

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

Historical Short Stories...

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Dreams Forsaken

“So why am I here, exactly?” queried my nineteen-year-old niece as she sat next to me. The lantern I had placed beside us cast flickering light throughout the abandoned tannery’s darkened interior. Eerie, dust-laden cobwebs clung to every wooden beam, workbench and table, causing her to shudder.

I glanced at her innocent face untouched by grief, and wished yet again that I had been born in her day rather than mine. “For emotional support.”

“Then I’m not in any danger, Aunt Margryte?” she asked unsurely.

“Of course not, Geruscha,” I said while smoothing down a ruffle in my threadbare black mourning dress.

“Do you know who owns this place?”

“I used to. Well, I guess I still do.” Memories of better days from decades past superimposed themselves over broken chairs and dilapidated benches. I bit my lip to keep deep inner pain at bay.

“So why don’t you sell it? Seems structurally intact; surely there’s a tanner who would buy it from you?”

“You ask a lot of questions, Geruscha,” I protested.

“You did ask me to come tonight,” she pouted.

“So I did. I keep this place because it suits my purposes on the odd occasion, such as tonight,” I answered after a moment.

Geruscha’s next question died on her lips when the front door swept open to admit a badly scarred man dressed in the garb of a common mercenary. I laid a hand on her forearm to reassure her.

Aged wooden floorboards groaned under unaccustomed weight as the man approached us. Cold eyes met mine, and then studied my niece as though she was a horse for sale. “Who’s this?” he grunted.

“This is Geruscha, my niece,” I replied in an icy tone that matched his expression.

“Why is she here?” he snapped.

“Well, let me see,” I said dramatically, “perhaps to add some light to these enchanting clandestine meetings we have.”

Returning his attention to me, the man slapped a cloth purse on the run-down table before us. I refused to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging the money.

Anger flashed briefly in his eyes. “Will you not even inquire as to my progress?”

“Oh, why not, since it obviously means so much to you. Tell me, what you have achieved of late?”

He held up three fingers. “It took me nigh on three years to comb every inch of Stühlingen, but thirteen more of our enemies have been brought to justice.”

I leaned forward slightly, careful not to overbalance the rickety chair. “Do you feel better now? Did you find this gratifying?”

He was not impressed. “It is not about satisfaction. It is about justice.”

“You mean revenge,” I clarified.

“Whatever,” he snarled. “You know this has to be done, Margryte. Those men must be brought to justice for the magnitude of their crimes. I will not permit those murdering vermin to do such heinous deeds and then simply melt back into society by assuming new identities.”

A cloud of dust swirled upward into twinkling lantern light as I plucked the purse from the table.

“That was twenty-five years ago. When will you tire of this quest?”

“When I’ve found them all, Margryte, and not before,” he said before quitting the tannery without a backward glance. He vanished into the midnight air.

My niece found her voice. “Who was that man, Margryte?”

“My husband, Geruscha,” I admitted.

“Walther Sighard? I thought he perished in the Peasants’ War of 1525,” she exclaimed.

“That’s what he wants them to think, Geruscha.”

“Them, Aunt Margryte? You mean the leaders of the revolt?” she pressed.

“Not just the leaders, Geruscha, all of the insurgents who perpetrated the massacre of Weinsberg. In the past twenty-five years he has hunted down and slain over ninety of them,” I answered from a great distance.

“But, Lady Margryte, you sound as though you disapprove. Did not those rebels kill your parents and two of your sisters, as well as hundreds of our people?”

I nodded. "Yes, they did. But you know? I had thought us lucky when we survived. We still had each other, two darling little boys, and this tannery. I wanted to get on with our lives, but not Walther. He became obsessed with revenge--an obsession that cost him not only a loving family that needed him--but also his dreams and future. Tonight was the fifth time I have seen him in twenty-five years."

"I don't know what to say, Aunt Margryte."

"Just walk me home, Geruscha."

The Strays

Metal-shod hooves clattered noisily upon the castle courtyard's cobblestones. Sir Tristram de Villeroi and his score of men-at-arms had returned.

Undaunted by the incessant rain falling from an oppressively dark sky, the lady of the castle hastened forth from the imposing great keep, lifting the hem of her dress off the wet cobblestones. "What news, my lord?" she asked.

Rain cascaded down his nose as Sir Tristram de Villeroi looked down at his petite wife, "We were too late, my lady."

"Baron Gillet and his family, my lord?" she asked, crestfallen.

"Alas, the rebels' dastardly work was all but done when we arrived, dear wife. They came at us like madmen and only fled after we hewed many with axe and sword."

"So the baron's whole family, murdered?"

Tristram opened his riding cloak to reveal a young slip of a girl wearing a linen nightshirt huddled against his armored chest. "All but this one - do you know her? She appears bereft of her senses."

Lady Isabelle reached up and took the girl into her arms. "I do - her name is Jehennette. She is...she was, Baron Gillet's youngest. She is ten, I believe."

"Best get her fireside before she catches a death of a chill, my lady. I will join you shortly."

* * *

"What happened out there, Husband?" Isabelle asked from her wooden stool before the hearth. Having bathed and dressed in warm nightclothes, ten-year-old Jehennette slept fitfully before the roaring fire.

Sir Tristram did not answer immediately, and when it came, he spoke as though from a great distance. "Incomprehensible barbarity - these peasant rebels are worse than wild dogs. What they did to that girl's parents and brothers..." Distraught, his words trailed off. "My every waking thought is haunted by that scene. And knowing that little Jehennette here had been forced to watch, knowing her turn was coming...it is more than I can bear."

A female grey cat detached itself from the shadows and butted her head against Tristram's arm. He scratched her chin, and she purred loudly in response.

"And yet you saved her, Tristram - that has to count for something. I just hope we can accommodate Jehennette better than the last stray you brought home."

"What? I thought the cat was making good progress," he said, stroking the feline's back.

"Progress? When you are absent, she hides in every nook and cranny and attacks me, our sons - even the servants - in a frenzy of slashing claws and biting teeth whenever we walk past. Behold my shins!" Isabelle lifted the hem of her dress, revealing painful injuries. "You said Edine could be a family pet, not yours alone!"

Sir Tristram ran his fingers over the cat's collar. "She wears a jeweled collar, my wife."

"What of it, my lord?"



“It means she was a noble’s pet and therefore tame. She can be tame again.” Tristram scratched the cat’s chin and indicated Jehennette with a nod. “The cat needs time to find her way back to normal life, and so does Jehennette. With time comes healing.”

Lady Isabelle looked at the girl sleeping before the fire. “I hope so, my lord. Poor child, she gave no indication that she was even aware of our presence while we bathed and dressed her. My heart broke a thousand times over.”

Tristram rose to his feet. “I will help as I can, my lady, but now must take my leave. King Charles of Navarre assembles an army at Beauvais to crush the rebels and has requested that I join him with half my men.”

“Take care, Husband.”

“And you, my wife. Keep the gates barred at all times until I return.”

* * *

Three weeks later, Sir Tristram and his retinue returned.

“Good news, Husband?” asked Lady Isabelle as the husband dismounted in the courtyard.

“The rebellion has been crushed and the dissidents dispersed, my lady. But what news do you bear - what of our two strays?”

Lady Isabelle pointed towards the stables. Tristram was surprised to see Jehennette sitting with her back against a stable door, stroking the cat as it lay contentedly on her lap. “After you left, the cat slept with Jehennette. From that moment, they have been inseparable. Although Jehennette is yet to speak, she does acknowledge our words. And the cat? It seems we have a pet after all - she no longer attacks us.”

Tristram made his way quietly over to the girl and feline and knelt beside them. Jehennette continued petting the cat, but did not look up.

“I rescued the cat from a storm too, you know, much like I did you,” said Tristram.

“Then we are both strays,” the girl said softly. Edine purred blissfully.

Tristram scratched the cat’s chin as waves of relief fled through him - she spoke to him! “She was a stray, and driven almost feral by her ordeal. And though she could have left at any time she chose to stay and became part of our family.”

Jehennette sought out his eyes hesitantly.

“You, too, are welcome to stay. Our family has room for one more,” he said kindly.

Jehennette examined the cat’s yellow-green eyes. “She has found peace here. Perhaps I will too. I will stay.”

In 1358 AD, northern France was terrorized by a popular peasant revolt. Over one hundred castles and homes of the nobility were attacked, the inhabitants brutally slaughtered. A pretender for the throne, Charles the Bad of Navarre, crushed the revolt on June 10.

Border Reivers

Alone in the castle's deserted courtyard, Ryan Bonfield stood while contemplating the events that had occurred there twelve years ago this day. Although he would pay homage to the family members who had perished that fateful day, his main purpose in returning was to confront the demons released into his life by those events.

Neglected, the castle had fallen into ruin. Once powerful battlements, now little more than crumbling stones, were disappearing rapidly beneath the relentless advances of voracious vines. Bushes and weeds flourished in cracks found between the courtyard's cobblestones.



Ryan cast his gaze upon the ramparts where he had last seen his father, the castle's lord. He bit his lip as terrifying memories leapt unbidden to his mind: the ferocious Border Reivers as they came swarming over the walls, his father attempting to fight them off virtually single handedly. His terrified, cowardly response of hiding behind a secret wall panel: and creeping back outside hours later to find the castle's few occupants, including his father, stepmother, and two stepbrothers, put to the sword.

"Hello Ryan," said a woman from behind him.

Startled, Ryan jumped and spun around. The beautiful, wealthy woman standing there was disturbingly familiar. "Mistress?" he asked unsurely.

"There is no longer any need to address me as 'mistress,' Brother," she said, walking slowly over to him.

"You have never called me that before, Mistress," he replied, respectfully averting his gaze. Two years his senior, his stepsister had survived that fateful day's massacre by hiding in an alcove beneath a stairwell.

"Please, Ryan, my name is Miriam."

"Very well, Miriam." He looked up. "You are here today to pay homage to your--to our--family?"

"Actually, no. This is the seventh year in a row that I have come here on this day, and it has never been to pay homage to the deceased."

"Really? Then for what reason do you come here?" he asked, perplexed.

"Why, to look for you, of course," she admitted.

"Why would you want to see me, Miriam? I am nothing but a worthless coward."

"You must not speak of yourself so, Brother. I am the coward, not you. I needed courage to overlook Father's infidelity and accept you into the family after your mother died, but I took the easy way out and persecuted you alongside my mother. As my brother, you had as much right to be part the family as me, yet I treated the lowliest of our servants with more kindness than I did you. Please forgive me, Ryan."

"I deserve only your contempt and loathing, Miriam, not your apology."

"Why do you say that, Brother? Why do you hate yourself so? I could never understand why you ran away from our Uncle's home after he rescued us, those twelve years ago."

Ryan's answer came as though from a great distance. "I was standing right here, on this very spot, when the Border Reivers came swarming over the walls. I watched Father trying to fight them off. I heard him call 'Ryan, Ryan!' as they bowled him over. I knew I should have gone to his aid, but I was so scared that I ran and hid instead! What more damning evidence do you need than this, Sister?"

Miriam touched his hand. "Oh Ryan, is that what has been troubling you? Are you not aware that I witnessed the whole incident from that window up there? Father did not say, 'Ryan, Ryan!' He said, 'Run, Ryan!' Do you understand the significance of this, Brother? When confronted with death, Father's first concern was not for me, my mother or for my brothers, but for you..."

"His bastard son?"

"No! For you, his eldest son, and heir," she concluded.

"Heir?"

"Yes, Ryan. Uncle Michael found Father's will when he returned to the castle to recover any items of value overlooked by the Reivers. The will named you his successor. Ryan. You should also know that since Uncle Michael passed away, I have managed not only his estates, but also our family's holdings and investments. I have done this in your name, not mine. Please come home with me, and take your rightful place as lord of our family. My husband and I are your humble servants, Brother."

"Husband?"

"And three children."

"Three children?" Ryan smiled for the first time in twelve years. "Lead the way, Sister."

Historical Note:

For nearly three centuries, beginning in the late thirteenth century, Scottish and English Border Reivers, or mounted raiders, terrorised both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border.

Have You Seen My Squire?

"Good evening, captain," I said as I approached the castle gatehouse. The afternoon air was becoming quite frigid.

"Good evening, Sir Carl," he replied hesitantly.

"Have you seen my squire, captain? He was supposed to clean my horse's armour and then bring the horse to the village to be re-shod," I queried.

"Ah, well, sir, I think Squire Anthony is hiding," the captain stammered.

"Hiding from whom?" I asked.

"From you, sir," the captain admitted.

"And why would that be, captain?" I pressed.

"Have you looked in the moat, sir?" he replied while tugging at his collar.

"No, I have not."

"Then perhaps you should, sir," the captain suggested.

Upon walking to the side of the drawbridge I received a quite a shock. "Ah, captain, what is my horse doing in the moat?"

"Well, sir, perhaps you should ask your squire that question," the captain recommended as we took in the scene below. A dozen guards were trying to save my horse. One held the stallion's head while the others worked to remove the chainmail armour. Once removed, they would use a trebuchet on the castle wall above to lift the horse out of the shoulder depth waters.

"I will, captain, as soon as I find him," I announced while resisting the urge to tell the men below to be careful. I headed off to my squire's usual hideout. The fourteen-year-old boy had only recently entered my service.

I opened the door to the gatehouse's interior and bellowed, "Squire, show yourself right now or I'll affix you to the drawbridge next time it lowers!"

A scrawny lad jumped out from the shadows to stand in front of me. He was soaking wet. "Sir Carl, please don't kill me! I'm so sorry about your horse - honest!"

"Squire," I said softly.

"Yes sir?" he wailed.

"Why is my horse in the moat?"

"Well, sir, um, you know how you asked me to clean your horse's armour?" he began unsurely.

"Yes," I said this *very* slowly.

"Well, um, I had this great idea of cleaning it with water," he continued.

"Right," I said this slowly too.

"So, I thought to myself, why bring heavy buckets of water to the armour, when I could take the armour to the water," he explained.

"Where does my horse fit into this, squire?" I prompted.

"Well, you see, I needed someone to help me carry the heavy armour, and who better than someone who carries it on a regular basis. So, I put the armour on your horse, grabbed a bucket and a rope, and took your horse to the moat. You know, so I could use *that* water," he clarified.

"And how did the horse end up *in* the moat, squire?"

"Well, we, ah, kind of slipped on the muddy bank, sir. Both me and the horse - right into the moat," he admitted shamefully.

"I see. Then why are you here, hiding in the gatehouse, instead of helping get my horse out of the moat?" I demanded.

"Sorry, sir, but I was so scared you'd skin me alive that I just bolted and hid here," he squeaked.

"Squire, can I ask you a simple question?" I began.

"Oh course, sir."

"How are you supposed to clean chainmail armour?" I asked.

I think a lantern lit up over his head. "Oh! By putting it piece by piece in a bag of sand, and then shaking the bag, sir."

"So why didn't you do that?" I queried.

"Oh, oops. I, um, forgot, sir," he replied.

"What happens when chainmail armour gets wet, squire?"

He looked mortified. "Oh dear – I forgot all about that, sir. It rusts, doesn't it?"

I laid a hand on his arm. "Look, squire, honestly, this is not the end of the world. Although the armour is probably ruined, I can get the armourer to make a new set. The important thing is that you are okay, as will be the horse once they pull him out of the moat."

Squire Anthony looked at me incredulously, "What - you're not going to skin me alive, sir?"

I ruffled his hair, "No, Anthony. I know you're clumsy and don't listen so well, but you'll get there eventually. Besides, you remind me of myself when I was a young squire..."

"Really?" he said keenly.

"Yes, but not *that* much. I never put *my* master's horse in the moat!"



SHORT STORY COLLECTION

Other
Short Stories...



The Only Message They Heed

"Thanks for the lift, Mikhail," I said.

"Don't mention it, cousin. Welcome back," he grunted.

"You've changed," I said, aware that a permanent scowl now marred his once jovial features.

"A lot happened while you were at uni, Alexei, it's not the same world..." He broke off as his phone rang. He flipped it open while keeping the other hand on the wheel. "Mikhail...What? Again? Don't these people learn?...No, no, I'll deal with it...No, stay put--I'll come to you. You're near the bridge?...Fine, see you in ten."

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Nah, just a bit of house cleaning to take care of. It'll only take a few minutes--then I'll drop you home."

With a near inhuman display of mechanical precision, Mikhail drove off the highway and followed a dirt road into Vojislav Wood. Uneasiness spread through me like a malevolent cancerous growth. Who was this stranger beside me? What had happened to the carefree, fun loving prankster with whom I had spent my youth?

Mikhail drove off the track into the small clearing to the left of the bridge that spanned Vojislav River.

Three people awaited us in the clearing. Two unkempt, rugged young men held a woman with a dark complexion between them. Tears stained her dust-caked cheeks. Gnawing doubt blossomed into fear.

Mikhail took a pistol from the glove box. "Come or stay, don't care either way. Just don't get in the way."

While at uni, I had heard rumours of bad things happening out here near the border. Jumping out of the 4WD to walk beside my cousin, I tried vainly to reassure myself that he could not possibly be part of such insanity.

As we drew closer, I realised that the men were not restraining a woman but a teenage ethnic girl. She had probably been using the wood as a shortcut to get home from a part-time job. Her eyes widened at the sight of the gun.

"Kneel down and put your hands on your thighs," Mikhail snapped as he chambered a round.

Whimpering helplessly, she shook her head.

Mikhail pressed the gun against her stomach. "You can have it in the guts or the back of the head--your choice."

I stepped forward. "Mikhail, you're freaking me out! Let the girl go."

Deadpan eyes met mine. "I told you not to get in the way, Alexei."

"What has she done to you?" I demanded.

"These ethnic filth take our jobs and our land--and spread their insidious religion everywhere they go. If we don't act, our heritage, our society, will be destroyed."

"Violence is not the solution, Mikhail."

"It's the only message they heed, Alexei."

Desperate to find a solution to this problem, I was suddenly struck by an uncanny but unmistakable resemblance between this girl and a certain photo in our family album back home. Although shocked by this revelation, it also gave me strength. I pushed the gun to one side.

"Back off, Alexei," warned my cousin.

Ignoring him, I lifted the girl's narrow chin. "Your great-grandmother, what was her name?"

She looked at me blankly.

"Come on!" I all but shouted. "Your great-grandmother was famous. Tell us her name!"

"Asiya," she stammered.

"Tell us her whole name!"

Her dark eyes darted about frantically.

"Come on girl, think!"

"Shamil! Asiya Shamil!"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Mikhail jolt as though struck.

"Recognise that name, cousin?" I said, refusing to relinquish my grip on the gun.

"What?"

"Do you recognise the name?"

“Yes, damn you! She’s our great-grandmother. But this girl...related to us...how did you know?”

“Because I can see her resemblance to our great-grandmother. However, that’s not important - what is important is that this girl is our cousin,” I concluded.

“Your great-grandmother’s one of them?” one of Mikhail’s comrades asked, aghast.

I was unsure whom Mikhail hated more at that moment, the girl, or me.

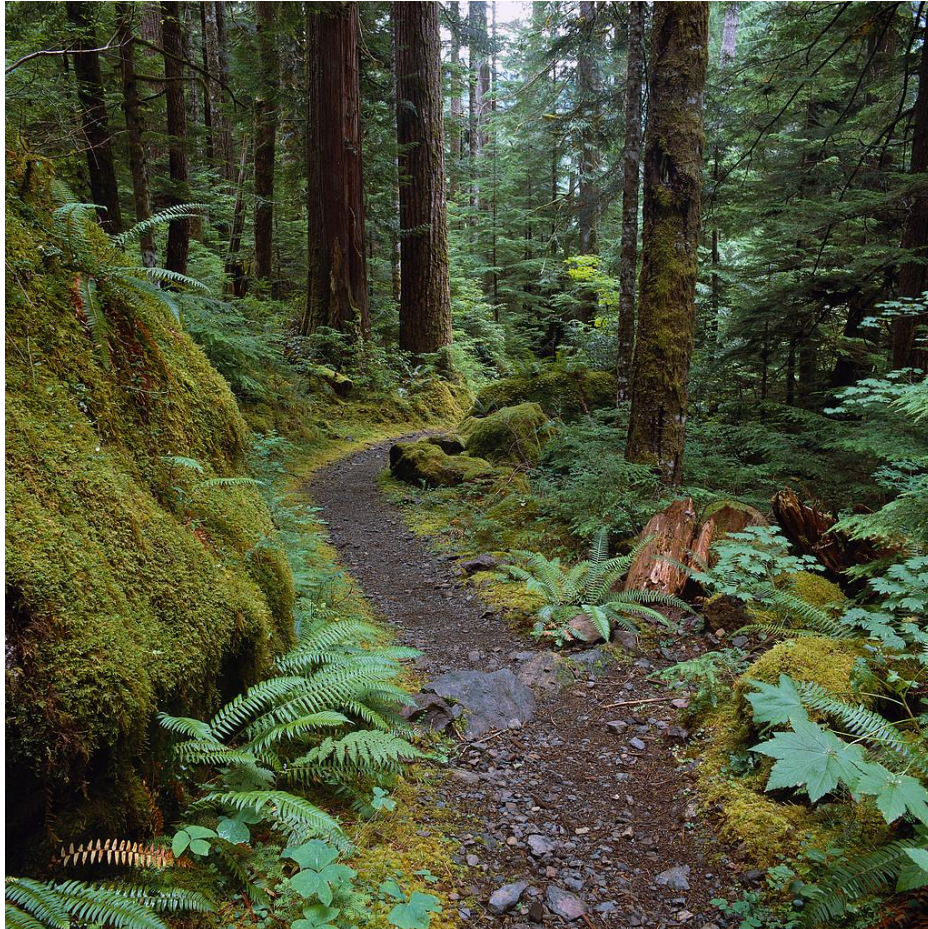
Drawing the girl from the slackening grasp of her captors, I put my arm around her protectively.

“Come, cousin, I will walk you home,” I said to her.

“Don’t make me shoot you too, Alexei!” Mikhail threatened, aiming the gun at me now.

“Don’t you get it, Mikhail? Do you have any idea what you’ve been doing with all this ethnic cleansing? If you go far enough back through the generations, you will find that our two nations share the same ancestors--we are all cousins! You’ve been killing your own family!”

I escorted the girl safely to her home.



The Waitress

“Hey guys, that cute waitress Natasha isn’t here today!” protested Henry as we took our seats in Bill’s Diner.

“Huh?” puzzled Jase in all seriousness. “Don’t we come here for the food?”

After a pause, we answered as one. “Nah – for Natasha.”

Nothing was sacred to my friends, they sent up everyone and everything in a way that kept me amused for hours.

“Oh please tell me *she*’s not Natasha’s replacement,” Henry pined as a middle aged waitress headed for our table.

“May I take your order?” she asked. Her speech impediment and inexpensive hearing aides reminded me of Megan, a deaf girl I had met at the gym two months ago. She was the cutest thing to walk

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