

The Plum Tree Nestling

John Carrick was hungry. The farm had failed. The exhausted soil had breathed out its last gasp of sickly, early summer wheat over a month ago. He had sent his wife to stay with her uncle's family in town until he could sort out how to provide for them. Pride kept him from joining her to live off Uncle Leroy's provision, and shame kept him from going to visit her there. It was only at Leroy's adamant urging that John had accepted his offer of a month's rations.

John's parting conversation with his wife had been heated. Annalise had tried to push him to plant for the autumn harvest and pray for rain. He had spit on the dusty ground in disgust at the vanity of the notion. He and his land were forsaken; John knew it for certain.

The stores of his pantry having run dry the previous night, and stubbornness guiding his continued refusal to go to his wife's uncle, he was hunting for scraps of nutrition anywhere he could find them in the parched grove above his south patch. The last tree to search for some woeful morsel was also the last place on God's desolate earth he wanted to trample.

Yet the urge to live often overcomes the need to immunize one's heart against grief. So, to approach the tree, he found himself in the hated position of stepping over his only child's grave.

Thus, he was near enough to reach up to the low branch of the

tired, thirsty plum tree to find purchase. It struck John as he climbed how effortlessly Providence seemed to turn beautiful things to ashes. Plums had always been Annalise's favorite. That was why he had planted this tree from the pit of a plum he had given her the day they moved in to their new farmhouse. Annalise, his beautiful bride with auburn hair and a bewitching laugh that always infected him, disarming whatever foul mood he may have brought into the room. They had married young and hastily. John loved her for her sharp wit, her singular beauty, and her practical way of keeping his fanciful plans anchored to the earth.

That was so long ago, when he had dreamed of being a gentleman farmer with vast swaths of crops from north to south, their cheery white house with blue shutters at the heart of it all. And as was his way, against his wife's stern advice (along with that of every other sensible citizen of the valley), he had unwisely purchased far too much land. The north side had turned out to be completely unusable. Only the south patch had ever held a crop. Mercifully, fate had led him to plant the plum tree, the first of many, to the south of the house. For a stretch of ten years, the south patch had kept them thriving, until the sky had turned on them with scorching hostility.

Now, all that had represented the brightest lights of his youth had turned to dusty death. A wilting tree and a child's grave were all he had to show for his years of toil and hope.

With hands and lips chapped and quaking, he searched the rest of the tree for...whatever it was he thought he would find. It was

vanity; there was no fruit, no edible vegetation. He had seen that from the ground. But just as desperation began to sink into despair, John saw a tiny nest. A thin mother bird sheltered a clutch of small, speckled brown eggs. It wasn't much of a meal, but it would be a change from the hollow rumble he felt in his middle.

The bird appeared sick, or perhaps dehydrated like everything else in the drought-whipped valley John called home. Its frail wings were papered with straggles of dirty, sun-bleached blue feathers. Likewise, its eggs seemed thin and brittle. The surface of each was covered with a web of crazing. He looked closer and found that two of the three eggs had in fact broken along many of the cracks, and their unborn passengers had expired. Only the smallest of the three remained intact.

When John saw the state of the eggs, he could not bear it. All the sorrow he had buried, which had roiled under his wife's feet until she had moved out of its range, now came spilling out onto the branches of his perch.

He was not going to eat today. Not if it meant cutting short the life of this pathetic bird and its...child. He choked on the word. It felt like the end of him. Maybe that would be better, he told himself. He could be with his little girl, feel her cheek on his neck again on the far-off shores of glory. And Annalise would be free of the weight of him.

It wasn't the drought, or even him sending her away that had

come between them. It had begun when the tiny, fever-stricken hand of his precious Madeline had slipped away from his, and with her, all the color had left the world. His heart had become a stone - not granite, but sandstone, slowly disintegrating flake by flake against the friction of the unwelcome task of continuing to be.

For some, the singular devastation of losing a child draws them tighter together, like the fibers of a rope submerged in salty water. But for John and Annalise, who mourned in separate cloisters, the frayed cords of their precarious marriage had nearly snapped.

Then the whispers came. Rumors floated round to him that his wife had been seen around their sagging village, giving bright smiles and easy laughs to Ash Curran, an itinerant farrier who had strutted in at the same time as the well-heeled horse ranchers who had been buying most of the failing farms in the valley – but not John’s farm, never that farm. He would not even entertain the notion of selling the land where his little girl was buried.

More than one enthusiastic farm wife had gleefully noted as Annalise and Curran passed by that they were sure there was a touch on the shoulder, or a gaze that outlived courtesy.

How she could smile at all in these past three years since losing Madeline was beyond him, but imagining there might be even a kernel of truth in the gossip made his jaw hurt from clenching. They had always had their difficulties; she was as strong-willed as he, but fiery in the way that only a girl who knew her own mind could be, whereas John was just stubborn as a matter of philosophy. The heat

of her tongue when she was angry blazed as brightly as the golden ringlets at the center of her dark-honey eyes. Yet, she was John's one true love from the moment they had met, and he adored her still. The idea of another man awakening her long-dormant laugh added molten iron to the weight of John's grief.

In recent days, now that the farm was little more than a wasted dream, and hunger had become their daily conversation, she had stopped going into town altogether. John was caught in a whirlpool of relief and guilt at the irony of it. It was only her misery and his failure that had kept her at home. That is, until he had been forced to send her away for her own survival. So maybe it was better if he just sat there under the plum tree next to where his Madeline slept and simply faded away.

As he wept openly at the state of his heart and the sight of that pitiful nest, a pale, green shape suddenly drifted across the mist of his memory. The birdhouse. Hopelessness hazily gave way to a glint of possibility.

Little Madeline had loved birds. "I would very much like a little green house for the bluebirds, Papa," she had said in anticipation of her birthday. John had leapt to work, sketching out an elaborate Queen Anne Victorian style structure, complete with tiny gingerbread cornices and scrollwork around the windows. He had shown it to Annalise with great enthusiasm, only to be met with rolled eyes and a blunt reminder that he "always plans more than he can finish."

Of course she had been right. The vague expression of an unpainted wooden rectangle was all the farther he had gotten before another big idea had stolen his attention. And since Madeline -- but now perhaps there was a reason to finish it after all.

"I'm going to save them," he sobbed.

John gently lifted the nest, being careful to not frighten its diminutive residents. It suddenly occurred to him that the mother bird might treat him as an interloper. Suspended as he was in the tree, if she were to take to his face with her beak, he would quickly make acquaintance with the ground, and likely not with his feet. But his Irish luck was overcome by the frail state of the bird, who did little more than turn her head.

As he carried the nest to the house, he noticed what looked like a pile of luggage on his porch. His heart leapt with hope and anxiety at the thought that Annalise had defied his will and had come home. As he drew nearer the porch, hope dissipated with the revelation that the "luggage" was just more boxes of provisions insisted upon him by the graces of Uncle Leroy. He chose to leave them be for now and tend to his nest instead.

If he would see the bird and her egg return to health, the primary prescription must be hydration, he decided. He first plucked a wild blackberry from the porch boxes, pinning his hopes on its juice. He soon found the mother bird was too weak to eat the fruit. This led

him to root through the drawers and cabinets of the kitchen like a hog hunting the last truffle.

His hand froze as it found itself wrapped around one of the desperate instruments of his futile attempts to heal his little girl: the medicine dropper. He trembled as the tide of memories roared over him. Day after day, he had delivered the foul-tasting brown liquid between Madeline's ashen lips. Though the flavor of it made her nearly retch every time, she had never once complained. "Thank you, Papa," was all she would say, until even those words took more strength than she had.

Bitter tears once again stained his weather-beaten face as he gently slipped the dropper into the bird's mouth, its desiccated tongue lapping at the water.

John continued his ministrations for another two weeks. During that time, the mother bird gained enough spirit to accept small bits of food. Each time the bird nibbled at his fingers, John felt a warmth rise up and crack his face into a long-forgotten smile. Though the berries were still too much, he found that she did well with crumbs of bread from Leroy's boxes and seeds from John's neglected stock of autumn planting.

The more he visited the barn to dip into those seed bags, the more he tangled with the last angry words he had had with Annalise about making another go at planting the south patch. What was wrong with him? What devil of self-destruction had taken hold of him that he

would refuse his wife's urging to not give up on himself? On her?

He knew the answer. Ever since his little girl had left his arms he had been blind to all possible futures but returning to the dust of the earth like Adam in the Old Testament. Now, however, his eyes were beginning to open again, just as the mother bird was starting to open hers.

In the third week, as the little brown egg began to burst with perseverant life, John found a new resolve. He grasped on to the dim recollection of a different passage of the Bible the preacher had taught once of a Sunday. It was something about God remembering even the sparrows. He decided in that moment that it was possible that he was not yet *entirely* counted amongst the accursed. He would plant the autumn crops.

Just then, the egg finally gave way to a writhing mound of fuzzy, pink newness. John whooped in celebration, followed by a full half-hour of uninterrupted laughter. He was exhausted and his ribs ached, but he felt like a ghost who had been reunited with his body for a second chance to walk in the sun.

He spent the next week dividing his time between two frenzied endeavors. In the morning he turned over the hard-packed soil, and when the sun began to beat down, he would spend the afternoon working on the little birdhouse until the crickets sounded the call for quitting time.

It was far less ornate than the extravagant Victorian manse he had originally planned, but it was within his level of skill, and that was good enough. At the end of the week, all that was left was to plant the seeds and paint his creation.

The former was accomplished readily enough, but John had no paint around the farm, let alone the pale green he had in mind for what he had got to calling "The Bluefeather Inn." Madeline would love that name. He surprised himself with how the thought of that brought comfort rather than pain.

To paint the "Inn" would mean John would have to go to Rogers' General Store in town for art supplies. He had no money, but Tom Rogers was a friend, and would gladly loan him what he needed on credit. John could not deny that he experienced a torrent of conflicting emotions about the prospect of running into Annalise in town.

"I can't just be a man that things happen to anymore," he told himself. He decided that he would avoid bumping into her by going out of his way to find her.

He resolutely charged toward the front door. But then he was jolted by the image of the disheveled hermit in the mirror hanging on the parlor wall. There had been little romance between John and his wife in the past three years and he had become negligent of his appearance. In fact, he could not remember more than once holding her in his arms, and that was after draining a bottle of wine, (plum

wine, of course), that she had bought for their anniversary nearly three months past. Annalise could not see him in this state. After seeing to his hair, beard, and clothes, he departed.

On the path toward town, his mind drifted on the notes of forest music around him. He thought about the growing strength of the mother bird and her tiny nestling, and how he would need a cage if he wanted to keep them from flying away. But how would they use Madeline's "Inn"? He immediately banished any consideration of a cage.

His gaze moved up the trunks of the woodland congregation, and eventually fixed on the sky, as if for the first time. How long had it been since he had looked at the azure expanse as anything but his enemy? But it wasn't azure today. Nor was it cobalt, nor turquoise, nor any other color for that matter. It was as grey as a river rock, and just as impenetrable. In the past, the sight of clouds would have been a welcome sign of summer rain. But John only felt the stifling, stale air of unyielding drought. Even clouds were no promise of help anymore. Of course. The thought soured his mood, so John turned his eyes back to the path.

He was at the edge of town. He chose to skirt the main thoroughfare and stayed behind the buildings on the east side, not letting himself admit that the westerly location of Ash Curran's forge was a factor.

As if John had summoned his rival from the depths with the

invocation of his name, Curran appeared out of the green grocer's carrying a basket of fruits. He wasn't alone. Annalise's cousin Greta appeared behind him...followed by Annalise herself. They flanked Curran on either side, just as close as three mules on the same yoke.

John saw Curran reach into his basket and produce a piece of fruit, which he handed to Annalise. The heat began to creep out from under John's freshly pressed collar.

"God, if You have the least bit of feeling left for me," he whispered between tightened lips, "Let it be an apple or a peach."

It was a plum.

John wheeled around in a fury and left the way he came. The green paint remained on Tom Rogers' shelf.

The storm of John's exit caught Annalise's eye. She did not see that it was her husband, but the fleeing apparition reminded her of him. As she bit into the tender plum in her hand, her heart ached for the days when he would bring plums in from the grove for her...and Madeline. Their sweet little girl had no particular love for plums, Annalise recalled, but she had never let on to her father. Stinging tears blurred the fruit she was holding, but Annalise let them come.

At least the man walking next to her knew how to give gifts to the girl he loved. Greta was going to be very happy once Ash finally

proposed to her.

He had been sharing his secret plans with Annalise for months. He was simply mad for Greta, and had finally decided to settle down and cease his traveling. He had told Annalise that he believed in the future of the valley with all the ranchers moving in and buying the defunct farmland. The way Ash saw it, the town would recover, and there was a place in it for him, with Greta at his side.

She was delighted for them, but she couldn't stop the sharp needles of envy stabbing at her mind. If only John could find a little faith, they could find happiness again too. Very soon, she thought, things were going to be different between them, one way or another.

John, of course, knew none of this. Had he stayed, he might have learned where things actually stood with his wife. But likely not. He sure as sunrise would have flattened Ash Curran if he had lingered one more moment watching that pretty-boy-plum-giving-wife-stealing-dog sweet talk his beloved bride. Such was the discourse John carried off as he stomped home, though it was colored with other descriptors that would have made the trees blush if trees had ears.

In his ignorant fury, John burst into his house, muttering curses and blasphemies through every room. His raging eye caught sight of the birdhouse. To damnation with his hopeful notions, he thought. Hope was dead. Just like his marriage, his farm, and Madeline!

With that, he picked up the birdhouse and hurled it across the kitchen. It struck the far wall, where it shattered with a sound of finality that echoed through the house and down to the plum grove.

John fell apart in like manner. He collapsed in the corner and wept, with ugly, heaving sobs of futility. He flogged himself with accusations of driving Annalise away. There was no chance that she would return to him now. They were probably trying to make excuses to Greta right at this moment so they could steal away and make secret plans for the future.

The mother bird chirped a rebuttal from the shelf above the wash basin. From the shelf? John's self-pitying reverie was broken by the realization that the bird was not in the nest. She had *flown* up to the shelf. She was haphazardly flapping her wings and making short leaps between perches of varying height throughout the kitchen. Soon she would be fully capable of flight. It was time to let her go.

John could not bear to consider that reality at present. He was utterly broken; a huddled mass in the silent corner of an empty house.

The next morning's sun gently roused him with its warm fingers about his face. He slowly opened his eyes and was met by two stark truths. The first was that he was not a young man anymore. This was revealed to him by the sharp pain he felt in every joint from having slept hunched against the wall. The second was that he had brought all this misery down on himself.

John had followed the same script of folly he had rehearsed his entire life. Act one was always him launching out, overly excited and sure of himself, too rigid to accept that some element of the world might not cooperate, disappointed when it didn't, and then crashing down to earth at his failure to see the thing through. The spotlight was shining on that last part, which he saw in the fragments of wood at his feet.

"I'm a damned fool," he sighed, surveying the splintered pile of broken birdhouse.

He sat down on the floor and quietly began to try and reassemble it. *Something* had to be put back together. He needed it to be so if he was to ever find peace again in this world. After three or four hours, he had done what he could. It was even less the product of his imagination that he had poured into the original sketch, but by some measure of grace, it was whole once more. As if to remind him of the birdhouse's purpose, the mother bird chirped insistently from behind him.

"It's not ready for you to move in yet," he told her. "It still needs to be painted."

The bird was perched on the mirror near the front door. Whether the Inn was ready or not, she was ready to be returned to the sky. John scooped up the nest with its tiny occupant and carried it to the mother bird, who summarily climbed aboard. He slowly walked

them to the only place it made sense to deposit the nest: Annalise's plum tree.

John delicately balanced his cargo in the crook of his arm and held it tenderly against his chest. This arrangement made climbing the tree all the more difficult, especially in light of the stiffness of his joints from last night's awkward slumber in the corner. He placed the nest securely on one of the higher branches and descended. Once on the ground, he watched as the mother bird leapt into action, flitting here and there to find twigs to reinforce her accommodations.

It seemed to John that she had already forgotten the ordeal she had gone through. Life would go on. Though he felt a loss at no longer being needed, he was grateful. He had been given a chance to save a life, and it would go on.

"That's what life does, I suppose," John mused, as he watched the bird flutter across the grove to the south patch. She alighted on a small cluster of pink who-knew-what. Puzzled, John made his way after the bird to see what could possibly be pink in his field.

Wildflowers. A small, sweet spray of blush-colored coneflowers. John marveled that he had not noticed them before. Surely it was no coincidence. Didn't he need a bouquet of flowers if he was going to win Annalise back? *Was* he going to try and win her back? Was that the road to peace? Or was he better off letting her go and live her life without him?

Who was he kidding? Whether a noble sacrifice was called for in the dogma of martyrdom, John wasn't the sort. She was his bride and it would be a snow day in Hades before he would give her up. She would just have to content herself to wallow in abject squalor with her lawful husband and be happy. He swiped the nearest bunch of coneflowers and set off like Quixote tilting toward a windmill giant.

He would go back to town, drop to a knee, give her the flowers, and then give Ash Curran a belt in the gob. No, that wasn't right, he reasoned as he headed toward the house to fetch a ribbon for his bouquet. He couldn't do things that way. He would belt Curran and *then* give her the flowers.

"John!"

It was Annalise that called to him. She was standing on the porch. Somehow, she was radiant, despite the afternoon return of the oppressive blanket of charcoal clouds. But why was she here? John couldn't stay ahead of the creeping sense of dread that nipped at his heels. He noted with alarm that her luggage was stacked on the porch.

He followed his wife inside, where she asked him to sit across from her at the small dining table. He tried to swallow the growing lump in his throat, but his mouth had run dry. Annalise sat nervously, fidgeting with the gingham placemats she had received from Greta as a housewarming gift.

“John, we must talk,” she began haltingly. She struggled to find the words, knowing that what she had to say would be hard for his pride to bear. “Things have changed, John.”

Not wanting to hear what was surely coming, he fairly leapt from his chair and talked over her, chattering like he was one of his recent feathered guests. “I should put these flowers in water. You’ll never guess where they were growing; the south patch, maybe it’s a sign. I planted the autumn seed, by the way. I know it’s crazy, but I thought I could give it another go –”

“John, I know you never wanted to sell our land to anyone else, especially to the ranchers –”

“I built a birdhouse, by the way. I found this poor mother bird in your plum tree, with an egg, and by Heaven, I nursed them to health! Annalise, I’m not—”

“John, you must listen to me. I can’t watch you carry on like this anymore. Ash Curran has decided to settle down here in the valley. Now, I know selling to him might seem like giving up on everything we’ve worked for, but it would just be the north side so he and Greta can build a little cottage after the wedding. She accepted his proposal...”

John’s ears had gone deaf after the word “Curran.” Now he heard only the pounding of his own heart as it threatened to tear its way out of his chest. His eyes had fixed on Annalise’s soft mouth. She was smiling. Smiling! As she ripped what was left of his life apart?

What gall she had to end things like this!

“Now *you* listen to *me*, girl! I may not be much, least of all a gold-heeled pretty boy, but I’ll be buried in my native soil before I let Ash Curran have my wife!”

Annalise reeled from his wild tirade, but only momentarily. Then her eyes flashed and she gave John back twice what she owed him. She was not about to allow his fits of mood to spoil the best news they had been given in years.

"John Donovan Carrick, has your fool brain been cooked by a heat stroke? I'm trying to tell you that you don't have to give up the farm and we don't have to starve. We can keep everything but the useless north side of the farm because Ash Curran and Greta are to be married and they want to build a cottage next to us. The price he wants to offer you would keep us going for at least the next few seasons."

John blinked. And then blinked several more times, as if her words were suspended in front of his eyes and he was trying to bring them into focus. "So you're not...running off with him? Then why are all your bags here like you're set to leave?"

Annalise's laughter cascaded over John's ears, each wave tinkling like crystal bells. She shook her head and answered, "I haven't packed them here, John. I've brought them full from Uncle Leroy's. I came home. I know you're likely upset that I spoke to Ash about

buying the land, but something had to be done now that I'm with child."

With... child? John was aghast. She was with child? Just as he started to imagine an angel appearing to explain this miraculous occurrence, he remembered something that was likely a more plausible explanation.

"Plum wine?"

"Plum wine," she agreed.

John's mind began to race with joyful convolutions. His stream of thought came burbling out of his mouth, unbidden and unfiltered as he ran out to the porch to bring in his wife's luggage.

"We'll name him after my father. Or after your mother if he's a girl. I'll teach him to fish and you can teach her to read. And then, there's the planting. He'll have to know how to farm, of course, unless he's got a dress on because he turned out to be a daughter and then we can't do that because her dress would get dirty--"

How to farm. Those three words brought John right back down to earth and threatened to bury him in it. He stood frozen, staring out at the barren south patch. Annalise watched him visibly shrink as if something of his physical form had been subtracted from him, reducing him to a smaller, more fragile version of humanity.

"What about the farm? We have no crops, Annalise. The land is bone dry; nothing can grow here. I can't provide for you and a child. Without your uncle's charity, I would have been dead already.

"I can't be counted on to do right by this child. Providence has turned a hand against me, don't you see? Why did I even bother planting the autumn seeds? Annalise, you need to go back to your uncle's until I figure something else out."

"Oh John! Must you always be so unsteady? It's cruel the way you start off riding on top of the clouds and then, just like that, you're down in the heap, or off on some other wild idea."

She ceased her assault, realizing they had fallen into their seemingly inescapable pattern of conflict. She looked at him in silence as he stared out at the field, no doubt a thousand miles away in his thoughts, imagining a thousand kinds of defeat.

They were like two moons, aligned in the heavens, but pulled apart by separate gravities. She searched through the years of friction and regret, trying desperately to find some word of encouragement that might break the cycle and bring them together, if even just for a moment. How could she give comfort to this impossible man that she loved so much?

Annalise began to weep. Silently at first, then with loud convulsions of impotent frustration. Why should *she* always have to be the one to encourage *him*? How much of her life had she already spent trying to bolster his dreams, even when they were childish? Even when he changed his plans on a whim and chased a different rainbow every year or two?

Loving her husband had required that she endure far more than her share. He never listened to her, even when she was obviously right. Even when she was trying to help him sort through something that was his fault to being with. He had led them to the brink of starvation and even now that she sat here with a solution that would steady them and *their baby* for at least a few years, he was already giving up.

Annalise admitted to herself that she had been putting on an air of confidence about the future when she told him about the land sale and the child. But she knew deep down that this conversation was the last of her efforts, the last of her patience. She had been terrified when she discovered the pregnancy. Sure, the sale to Ash would save the farm for now, but she would still have to place her hope in more crops appearing in the long run, and it was just as slim a hope in her mind as it was in John's that this drought would end anytime soon. Just look at him, she thought. Staring out at that parched, desolate field in the south patch.

"Oh maybe it *is* hopeless," she said, surrendering to her husband's despair, which she could no longer find the words nor the will to alleviate. She turned away and walked into the house, directly to their bed, where she deposited herself and slept.

Annalise woke early the next morning, only to find that John was not in the house. She was unsurprised to see him through the kitchen window standing outside again (or still). Since John had left the window unwashed, it was difficult for her to make out exactly what he was doing, other than looking upward. Probably arguing with the Almighty, she thought spitefully.

“John, come inside the house! We need to talk about Ash Curran’s offer.”

“Alright,” he shouted absently.

She pressed him further, hoping to provoke a more engaged response. “And we need to figure out what we’ll do after that money runs out, other than shrivel up and die.”

“No we don’t!”

John began to laugh. He came into the kitchen laughing. Annalise was in no mood for his mercurial temperament to be shifting toward the jovial just now. It was cruel to laugh at her.

"What in the world do you think is so funny?" She stopped short of the string of unchristian titles she had been about to bestow on him. She turned her back to him and started back to bed. Let the fool have his laugh.

John caught her in his arms and pulled her tightly to him. Then he turned her around gently and placed his rough hand on her delicate cheek. The look in his eyes rebuked all her suppositions about his intent. It was a look of adoration and hopefulness that she had thought the world had erased forever. Yet there it was, on his face and aimed at her.

“I’m not laughing at *you*, my love.”

“Then what?” she asked, uncertain now what to make of his serene expression.

His smile dissolved all but a few traces of the world-weary grief he had carried so long.

"It's raining."