or night, I am now always in my own twilight. My eyesight is poor, but there is enough left that I can look into the past to tell you this tale. You are kind to listen to the ramblings of an old man.

See here. I have lived my potential, and I am content. I hope you can say that of your life. I worked my forty years and shored up my progeny so well that most are too busy to visit. I watched as my skin withered into translucence, like the papery wisps of an onion peel. But, is it not true that anything you can see through takes you someplace else?

In the solid middle years of my life Walter Mitty was my Lawrence of Arabia. Hear me now. This was by design and so it was good. Like you, perhaps, I have stood at the edge of an ocean,

though it was too far away for me to touch. I plaited my love's hair on the day she died. And she kissed my hand and held it to her cheek, as if I had given her silks and spices from Atlantis.

I digress. But surely you will forgive an old man.

The story of the raffle baby begins with me in the Laurel Highlands of Pennsylvania. Trust me, I will get to her in time. But to know her, you must know me.

It was 1936, and the Great Depression gripped us like a circus strongman. Before, the men in my town descended deep into the coal mines, while the women kept house and tended children. The miners were a rowdy crew, until, all the veins exhausted, the miners of our town were forced to look for work elsewhere. Some left with promises to send money. Others, like my father, just up and walked away from everything, never to return.

The last we ever saw of him, Mother was running alongside his old truck, dirt and gravel flying up into her hair and face, her husband behind the wheel, moving faster than she thought that old, dilapidated truck could ever carry him. Ankles swollen with the moisture of a summer's humidity, it wasn't too long before the truck was gone and she was chasing a swirling cloud of dust that mixed with her breath and choked her from going on.

Was it unusual in those times for a mother to send her twelve-year-old son out into a world clogged with despair? No. There were plenty of us youngsters out there, riding the rails, stealing apples, hustling odd jobs. Tramps, they sometimes called us. But we were not ashamed. And I was fortunate. I was often hungry, but I did not starve. I might have been cold, but I did not freeze.

You might as well know that it was more than my mouth to feed that prompted my expulsion from our home. My father's void forced Mother into a place deep inside herself accessible only to her. I was grateful for the days when she looked at me but saw nothing. And I was frightened of her. Frightened of the uncharted geography of her temperament. Frightened of her many minefields and those grand sweeps of no-man's-land that bordered her every

The Raffle Baby

province, her every nation. After Father left, looking at my mother was like trying to read a map of an unknown land. Her face was a grid with lines pointing this way and that, her brow was a mountain range mired in self-pity. Her intentions were obscured by a harsh topography. I did not have the legend to traverse her, so I simply existed on the outskirts of her despair.

Even at twelve-years-old I understood how she had come to the precipice of an impossible choice. We lived in a tattered company house owned by the mine. With the mine shuttered, the families were told to move on. For a while, we lived in the small room above the butcher shop. Eventually our meager savings ran out, and so, I was sent away. After, I believe Mother kept house and cared for an elderly woman. But I cannot say for certain, as I never saw her again.

I roamed around the town for a few weeks, half praying Mother would change her mind, half hoping she would not. At night, I slipped through an unlocked window into the elementary school and curled up on the wrestling mats. I battled stray dogs for sustenance and drank and washed in the creek that threaded through an old mill.

It was in the five-and-dime on the main street that I saw the vast smallness of my life. In two minutes, I could walk, aisle-by-aisle, from one end of the store to the other, as if I were Louis and Clark exploring a new wilderness of motor oil, penny candy, cheap writing paper, and tobacco. I walked that mercantile terrain until I was finally ejected for soiling the comic books with my filthy fingers. The dirty hands and soiled shirt cuffs of a child were all people saw when they looked at me.

And so, I left the town, not just because I was hungry, but also because I hungered. I did not return for more than sixty years.

Yes. I know you are impatient to learn about the raffle baby. And I to tell you. I will jump ahead, just for you.

One evening, so very long ago, the girl with fiery red hair and too-big boots unraveled her tale to a ragged band of hoboes and

Ruth Talbot

migrant workers gathered around a spitting fire on a grower's farm in California. Our bellies were not full, but neither did they offer up their perverse pangs of hunger. It was warm, so we were not distracted by the cold that would inevitably return to invade our bones, unless we made it to Florida by October. By the end of the girl's story, I knew her audience did not believe her tale. And it makes no matter if I did or not.

But you. Perhaps you will find a seed of truth or a shard of lie playing hide-and-seek with my words. Perhaps not.

Come. My shadows are long. Be that I finish my story, and you stay with me to the end. For that is the only way you will know if she was my love. If I plaited her hair.

Read the rest of the story.



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