

May-June Bookbug Writing Contest Entries

Theme: An unimportant-looking object that is actually important.

The Innocent Suspected: A Tale of Old France, 1st Instalment -- Katja L.

"The wicked watcheth the righteous, and seeketh to slay him. The Lord will not leave him in his hand, nor condemn him when he is judged." (Psalm 37:32-33)

Reynard sprang off his bed with a resounding thump and stood erect, full of enthusiasm and joie-de-vivre. He was struggling with his shirt when a sleepy voice erupted through the closed door leading into the adjoining room.

"Confound it, Fairfeather! Can't a body have some honest sleep when on leave?"

"I beg your pardon, Callaghan," Reynard replied apologetically. "It's this confounded shirt—you know how abominable those nuisances are."

"Well, no, I can't say that I do," replied Callaghan, shifting in his bed, his eyes still closed. "I never did understand your continual feud with them.—Well, what now?"

This disagreeable inquiry was provoked by a smothered exclamation on the part of his comrade.

"Well, THIS is pleasant!" was Reynard's sarcastic reply.

"I daresay," answered Callaghan, ironically, "but I really think you could be quieter about it.—NOW what is it?"

In reply he heard Reynard tramping about his room, then: "I say, Callaghan! have you seen my doublet?"

"No," grunted Callaghan, resolutely squeezing his eyes shut.

"But where can it be?"

"Anywhere," was Callaghan's reply, heavily loaded with sarcasm. "Your room really resembles one of those foreign messes, Fairfeather—odds and ends of everything well scrambled up. How you manage to exist so—"

"But I cannot appear before the Countess with no doublet, Callaghan!" cried Reynard, who, although calm and cool over dangers, was given to panic over such trifles.

"What happened to your second one?"

"Don't you remember? I lost it on the way here."

"Of course," said Callaghan in a high, ironical voice. "What else could you do?"

"May I borrow yours?" inquired Reynard meekly.

"Of course! What a splendid idea! Then you can explain to my lady how it happens that I cannot appear at my lady's table," retorted Callaghan, rolling his eyes at the ceiling.

At the same moment, however, Reynard gave an exclamation of satisfaction and pounced upon a wrinkled doublet.

And so it went on with every article of clothing he must don. Callaghan, used to these early interruptions, replied dozily from his bedroom and lost no opportunity to upbraid

Reynard on the disgraceful state of his room. There was a final and prolonged scene upon the knowledge that Reynard's left boot had disappeared, but at last he was attired and exited noisily from the room, whistling an English tune with due heartiness.

Safely in the garden outside, he paced about and talked to the gardener, perfecting his excellent French, which he could never be persuaded was already perfect. The gardener had considered Reynard his protégé from the first moment Reynard had entered the garden, remarking: "My fine fellow, I know absolutely naught about gardens; will you please direct me as to where I must walk" and had proceeded to trample down a bed of lilies. The gardener had made the proper lamentations, and Reynard the proper apologies, explaining how he had merely wanted to cross over, but had slipped somehow. Won by his courtesy and interest, however, the gardener had overlooked his clumsiness, and volunteered to teach him how to conduct himself in a garden.

They were engaged in this occupation when Callaghan appeared and fetched Reynard in for déjeuner.

The Countess, a pretty, middle-aged woman in deep mourning, sat opposite her two young guests and her young son, and despite her efforts to be merry, Reynard detected red eyes and an abstracted look. In the highflown, complimentary language of Old France's court, he inquired the reason whereof.

The Countess hesitated, and at last admitted that a thief had broken into her dressing-room in the night and stolen her wedding-ring—doubly precious now that her dear Eugène had departed, she confessed with tears.

The Englishmen were duly indignant, and much discussion arose upon who this impudent villain might be, and what steps should be taken to find and capture him. After déjeuner, they adjourned to the garden, where the question was debated still further. Reynard was pacing about—to the great detriment of the Countess' elegant lawn—when a sudden cry was heard.

The party leapt to their feet and glanced about, wondering what was happening. The young Vicomte crowded close to his mother and set his jaw, preparing to defend her. The gardener came rushing towards his mistress, pale as mortal man may be.

In disjointed words he gave the reason for his cry: below my lady's dressing-room window he had discovered footprints.

These were carefully examined by the young English soldiers, but no clue was there: the boots seemed to bear no distinguishing mark.

Reynard set off to report this to his hostess, but a cry from the servants arrested him, and he turned to find them staring at him with mingled hostility and terror.

"What is it?" he demanded of his older comrade, bemused and confused, with his hand upon his rapier.

Nigel Callaghan looked grave. "Look," was all he said, pointing to the muddy puddle Reynard had but just tramped through. Then his finger moved to the footprint left by the thief.

The marks were identical.

As if to further incriminate the lad, Callaghan drew Reynard's missing left boot from where it had been cast off under a bush.

Reynard was crushed by the reception of this. In vain he protested, implored, and raged: the servants and the young Vicomte were firmly impressed that the secret thief was he. The Vicomte was disgusted by what seemed to him to have been hypocrisy in debating manners to catch the robber. The Comtesse proclaimed her belief in him, but he felt a slight fear hanging about her, and even Callaghan admitted circumstances were certainly against him, although he protested that he believed as a matter of course that his comrade could in no way be guilty of such an offense.

This state of matters continued for a week; then one misty dawn, when a desperate Reynard was contemplating leaving for Spain, where he would try and gain his living by his sword, he was roused by the triumphant shout of his former friend the gardener.

"Ma dame, ma dame! I have found him!"

The Frenchman danced about under his mistress' window, ecstatic.

The Comtesse's maid threw up the window and demanded an explication for this wild behavior.

"O joy! O hour of delight!" cried the gardener. "My lady, I have found the thief! Monsieur the English lord is innocent! It is that villain Larron! I saw him, coming down from the window, with my English lord's boot awaiting below! He marked the ground with its prints and tossed it, again, below the bush! O my lord! God be praised!" The good fellow was overcome with joy that his friend was blameless; his loyalty had been sorely shaken.

The Comtesse displayed mingled emotions: joy that her favorite guest was innocent, shame that she had allowed doubt to affect her, fear of the unscrupulous and notorious criminal. . . She shed many tears imploring Reynard's pardon, much to his embarrassment.

As they stood, a few hours later, waiting for their grooms to lead out their horses, the young men watched guards march up, to escort the Comtesse and Vicomte home to the country château. Larron was a broken man; once a successful and higher-class bourgeois, he had taken to his wicked profession out of love of cruelty, and none seemed able to rout him out. The danger was his former statute: he was capable of ultimate sophistication and apparent humbleness, and often entered into livery, soon after robbing and killing. The Comtesse had appealed to the Queen, and she had been granted a guard of Royal soldiers.

"Callaghan," confided Reynard to his friend, "I am determined to stop this scoundrel Larron. To trouble and rob this poor lady, especially of such a prized possession! He shall return it, Callaghan!"

"I daresay," replied this personage, "but I suggest you begin by retrieving your second doublet. . . before it disappears inside your saddlebag again."

The Guilty Punished: A Tale of Old France, IInd Instalment

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

His horse was fresh, his heart young, and his spirits high. This combination led to a hearty gallop.

His horse's hooves pounded rhythmically along the hard road, a week after the discovery of his innocence, bringing him further from the barracks, where he had met some comrades, and closer to the château, where he was being housed.

Reynard's thoughts flew alongside his steed, memory replaying many past scenes, from the home in Ireland to the barracks in France. Reynard Fairfeather was the son of an English merchant and an Irish officer's daughter. At present the English army was unoccupied, and from love of excitement, Reynard had entered, for a time, the French army.

A sudden swerve of the horse, as a rabbit dashed by, compelled Reynard to attend more strictly to his mount and less to his memory. In spite of this necessity, however, he could not restrain from dwelling for a moment upon happy reminiscing concerning his last few hours spent with his widowed mother. Three hours filled with love, wisdom, and humor are pleasant to recall.

The château drew closer, and Reynard scrubbed away at his doublet and breeches, stained with highway dust. He brushed a hand over his head slick with perspiration and wished his wig were at hand. The Comtesse, by her modest well-dressing, inspired him to care more for his own appearance, and ensure that it was politely pleasant.

Arriving before the château, Reynard dismounted, and handed the reins to his servant, Zacharie, who had run out from the stables upon hearing the sounds of Reynard's arrival. Hurrying up to his chamber, Reynard donned new clothes and freshened himself.

His jackboots rang upon the floor as he marched into the dining-room twenty minutes later, and his reward was in the pleased look in the older woman's eyes as she saw the pains he had taken to render himself presentable. She gracefully led him into the conversation between Callaghan and the young Vicomte, concerning horses in general and Royale in particular. The Vicomte was never tired of singing his grey's praises.

When the dinner was over, Callaghan and Reynard retired to the salon with the Vicomte, where they were soon all three engaged in a friendly society game.

As the time ran on, conversation turned to Reynard's and Callaghan's departure, in two weeks. Callaghan had been recalled home by his father, who wished to see him established at the old estate before he died. Reynard, who had left the army, had elected to return to Paris to bid farewell to his Captain and then look about for a place where a good blade and strong nerves could be of use. The Comtesse, who had by now joined them, was frankly sorrowful at the imminent loss of fun and youth in their quiet home, and the Vicomte bewailed his approaching loneliness. Callaghan could offer no consolation, but Reynard, as he might pass by France in his journeying, promised to visit them whenever he might, and swore not to settle down until he had paid them a final visit.

The next morning, at dawn, Reynard saddled his Joyeux and cantered off. Similar to Alexander the Great, Reynard found that a ride at daybreak was the best sauce to enjoy his food, and he never failed to sally out at break of morn, after reading the Word, to pray and meditate surrounded by God's works.

'Heavenly Father, I thank Thee for—'

A shot flew by his ear and interrupted his prayer.

'—Protection,' he added silently, drawing rein and facing round pistol in hand.

A masked man stood in the road, a pistol in each hand. His belt bore a rapier on one side and a sword on the other; a dagger projected by each. He was swathed in a dark, camouflaging cloak.

He scarcely gave Reynard a moment for thus examining him. Another ball narrowly missed the boy's cheek.

Both aimed, and both fired. At the sound a rabbit, with a snapped cord hanging from her neck, dashed forward in terror. The horse reared up at both the discharge and the animal, and Reynard's bullet, aimed at the man's arm, struck his head; his enemy's bullet, aimed at Reynard's head, struck his arm.

The man fell heavily. Reynard struggled to dismount, but crazed by fear, Joyeux dashed off, and it was some time before Reynard, with one arm disabled, succeeded in calming and turning him.

Back at the dying man's side, he bent over him and offered him a drink.

"You are the Comtesse's guest," the man said hollowly. "The young Englishman that robbed her."

"No," Reynard said steadily, though stricken by the blow of false accusation again. "It was the robber Larron, wishing to throw dishonor upon my name, I suppose. Why, I know not," he added, shrugging.

"How do you know this?" exclaimed the man, in great astonishment.

"We saw Larron making off. And using my boot."

The man reached up and tore off his mask. Reynard stared down in amazement at the robber.

"I have been dogging you for days," Larron admitted. "I did not want to stain my hands with your blood, because. . . because your God is powerful to protect and avenge you. But I frightened the rabbit under your horse, yesterday. . . Yes, that is not your Joyeux. I stole him, and substituted an extremely nervous horse for him. But the animal did not take fright. Therefore I resolved to. . . to do it, now. But your God protected you—with the very instruments I meant to kill you with. Now—" He hesitated. "I have done you much wrong. Yet I cannot die without imploring your pardon. Will—CAN you forgive me?"

His imploring look was not to be ignored. Warm-hearted Reynard replied with a smile and an affirmation. But he only took in the explanation above later; now his attention was focused on much earlier in Larron's speech.

"But, Larron, my God can become your God too."

In a few short words he told the beautiful story of God's Son, who chose to die to bear our sins. He explained how if one simply believed in Jesus, and what He has done, and that He can save, and one does say it with his mouth, then he is saved. Within minutes, there was joy in Heaven at the repentance of a sinner.

With his last breath, Larron motioned faintly to his pocket. Reynard obediently explored it, and soon brought to light the wedding-ring of the Comtesse.

The body of the robber was laid to rest below the soil, that afternoon, but his soul was in Heaven, washed in the blood of the Lamb of God.

The Injury Amended: A Tale of Old France, IIIrd Instalment

"Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22)

A month after the death of the footpad Larron, Reynard Fairfeather tramped into an auberge and summoned the landlord.

"Have you a room available, monsieur? I have just shot my horse."

"Shot your horse!" exclaimed the man, throwing back his head and stepping backwards in astonishment. Then he peered hard at the boy-soldier, as if trying to discern Reynard's sanity.

"He was hamstrung," Reynard offered.

A look of relief was quickly replaced by alarm on the man's face. He glanced about and lowered his voice. "Then, monsieur the foreigner, I counsel you to leave at once. It is not healthy to make an enemy here." He handed a candle to Reynard, whispering the way to a room, and vanished before Reynard was able to answer or thank him.

In his room a few minutes later, Reynard set down his candlestick upon a table and slipped his hands into his pockets. Then, lowering his chin so that it almost touched his chest, he paced to and fro, pondering. Who could this mysterious antagonist be? Was it a coincidence? Had his Surprise been mistaken for another? Or was the blow aimed deliberately at him? Was someone trying to prevent him from leaving Paris? Who could that be? What enemies did he have?

He had grieved that his Joyeux had disappeared, for death had come too soon for Larron to reveal the horse's whereabouts. Now, though, Reynard rejoiced, for he could not have borne to shoot his good friend. Surprise—so named because he had a trick of sometimes displaying no nervousness, and sometimes breaking forth almost madly—was not a quarter as dear.

Reynard passed a restless night, filled with questions and prayers, and arose before dawn. Hastily attiring himself, he laid the money for his reckoning next to the candlestick, and slipped downstairs. The yard was deserted, save for a rather dirty boy lounging out of the stables. Hurrying past him, Reynard soon saddled and mounted his hired horse, and set off. Only half a mile, and he dismounted again. Something was definitely wrong with this horse.

Lifting up one foot, Reynard sat back on his heels in surprise. "Great fires of London! his shoe is loose!"

This was so. Three of the four nails were loosened.

Reynard rose and unconsciously placed his hands back into his pockets while he stared down at the foot. The horse stamped and released a huff.

"Oui, oui, one moment please," his rider murmured mechanically and absently. Then he looked up and gazed around him. "Now what in the world is happening, and who can be doing it?"

"I am," growled a bitter voice from nearby, "and you deserve it, you dirty, meddling Englishman."

Then out stepped a young boy of some seven years younger than Reynard, more on the filthy and bedraggled side than the clean and neat one.

"And just who might you be, my fine fellow?" demanded Reynard.

The boy bared his teeth and spat. "I am the son of my father, and you have killed him!"

Reynard looked blank. "I am a soldier," he protested. "It is my duty. If one is a soldier and is killed, one mustn't grumble."

"But he wasn't a soldier," snarled the boy. "My father was Larron!"

Reynard stared in astonishment at the angry face of the child. He bore a strong resemblance with the late highwayman—undeniable proof of his claim.

"I did not know he had any sons," he remarked quietly. "What is your name, boy?"

"I am Eustache Larron. And you have killed my father!" hissed the boy, astonishingly menacing for so young a child. "I cannot kill you yet, but I hamstrung your horse, yesterday, and this morning I went into the stables and loosened that one's shoe. I hope he throws you off!"

"I am sorry I killed your father," Reynard answered quietly and sincerely. "It was no fault nor desire of mine. Your father attacked me. I defended myself. I fired at his arm, he at my head. My horse reared, and my shot mortally wounded him, while his only struck my arm. I could do nothing for him, but I did what I could. I forgave him, and I shared with him the Good News of salvation. Your father is safe in Heaven, and he awaits you."

Surprised by this mild reply, the boy dropped his eyes and studied his toes.

"I knew not he had attacked you," he said quietly. "I thought you were a 'good man', killing him for what he has done to others, when he had done naught to you."

"But he did do me wrong," replied Reynard, misinterpreting the general suggestion of the boy as a personal accusation. "He sought to throw dishonor upon my name. He sought to make me appear as a base thief and ungrateful hypocrite."

The boy's face became pained. He scrubbed his heel and toe into the dirt and squirmed under the quiet, manly gaze of his opponent.

"I am sorry," he said at last, gesturing vaguely to the unshod hired horse and to the place where the unfortunate Surprise lay beneath the earth.

Reynard studied the boy's face. He was about ten years of age, well-grown and big for a French boy, with an active face that was sharp in no unpleasant manner.

“What will you do now, Eustache?”

The boy shrugged.

“Will you come with me, and be my brother?” Reynard blurted.

Astonishment raised the boy’s head. “But my father did you wrong, and I as well!”

“Your father apologized,” Reynard replied, with a careless gesture, “and besides, you know, ‘seventy times seven shalt thou forgive’. If you can forgive my unhappy shot, I can forgive you for these poor horses,” and he patted the horse, who was considerably impatient. Humans! Standing there chattering instead of bringing him around to a blacksmith! By this time he might be shod and the journey continued!

There was silence between the English lad and the French boy. Then Eustache colored, and tears gleamed in his eyes.

“No one has ever forgiven me before,” he murmured.

“God forgave and forgot all my sins,” Reynard said simply. “I must do the same.”

The boy’s face was inquiring, and Reynard explained. “We have all sinned, Eustache. We have all done wicked things, contrary to the law of God. The wages of sin is death. Yet God in His mercy and love sent His Son to die in our stead. The sinless Lord Jesus shed His perfect blood upon the cross, and took upon Him all the sins of the world—the every sin of every man, woman, and child, who has lived, who is living, and who will live. If we believe that the blood of the Lord Jesus can cleanse us, and that it is this, and this alone, that can do so, and we call upon His name, and ask Him to save us from our sins, to wash us clean, and to come live within us, He will do so, and we are saved from the penalty of our sin—death. No longer are we on our way to judgment and Hell. Now we are on the way to Heaven and rest.”

Wonder and awe sat upon the child’s face, and he drank in every word.

“Then—what must I do to be saved?”

“Pray,” was the simple reply. “Tell the Lord you believe in His atonement. Ask Him to wash you. Tell Him you repent, you turn away from your sins. Ask Him to come live within you. That is all.”

“You are my brother in Christ, now,” Reynard remarked, several minutes afterwards, “yet, still would I like to have you as my brother. I have neither brother nor sister, and I have greatly longed and prayed for one. Your friendship would more than pay for aught your father has done. —But have you forgiven me?”

Eustache laughed. “God forgave and forgot all my offenses; I must do the same,” he quoted.

Reynard beamed.

And when Monsieur the Englishman left the town, an hour later, by his side there rode a smiling French lad. And never did Eustache leave Reynard’s side, until several years later, when Reynard has settled down. Then the LORD called Eustache Larron Fairfeather to be missionary to the French, and for many years he was used to bring many to the fold.

Matched for Danger -- by Victoria Minks

The matches were scattered over the ground. Hugh tread over one as he paced the dark room, the slender piece of wood snapping under his weight.

"I must get out. I have to tell his lordship what Letholdus aims to do." He threw up his hands in frustration. "Not even a window to signal out of for help!"

His best friend Maerwynn's steps echoed his. "If we walk enough we might wear a hole through the floor and go crashing down to the room below." She laughed.

Hugh turned to stare at her, just making out her face in the dimness. "How can you smile at a time like this? The King is in danger of assassination and we must sit here like fools, babbling and treading about while he gets stabbed or something."

"You claim to have such information and yet you can not even remember the method of assassination that they chose. It was poison, and they meant to infiltrate the kitchen. And don't mind my laughing, at least I still have my wits about me." Maerwynn crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. "Besides, who was it that insisted we hide in Letholdus' baggage cart?"

The boy groaned. "Me, but it wasn't supposed to end up like this. I only encouraged such a means of concealment to keep us from being found by that nasty porter of Letholdus'... he would have had us whipped whenever he spotted us too near his precious cargo, if he had been able to dictate such punishments."

"I could withstand his anger far better than the promise of death." Maerwynn remarked wryly. "We are but mere servants, you know they will execute us as soon as they have time. Nobody at his Lordship's will think much that we are both gone, except for perhaps Daphne, and that is only because I shan't be able to be bossed around by her."

Hugh fumbled towards the door and pushed at it. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, throwing his shoulder at the door. "It's bolted so tightly..."

Maerwynn felt the matches beneath her feet bent down to pick them up. "I'm going to keep your matches, Hugh, since you dropped them everywhere when you were struggling with that man."

Hugh didn't answer. He began pacing again, bumping into the wall on occasion.

Maerwynn slumped onto the floor. "Do you think if we started a fire in here they would let us out?"

Her friend stopped in front of her and sent her a look of disgust. "We would simply die in the flames."

"I was only trying to help." Maerwynn pulled out the matches from where she had tucked them into her sleeve and struck one against the stone floor. The flame sprang up and she studied it. "I wish you had candles on you, Hugh."

"Don't be ridiculous." Hugh sighed, his boots slapping against the floor with every step.

The flame flickered out and Maerwynn shook her head, striking another. "I wish you'd stop tramping about, you're causing the matches to go out."

Hugh flopped down next to her. "There is one comfort in dying together," he spoke in a listless tone.

"What's that?" Maerwynn frowned and raised her hand in front of Hugh's face. "Stop breathing so much."

Hugh snorted. "I was going to say that it would mean that the one would not be lonely without the other, but I might have spoken too soon. What, now you wish me to stop breathing?"

Maerwynn gasped as the winking light went out and they were swallowed in blackness. "Hugh!"

"That was not me." Hugh insisted. "Slow your own breathing if you are that determined to keep the match going."

"I was not breathing very heavy." Maerwynn countered, scraping another match against the floor. "We shall race through this bundle of matches before the night has even come if we continue as we have."

Hugh rubbed his eyes as the orangish glow brightened a small circle around them. Maerwynn's sudden short exclamation made him straighten. "What?"

"It was a rat," Maerwynn nudged him. "Go chase it away. I'll not be nibbled on in my sleep tonight!"

Hugh grumbled but rose.

"Wait!" Maerwynn caught onto his tunic. "Stop."

Her friend paused, and Maerwynn remained very still, her gaze on the match. "Hugh, there is a breeze."

"Why are you so obsessed with the breathing, Maerwynn, please--" Hugh sat down again. "The rat has run off, perhaps it will not come back."

Maerwynn did not tear her eyes away from the match. When it died once more in the same manner of the others, she struck another one and turned with an exultant face on Hugh. "Come, there is a breeze! I would not have known it in this stifling room, but from somewhere I can see a little air. It is putting the matches out."

"Why, grand." Hugh sighed. "It is likely from some minuscule crack in between the stones, and that shan't help us any." He brightened a bit. "On the other hand, at least we will not suffocate."

Maerwynn had risen and was holding the lit match in front of her, walking slowly around the room. Hugh watched her, the glow around her enough to illuminate her shape but nothing more. "Here." she called in an excited whisper after a few minutes. "Come see if you can pry a hole, Hugh."

Hugh rose and walked over to where she stood against one wall. She shielded the little flame with one hand and motioned towards the wall. Air whistled in between a gap between two stones. Hugh shook his head. "I can try to do something, Maerwynn, but I

don't think-- that is--" he bit his lip and faced her. "Please don't get too hopeful. It would be doubly disappointing for me to see you saddened."

"Fine, fine," Maerwynn swallowed, but waved him on. Hugh braced his feet against the floor and grasped the rock, giving it a tug. A bit of dust showered onto his boots. "It's working," Maerwynn whispered.

Hugh set his jaw and grabbed the stone tighter. Suddenly as he pulled, several rows of the stones swung out at them. Maerwynn dropped the match as she stepped back, but even in the darkness they could feel the cold air rushing out at them. "Light another one," Hugh breathed.

Maerwynn did. "There's only a few more," she started, but her words faded away. Before them appeared to be a hidden hiding spot, like another little room.

Hugh shook his head and stepped in it. He glanced back at Maerwynn and nodded. "I suspected so. Come, it's a tunnel."

Maerwynn glanced behind her then back at Hugh. "Do you think it will lead us out of Letholdus' castle?"

"It leads somewhere." HUGH reasoned. "If anything, it is out of this room." It was his turn to smile now. "You were right, Maerwynn, about the matches. I should have believed you when you first spoke. Let us hurry-- perhaps we can reach his Lordship in time, if we try hard."

Maerwynn entered the tunnel after him, peering ahead into the darkness. When she faced Hugh, her eyes shone in the light of the little flame. "Let us make haste, then!"

American Ingenuity -- Ryana Lynn

This story is also about the Springfield family, concerning their adopted son, Mitch Cohen. This story chronologically comes after "The Bright Idea" and WAY before "Love Conquers All." Find These Stories in the previous Monthly Writing Contest PDFs.

"Come on, Cohen, let's go!"

"I'm comin'! Hold your horses, Plastic!" Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class (HM3) Mishael "Mitch" Cohen hurried to follow the squad of Marines. "We have another five minutes and I need them," he grumbled. "It takes a lot to take care of you jarheads." He snapped up a couple more packages from a table he was passing.

He sighed. Somebody had left trash on his desk...again. He quickly grabbed the gum wrappers, bobby pin and rubber band, shoving them into a pocket close to his boot. L.CPL. Adam Pulaski tapped his foot as Mitch hurried by. "Keep it up and we'll go back to calling you 'Squid.'"

“Sure,” Mitch replied. He and Pulaski were good friends. Being the only Jewish guys in their unit, they “had to stick by one another” out of principle, even though their beliefs varied a bit. Adam was a Christian, like Mitch, but still hadn’t given up all of the traditions his people upheld.

Their squad leader briefed them on their mission and they set out on their patrol. Mitch walked along between two Marines. They didn’t want him exposed to enemy fire any more than necessary; after all, if he got hurt, they’d be sunk.

The province they had been working in the past few months had been fairly calm of late and they didn’t expect today to be any different. Maybe that’s why it was so easy for the insurgents to ambush them.

Mitch was stunned to see Pulaski fall first. He snapped to attention and hurried to his buddy’s side. “Don’t take little breaths like that,” he admonished. “Deep breaths, remember?” He ripped open Pulaski’s right sleeve. The bullet had torn through his shoulder and lodged inside, too deep to be removed on sight.

Thinking fast, Mitch began pulling out supplies and packing the wound. Then he wrapped another bandage around to secure the arm in place. Pulaski was breathing hard, sweat popping out on his face. “Just take it easy.” Bullets zipped past them and the two hugged the ground, making themselves as small as possible. One bounced off of Mitch’s helmet, hard enough to give him a headache.

BOOM!

Mitch felt himself spinning through the air. He landed on the road nearby, flat on his back. Pulaski lay ten feet away from him, looking pretty beat up. Groaning, Mitch moved each limb and his back. Good. Nothing broken, just bruised.

“How you doing, Plastic?”

“Not to good, Doc. Lay still! They’re coming!”

Mitch closed his eyes and lay as still as he could.

“Over here!” one of the terrorist shouted in Arabic. Footsteps crunched closer and closer. They came to Mitch first. He fought the desire to wince as they kicked him in the knee. “Dead.” The voice was in English, but heavily accented.

“No,” he heard a Marine whisper. They had taken at least one man prisoner.

They turned their attention to Pulaski. “He’s alive.” Pulaski was lifted partway up, then thrown back to the ground. A piteous cry escaped him. “He’ll be dead by sundown. Leave him. Let’s go.”

“NO!” shouted the captive Marine, joined by a few others.

Mitch took advantage of the noise to take a gulp of air. There was much scraping and scuffling, but the group had soon moved several feet away. Mitch lifted his head and counted the Marines being herded away. His heart sank. Eight of the twelve marines were shuffling along with the enemy. Pulaski was hurt, and Mitch wasn’t sure where the other three were.

One of the captives looked back at his prone brothers in arms. His eyes widened when he saw Mitch pulling himself up. He smiled, his step slightly quickened. Mitch smiled too, glad that one of his brothers had a spark of hope now.

As soon as the insurgents were out of sight, Mitch sat up and hurried over to Pulaski. "You're gonna be fine. You're just gonna be in bed for a while. We've gotta get you back to base...but we need to know where they're taking the squad."

"I'll take him back, Doc."

Mitch nearly jumped out of his skin. "Rodgers! Are you alright?"

The Marine nodded. "Fulcrum and LaHaye are fine too. But LaHaye's...kinda shook up."

Mitch and Rodgers carried Pulaski back to the other marines. "You weren't kidding," Mitch mumbled. LaHaye was shaking. "LaHaye?"

The Marine looked up. "I'm alright, Doc. I just can't stop shaking. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"You'll be fine. You go back with Rodgers and Pulaski. Send another squad out to help us. Fulcrum, come with me."

"Right, Doc," they said.

Mitch and Fulcrum hurried along, watching for every sign that could lead them to their enemy and captive brothers. It took them three hours to locate their target, an old, run down compound on the edge of a village. "Cover me," Mitch whispered. Fulcrum didn't look too sure, but didn't argue.

Mitch slipped up to the wall and through a hole in the crumbling structure. Fulcrum laid low, his rifle at the ready. Fifteen minutes later, Mitch returned. "They're questioning our Marines right now. From the sounds of it, they are planning to leave our guys here for the night and move them out tomorrow. We've got to get them tonight."

"But how? The others won't catch up with us by night."

Mitch smiled. "With a little ingenuity, we won't need them at all. I saw the insurgents stash the weapons in a side room. It'll be your job to get them. I'll see to freeing our boys."

At midnight, Mitch and Fulcrum entered the compound. Mitch pointed out the side room and the guard keeping it. "You take care of that," Mitch whispered. He had a guard of his own to deal with. Working quickly and quietly, Mitch soon had passed this obstacle and entered the holding room.

"What are you-"

"No time for that," Mitch said, rifling through his pocket. He pulled out the bobby pin and used it to open those held by zip-tie confinements. They aided him in untying the others.

Hearing footsteps approaching, Mitch pulled out the knife he had taken from the guard. He relaxed when he heard Fulcrum cough four times. He entered, laden with weapons. After they had been passed out, Mitch assessed the wounded men in their group. "These two will have to be helped."

Their squad leader nodded. "Washington, you carry out Pepper. Jones, you get Jacobs. Harper and Keats, you'll help me cover the fellas as they make a run for it. Cohen,

lead the way. Us three will meet you outside. Those with wounded, don't stop for nothing until you get them to the base. Got it?"

"Oo-rah, sir!" they all whispered.

They waited for the guard to pass again, hoisted up their injured buddies and made for the hole. Mitch clutched the M-16 that had been handed to him. He knew how to use it, but doctors didn't usually carry guns, so he wasn't well practiced. He was more comfortable with a pistol.

They had run about twelve yards when the alarm was raised. Bullets flew and boots crunched against the dirt as the Marines raced back the way they had come. Mitch tried to keep up with the men helping the wounded, but it was dark. They must be running all out. Mitch took off with a new burst of speed, determined to be right there for his Marines when they got back to their outpost. They would need him.

Hours passed, but at last, he came into sight of their post and was promptly greeted by a warning shout.

"Don't shoot! It's me, Cohen!"

"What's the countersign?"

"Uh...Tarawa!"

"Open the gate."

Mitch hurried forward. "Cohen, what happened to you?"

"Where are the others? Are they inside?"

"No, you're the first we've seen of the squad since Pulaski, Rodgers and LaHaye go here. What happened?"

Mitch didn't answer, but turned back towards the gate. "There's no way I could have beat them here!"

"Whoa, Cohen, you ain't going back out there," said the sergeant, grabbing his arm.

Just then the remainder of the squad joined them, panting, but safe.

"There's Lightning Bolt Cohen right there!" one of the men joked. "I've never seen you move that fast!"

"I thought you fellas were already here," Mitch said as they hurried to the aid station. "I was trying to catch up."

"Good work, Cohen," the squad leader said, slapping him on the back. "How did you know a bobby pin would get us loose?"

Mitch grinned. "A SEAL friend of mine told me."

The leader nodded. "Semper Fi, Doc."

Mitch grinned. "Semper Fi, sir."

The Icecream Maker- KeiAnna

"The old icecream maker sat faithfully on the front porch, a porch belongin' to a little farm house built in 1905. It was a pretty farmhouse, it was, painted a sunny yellow

with a wide, friendly-like porch. Mama kept the gardens wells, and daddy worked harder than any man, and the animals loved him like no other. Sister Lissy, she had her chores, and brother Jack, and me, and though we sometimes quarreled as children are bound to do, we were a happy lot, we were.

Life on a farm is hard work; I'm sure that's no surprise to y'all. But we liked it. Liked the independence, the risin' with the sun, the feelin' that comes when you can finally reap the rewards of your labour...but now, I'm gettin' distracted

The ice cream maker.

Not that it was anything special in itself. No sir, it was second-hand, plain, nothin' fancy, but a joy to us. Some evenings, Lissy, Jack, and me, we'd take turns turnin' that metal crank, nigh until we felt our arms would plumb fall off. And daddy and mama, they'd relax together on the creaky porch swing, and we'd all laugh and talk, and my, what happy times! Icecream was a lot harder to make back then and it'd take awhile for it to come, but we kids didn't mind. The sweet, creamy results and bein' together and just enjoyin' the evening after a long day's work made all that crankin' worth while.

Well, daddy's gone to glory now. And mama, she followed close behind. Lissy is a married woman; Jack, a married man livin' across the country. The farm is mine now, and my wife's and 4 young 'uns. And, just as sure as day, that ice cream maker still sits on the porch, almost like a solider guardin' the house faithfully. My oldest son, Jes, asked why we had an ugly crate with an odd crank attached to it, and what's it for, anyhow. Ugly! Yes, I suppose it is now, and worn. But I didn't answer. I closed my eyes, and relived the days of my childhood. The toil of farm life, the evening talks and laughter, the wonderful scent of the summer air, the hug of the sun's golden rayss it set into the west...and our arms achin' as we cranked that little machine. Though, I s'pose I don't love that icecream maker in itself. No, it's the sweet memories it brings. Lasting memories. Memories far, far sweeter than the cool, creamy icecream that came outta it. That ol' machine may seem unimpressive to most folks. Why, I'm sure it does. But to me, it represents the beauty of toil, and the joy of just plain togetherness. Lookin' at that old thing, I can almost hear our laughter ring clearly out across the grass, almost feel those evenings long, long ago...

And I realize I have received a gift. No, not the icecream maker- a love for simplicity, a love for labour, the ability to see the importance even in the little things. And, best of all, a thousand sweet memories that never will fade."

By The Campfire -- Faithful Lee

The fire crackled loudly as the bright flames chased each other above the glowing pile of logs. Outside the ring of light, a chorus of chirps and croaks drowned out all of the other night

noises. Huddled in a thick wool blanket as close as safely possible to the powerful warmth emanating from what hours before had been but a pile of sticks, Ethan morosely stared off across the silent lake. He absentmindedly watched the silver moon rise up in all of its splendor and cast its beautiful reflection across the water. The stars bravely struggled to follow suit, but couldn't seem to shine quite bright enough to reflect back to themselves. But Ethan didn't care about any of that. All he could see, all he could feel; was the still silent form of his beloved friend and companion, Maple, before they had buried her that afternoon.

What seemed to him like only days after his mom and dad had gone away to Heaven and it had been decided he would live with his grandpa and grandma, his grandpa had taken him to the animal shelter to pick out a "pet to keep him company". Ethan hadn't felt very excited about it—he didn't really want a dog anymore. Even walking down the bleak concrete hallways with noisy dogs clamoring for attention from every kennel space didn't cause the thrill that it usually had whenever he and his mom had visited. Besides, in all the times he and his mom had been here, they had never found the dog that was to be theirs. Why would now be any different?

Then he had seen her.

Movement across the water suddenly caught his eye. Squinting as he focused all around the distant figure approaching the bank, Ethan recognized the shadowy form of a deer. He slumped down again with a sigh, remembering the words of wisdom his father had given him on a night so long ago not unlike this one. "At night it's harder to see what things are," his dad had explained, "harder for your eyes to focus. So if you want to identify something at night, don't look directly at it, but look all around it and you'll be able to pick out what it is. Let's try it..." And they had. Time and time again until it was what Ethan automatically did.

Resting his chin on his folded arms, Ethan let his eyes wander back across the dark mass of water to the little flecks of light glittering around on their merry way. Maple had always liked traipsing into the wilderness at night. She would pretend that it was a strange new world waiting to be explored to the fullest. The sparkling lights became creatures just out of reach, and Ethan and his grandpa would laugh as she pounced along in the water trying to catch them. Then, after they had made camp, she would patter up to them with a big satisfied grin on her face and shake off with all her little might before curling up at Ethan's feet to let her fur dry back into its silky mass. He always gave her a piece of his hot dog or burger, and she would rest her head on his foot, gazing up at him with dreamy eyes.

A solid step behind him suddenly caught his ear, and Ethan turned to see his grandpa entering the little circle of light. He pulled the blanket tighter around himself and studied the tops of his worn out sneakers while he listed to his grandpa's footsteps stop by him. His grandpa settled down with a comforting sigh and placed his arm around him. Ethan swallowed hard as the frayed edges of his sneakers blurred. Then, his grandpa drawled out, "Remember when Susy Parks thought Maple was a mix between a Border collie and a Papillion because of her size and coloring? And then

grocer Dan was sure she was part spaniel because of the expressions she would get on her face and part Doberman Pinscher because of how smart she was. Why, remember the time you were late coming home from school and she managed to find you....”

His comforting voice rambled on, recounting the adventures they had had with that cuddly little dog that had been there through all of the ups and downs. Ethan found himself gradually smiling at the recollection of her quirky antics, then laughing at the preposterous incidents they had found her culprit of—like the time they had come home from church to find their angel food cake gone and toilet paper strewn all over the house. Their first thought was to search out Maple, and yes, there she was on Ethan’s bed serenely sleeping with an angelic look and frosting all over her beautiful little face. That dog!

At length, they both fell silent; Grandpa thinking about whatever he might be thinking and Ethan finally allowing his eyes to slowly wander down the fire to stare at its rich, intense colors. His mind went back to another time, another place.

“Seems almost like yesterday,” Grandpa’s voice suddenly broke over the background serenade. “We had just finished reading our passage of Scripture for the night, when your dad asked why God allowed so much trouble and bad to happen in life.” He paused a moment before continuing. “I told him that I didn’t know for sure, maybe to make us stronger, but I knew that just like God guided the children of Israel with a cloud by day and fire by night, God can guide us through those dark moments in our lives.” Ethan stole a glance at his grandpa, and saw he was staring into the fire just like he had been.

Licking his lips nervously, Ethan summoned up the courage to say, “My dad told me if we keep in Jesus’ light and do His commandments, We’ll always be safe and know what to do next.”

Grandpa’s eyes were soft as he looked at Ethan and gave him a gentle squeeze before replying in a quiet voice, “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” He glanced around the small circle they sat in, then continued with more power in his voice, “Ethan, we know that all around us in this world is the darkness of the enemy. If we live each day keeping our hearts and minds stayed on Christ, He’ll keep us in perfect peace through everything we go through.” Ethan watched his grandpa’s eyes go back to the fire, and Ethan turned to it as well, once again noticing the intensity of the flames. “Even when things seem really bad,” His grandpa slowly said, “if we will keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, loving Him because we know He loves us, He will keep us safe in His warm love, safe from the weapons of the enemy.” Ethan looked up at him again, and his grandpa turned to him with seriousness on his face. “Ethan,” his grandpa said, tapping the left side of his old coat, “The fire of God’s love can’t be put out. It’s always here in your heart. Sometimes it dies down to just a few embers, but you can always blow them up into a warm fire again, you and God. He can get us through anything.” The crickets and frogs and the crackling fire were the only sounds for a moment while the words sank in deep.

Then, Grandpa nudged Ethan. "Remember first John four sixteen?" Ethan nodded his head. "My dad taught it to me when he told me about the fire of God's love."

Grandpa smiled and glanced to the fire then back to Ethan. "Well, let's hear it."

Ethan took a deep breath. "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."

"See," Grandpa slapped his knees for emphasis, "It's in you."

Ethan studied the fire again, felt the warmth emanating from its midst, and finally noticed the scratchiness of the blanket against the back of his neck. He looked back up at his grandpa. "Dad and Mom are safe too, aren't they, because they get to live with Jesus."

Grandpa smiled as put his hand on Ethan's shoulder. "Yes, they are. And someday, we'll see them and Jesus and know the overabundance of His love." He paused as a log finally gave way and sent up a shower of sparks into the night sky. "Ready for home?"

Ethan looked up from the fire and smiled at his grandpa. "Yup. Thanks."

"My pleasure," Grandpa grunted, standing to his feet and making sure the fire was safe to leave.

Ethan stood as well, gazing at the fire with a warm feeling inside. "Thank You Jesus," he affirmed, "for Your love."

A Regular Man's Ring-- Sophia

"Hats in here. That goes there. Old coats over there," Mercy Buttler said to herself as she was organizing the attic in her house. The house had been built in 1842 and had been passed down in her family ever since. Mercy considered her, her husband, and her daughter Sarah Anne very blessed to get to live in a house that old, yet still standing. She started looking through another box and found it full of blank paper, hot glue sticks, and markers. She figured that could probably stay so she moved on to another box. She found it full of old China, tea sets, and aprons. She took it all out and was about to throw it down the ladder, when she noticed a goldish man's metal ring. The inside of the band was marked with T.J., but since she didn't recognize it, she climbed down the ladder, set the ring on her dresser, and decided to finish the attic some other time. She then didn't give the ring another thought.

The next morning, Mercy stumbled out of bed, slipped on some clothes, and put her hair up. When she was about to leave her room she noticed that the ring she had found in the attic was missing. "No matter," she thought. "It's just a regular man's ring." Later that same day, Mercy was finishing cleaning out the attic, when she found a stack of papers. Most of them were recipes, old mail, and cards from random people. At the very bottom she found some old letters that she guessed must have been her in parents or grandparents. She was looking over, when she found one that was soiled and very old looking. The back was labeled "Thomas". She opened it and read:

Dear Thomas, How are you doing? I hope you are well and in good spirits. I got you this ring . I picked it out mainly because of the lovely goldish metal . I hope you like it. I love you !

Daniel Jackson

"Wow! Thomas Jackson's own letter ! Wait till Colin sees this! ," exclaimed Mercy. " Wait a second... The ring... ," Mercy said scanning over the letter again . " The description matches I found up here yesterday. And it was marked with T.J.!" Mercy hurried down the ladder, into her room , and to her dresser. She soon remembered that she had lost it . " Oh I hope it's nearby. It has to be,since all I did with it is set it on the dresser," Mercy muttered under her breath. She looked all over her room, in every single crook and cranny. She then moved to the bathroom,the kitchen, and the living room ,but found nothing. "Where is that ring ?"Mercy asked intendely to herself, though Sarah Anne did hear.

"In m' hose ," the two year old replied . "Oh hey ,Sarah Anne ," Mercy said as she looked through a drawer."Mommy, it in m' hose."

Mercy looked down at the toddler and said," Hey Sarah Anne, Mommy's kind'a busy right now . Why don't you go play with your dolls or something? "

" Mommy! Mommy!" the little girl frantically cried while tugging on Mercy's skirt . "What is it ?, " Mercy said slightly irritated. "Mommy In m' hose. "

"Sarah Anne , you tell me all the time that somethings in your doll house,but it never is . So why do'nt you go play now?" The toddler reluctantly went back to her room,though she wasn't gone for long. She went right back to Mercy with the ring .

"Mommy 'ook " Mercy turned around wishing that the two year old would just go and play. When she saw the ring she happily exclaimed," Sarah Anne , where on earth did you find that? I've been looking for that all over! " "In m' hose ," the toddler replied going back to her room. "Well, I guess sometimes a toddler just knows what they're talking about," Mercy laughed.