

Pancake & Hen

Pancake & Hen
Visions of Childhood

Pancake & Hen

Author's Note

Pancake & Hen is a collection of short stories about an adventurous pair of children. Yet instead of having a direct plot like a regular novel, it's merely a collection of situations involving the pair. As such, there's no specific trouble or resolution. It's just a glimpse of their world through their eyes. Hopefully it's a lighthearted and fun read for you, the reader.

Dedication

To Grandpa Fitzner, my most avid reader and greatest fan...

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The Nature of Names
Leave No Child Unnamed Lest They Disappear

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Once there were two children, and neither was terribly ordinary or terribly strange, for to be either thing was indeed terrible. They were born and raised under the shadows of a great wood, a mix of hardwoods and leafy giants made up primarily of willows where there was water and oaks where the grounds were dry. But the willows and oaks we will speak more of later.

The children were an interesting pair, the kind that keep mothers and fathers on their tiptoes with their eyes peeled for the next unexpected outburst of hilarity, curiosity, or just plain trouble – the latter of which was often the resulting concoction of hilarity and curiosity. As to the proportions of either of these things in the various situations the children found themselves in, well that depended on who you were.

Father was a stodgy man, prone to long silences as he chewed on his too-long mustache at the corners of his mouth. He would mull over a cup of coffee for an hour, not noticing during any of his thoughtful sips that it was too cold. In fact, he never seemed to taste anything at all, and when queried about his preference of something or the use of a new recipe, he'd always say, "Every bit as good as the last," or, "Just splendid." It wasn't as if he didn't have opinions either, but rather, it was as if there was someone counting who spent what number of opinions, and Father simply didn't want to look greedy by spending too many of them. The lone exception to this

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reticence was his only son. For or about his son, he always had something to say, and it was clear to all even if he didn't exactly dote on the boy that he cared greatly for him – in his own stolid and unobvious way.

Mother was a kindly woman, with soft, sleepy green eyes that seemed to complement her husband's more dour and contemplative expressions. She always seemed on the verge of sleeping, though she rarely yawned. Her mouth curved into lazy but amused smiles as frequently throughout the day as there were clouds in the sky. She was always shielding her youthful and eager children from harms of the world that only she could see, as if her eyes had been tuned into the specific wavelength of light and reality that evil dwelt upon. Her gift was exercised liberally, but never stiflingly so. She was not a cynic or prophetic about what could happen to bad little children with incautious manners and daring fingers. She was just a very protective mother overall, but then, what mothers aren't?

As for their two children, they seemed mismatched to such opposite parents, for they were unlike their parents in many ways. The daughter, the eldest, was a red-haired girl who took after her mother's side of the family in features. Yet if Mother was calm and thoughtful, the girl often seemed thoughtless. Those who would hazard such thoughts and garner such ideas just didn't know the girl well enough. They merely saw her shuffling of feet as she kept her eyes to the ground, lifting them only to stare occasionally

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in what seemed a blank manner at the shapes of the clouds above. “She’s simple.” They’d say hastily, shaking their heads in disapproval. They just didn’t see past appearances and notice how deep her observations were. It was these deep observations of the ground that earned her the nickname that she knew better than her own given name, the nickname ‘Hen.’

Now hens were well known to hunt the ground for delicious morsels to eat, namely grubs, beetles, worms, and bugs if corn and feed were scarce. In the same way, their daughter searched the world for little morsels of information that she could gobble up with her eyes, ears, and all her senses. No shiny rock, insect, or minnow escaped her sharp eyes. Many of these ended up in her pockets when she was younger, too young to realize right away that they might be too heavy for her clothes and pull them down at inopportune times or that the little creatures that made homes in her pockets would only do so for a short time before escaping, dying, or biting. This was one of many lessons she taught herself as she aged into the ripeness of age that comes upon reaching double digits. That, and she had a bothersome brother two years younger than her to look after, and that sort of responsibility requires the certain maturity only an older sister can provide.

The youngest of the family, who resisted being called ‘the baby’ as much as he resisted baths without inordinate amounts of bubbles, also had a nickname. It was not so much a declaration of his personality as

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it was a declaration of his favorite food, which was a pancake. ‘Pancake’ he became, but at first it was not because of the food, which he only learned to love upon being nicknamed after them. No, the nickname was for a blotch of darker, maple syrup colored skin beneath his jaw. He had been three when Mother and Father had found him admiring himself in front of their looking glass and fretting over the darker patch of his skin. It clearly didn’t belong with his freckles and sandy hair he’d decided, and he’d demanded to know why the dirt would not wash off.

That story is another one as well, but suffice it to say that Mother spun a tale about angels, spirits, turtles, and everything she knew his young mind fancied. By the end of the tale, he had not only accepted the birthmark as a badge of courage and heroism that he’d supposedly performed when he was too young to remember, but he had embraced the food that his maple syrup colored skin brought to mind as his favorite meal. He’d quite tired everyone out with the repetitions of his ‘forgotten’ childhood quest, every time more glorious than the last, before he had forgotten the story and had been left with only the nickname as a souvenir. In its place, there were many more fanciful tales, for the boy was one of endless imagination and gullibility. You could tell him anything and he’d be declaring it as fact two minutes later.

So these two children, one boisterous and brashly outspoken, the other more reserved except for moments when her dreams spilled unrestrained from

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her tender heart, were the heart of the family. They were loved as much as both parents could possibly love, though each in their own ways.

Still, not all was perfect and troubles were specters and robbers that laid in wait for the pair of children under every rock, in every cave, and in every lake. At least that's how Pancake and Hen imagined things...

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The Castle in the Willows
The Disenchanted Forest

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Now the forest that encroached upon the grounds of the home of Pancake and Hen was a massive one, though less so to adults than to children because sizes are very relative. The forest's broad arms swept easily around the sod-roofed cabin, the outhouse, and the fenced-in areas that held the dozen chickens, four goats, and Cindy, the family heifer.

To Father the trees were a nuisance whose roots kept upsetting the carefully laid fence posts and rails that he had so laboriously constructed. Not only that, their bothersome leaves got everywhere and made Cindy's milk taste bitter when she ate too many of them.

Mother loved the way the winds whistled between the shiny trunks of the birches and tussled the spindly willow branches like a child's careless hair. The leaves didn't bother her so much, since the trees gave shelter to a seemingly endless supply of berry bushes, truffles, and nut trees that hid in places that allowed the knowledgeable some tasty tidbits throughout the seasons. "One needs only to know where to look to find the good in anything," she always said.

Hen was somewhat indifferent about the forest, only because it was just another place to examine, each as interesting as the last. Still, she had to admit it had some lure to it when the sun or the winds hit it just right, or when lightning bugs appeared and vanished between the trees like will-o-the-wisps during long summer nights.

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The forest was either Pancake's birthright or part of his lost memories. He was never sure which. Surely he would own part of the forest as Father did, but he was also convinced that there was something of his past hidden in the recesses of the forest, so he ventured into it as often as he could.

This, of course, meant that Hen had to follow, or she'd get scolded and paddled by Father for letting her younger brother go wandering out of her sight. She resented this charge of responsibility, not because she had much better to do, but simply as a matter of principles. How was she to watch Pancake better with her own two eyes than her parents could with four? This was one of 'those questions' of the sort that made parents angry when you asked them. She knew it was better to just swallow the fact that she had to do this thing and not ask why. Still, she decided that she'd always explain to her own children, if she had them anyway, why they must do each thing she asked of them, and she'd make so much sense that they'd never question her.

"Where are we going today, Pancake?" Hen asked boredly, as if she had something better to do, though she didn't. As she walked she swung her arms briskly back and forth as she marched arrow-straight into the woods.

"We're going to the castle." He announced proudly, as if the mere going was a noteworthy quest, like climbing the highest mountain or diving to the bottom of the pond to reclaim the jewels he was certain had been lost in the murky depths.

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“It’s not a castle.” Hen said with a sigh. They’d been over this many times, but he refused to see the old hunting cabin as anything other than a castle.

“If it’s not a castle, then why does it have towers?”

“It has a *tower*, not towers, and that’s simply a lookout stand so they can shoot at deer.”

Pancake had other theories for the reason there was a tower on the cabin. He shared one, “Or shoot at monsters...”

“There are no monsters.” Hen proclaimed definitively.

“That’s not what Martin said. He says they’re all through here, looking for people who get too far off the path.” Then, to show how brave he was, he purposely deviated from their path, though only two steps, but it was off the beaten path at least.

“What do these monsters look like then?” Hen asked in her most unworried tone. She was sure that there were no monsters, but then if there happened to be just one wandering about it would only be prudent to be well-informed.

“The monster is twice as tall as Father, with eyes like an owl’s, ears like a bat, and hands three times the size of Mother’s.” Pancake acted out each part of his description, gesticulating wildly to show exactly what the monster would appear like.

Hen was still skeptical. “That’s big, but it doesn’t sound very scary. Real monsters should be scary.”

“Says you! Can you imagine how hard something with hands that big can spank you? It would probably break your rump.”

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“It would probably be too busy sipping coffee or baking to even notice us.” Hen suggested bitterly, though her bitterness was shallow, not like that of an adult, which sours and deepens over many years.

“Really?”

“Yes, and it’s probably sleeping in the castle!” She teased.

“I thought you said it wasn’t a castle?” Pancake returned.

“It isn’t, I’m only pretending.”

“I like to pretend.”

“You never stop pretending.”

“Yes I do!”

Hen stopped and regarded her brother with arms akimbo, an affectation of her mother when she was particularly exasperated with Father’s brand of stubbornness. “When?”

Pancake frowned and looked at his hands, then his feet, then at a tree beside the path. Finally he bent and picked up a stone, grinned, and answered, “When I’m sleeping I’m not pretending.”

“Pah!” Hen grunted in mild annoyance. “You’re dreaming when you sleep, and that’s the same as pretending.”

Pancake shook his head back and forth very slowly. “If it’s pretending, they’d call it that. They call it dreaming because it’s not pretending. It’s dreaming.”

Hen blinked twice in amazement. She’d never heard such a convincing argument from her younger brother. He smiled because he knew he’d won, though it was not a gloating smile. He trotted past her

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as fast as his little legs would carry him without outright running, and Hen fell in behind him, temporarily silenced by her brother's victory.

The castle was as it always was, that being a vine-covered log cabin with a shale roof that had been covered by so many layers of leaves and dirt that it would likely never be seen again. It was built to house many hunters, so it was fifteen adult paces on a side – twenty-four for Hen and thirty-two for Pancake. Its tower was simply an extension of the walls up in one corner of the building with a hatch built into the small roof that doubled as a hunting platform. It was perhaps twenty-five feet off the ground, but as Pancake told it, it was halfway to the clouds.

“I could fly off that and touch the sun.” Pancake said breathlessly, his arms slack at his side, each holding a somewhat straight and modestly sharp stick – swords he'd found in the woods on the way there.

“You'd need to grow wings if you wanted to fly.”

“I could do it.”

“If anyone would fly, it would be me, because I'm the bird. I'm Hen remember? Who ever heard of a flying pancake?”

Pancake was unbothered by her comments, replying simply, “They fly all the time in Mom's kitchen. Besides, the chickens we have don't really ever fly. You'd just squawk, eat corn, and make a lot of noise like you do now.”

Before she could reply, he ran off to the heavy door of the cabin, pulling at the steel ring set into it as a

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handle. It was always locked, but he pulled at it every time just in case someone carelessly left it unlocked for curious little boys to explore the rooms within.

“Did you lose the keys to your castle?” Hen asked snidely, leaning on the walking stick she’d found while Pancake had found his silly swords.

“It’s not my castle.” Pancake said, almost sadly, which made Hen feel bad for teasing. “But, someday it might be.” He added hopefully.

“Maybe it will. Mother says, ‘Anything that can happen will happen eventually.’”

“I wonder whose it is.”

“Ask Father; I’m sure he knows. He knows everyone who lives around here.” She suggested helpfully.

“No, I’ll find out on my own if I come here enough times.”

Pancake lifted his pair of swords then and battled around the corner of the cabin, fighting an army of invisible enemies as he went. She trudged along behind him, but not until after trying a tug at the steel ring on the door herself, just in case the place was only supposed to be open by a young girl on this specific day. After all, anything that can happen will happen eventually, and maybe the castle was meant for her.

When her tug at the door handle proved to be as fruitless as her brother’s, Hen went after her brother. She rounded the corner and found Pancake kneeling a dozen steps away, his hands silently outstretched toward a spotted doe. His swords lay crossed in front

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of him, almost as if he were swearing fealty to the wary animal. Hen could almost see her brother's reflection on the pair of glassy pools that unblinkingly regarded her brother. She held her breath as the doe sniffed at her brother's offered hands. Then she bit her lip as he gently touched the underside of the doe's chin.

Hen took a step forward then, emboldened by the display. She strongly desired to touch the downy fur of the little deer as Pancake had, but no sooner had she taken a step and crunched a twig beneath her foot had the deer jerked its head up to look at her with its dark brown eyes and then darted off. The doe disappeared into the woods, its legs kicking and its white tail lifted high as it hurried through the underbrush.

"Why'd you do that?" Pancake blared at her, turning to look over his shoulder.

"I wanted to touch it, too." She replied gruffly.

"Well, you scared her away." He declared sullenly.

"I see that. I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"I wonder why it let you touch it but ran from me?" Hen wondered, very much bothered by the fact that her silly little brother could pet the deer but not her.

Pancake had no immediate answer. He looked into the woods where the deer had crashed off between bushes for a long moment before answering. "Maybe it was because you think like a girl who wants to touch things they shouldn't, and I think like an animal."

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Her brother was strange, that was true, but think like an animal? She didn't think so. It had been a lucky turn of fate that had let him touch the deer and not her. It must have been so. "You smell like an animal you mean?" Hen teased.

Pancake bellowed in mock rage, drew his heavy blades off the ground, and charged at her. She, laughing as they fought, deflected each of his deliberate swings with her trusty quarterstaff. As they fought throughout the afternoon, they each assumed legendary roles, some of which they made up on the spot. Each of them died tragically a dozen or more times only to revive as a different character in the vast struggle between good and evil, between sister and brother. Brave deeds were done and epic struggles were fought in the dusky light of that day.

They fought until almost dinner time, and then they lay spent among the leaves and moss, where they listened to the chirruping cicadas until the sky had darkened enough that even through the canopies of the overhanging trees they knew they had to go back home for dinner.

Both of them knew the castle would wait for another day, and next time, the door might open for them.

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Contrary
Everything but Right

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"That boy of yours is contrary." Father declared one day at dinner after hearing one of Pancake's stories, giving Mother sole ownership of Pancake with but a few words. He looked at his son uncomprehendingly, a look that was not the least bit infrequent.

"Your son is fine." Mother replied, sending him back to Father with a smile and a wink.

Hen frowned at the game of toss her parents seemed to be playing with Pancake, like an egg they pitched back and forth. She rose to clear the dishes and leave the room lest she get splattered when the shell cracked. Pancake did nothing of the sort. Rather, he sat in the middle of the game and soaked up the attention.

"Hello, Mother. I'm Contrary. Nice to meet you." He announced cheerfully.

Mother curtsied and offered her hand to the newly named Contrary. "Nice to meet you, gentle sir."

Pancake, or Contrary as he was now known, shook her hand proudly. "I like this name. May I keep it?"

"Pancake, you *are* contrary. You're not named Contrary." Father said with a grunt, lifting his mug to his mustache-covered lips.

"Exactly. I am Contrary."

Mother knelt and patted Pancake on the head. "Pancake?"

"Contrary is my name, ma'am. I don't know this Pancake you speak of."

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Mother smiled one of her sleepy smiles. “No, contrary means to act or think opposite or differently from what is expected or wanted. It’s not a name. It’s just how father thinks you are.”

“I am an opposite?”

“Father just thinks you act strangely sometimes.”

“Sometimes? The boy eats his dessert before dinner. He wants dinner for breakfast and breakfast for dinner. He opposes the right nature of things. There is an order to things that he downright disrespects.”

“Mother’s desserts taste better than her dinners.”

Pancake explained.

“I think so too.” Mother announced with a lazy grin and a conspirator’s wink.

“Don’t encourage him.” Father insisted. “Soon he’ll be expecting eggs to lay chickens and milk to make cows.”

“Eggs can’t lay chickens?” Pancake asked in surprise.

“Of course not, boy.” Father said with a sigh and a waggle of his mustache. “There is an order to how things happen in the world.”

“Then I shall be the first to have an egg lay a chicken.”

“It’s impossible for an egg to lay a chicken!” Father insisted.

“Have you ever tried?” Pancake asked. His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Father looked flabbergasted and turned to his wife. “See? Now the boy thinks I’m lying.”

Mother only shrugged though; she had no sympathy

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for him in the situation he'd created.

"I swear, he'll either end up so daft as an adult that he'll never marry and have to live with us forever, or he'll buy a magic cow from a gypsy." Father's mustache twitched and he snorted as he imagined both scenarios in his mind.

"Magic cows?" Pancake repeated with great interest, his mind already whirring with the possibilities.

"I will say no more." Father proclaimed, seeing that he was alone in this. He hid his mouth with his mug, which his mustache silently presided over.

True to his word, Father said no more on the matter, but the ideas were already planted in Pancake's head. He spent the next two weeks closely observing Cindy, the family cow, and a pair of the chicken's eggs Mother let him pilfer from the coop for observation. Over those two weeks, he tried dozens of small experiments with both the eggs and the animals: standing on his head and watching, sneaking up on them at night in case they wanted to hatch when he wasn't watch, feeding them his breakfast, feeding them thistles and flowers, dousing them in water of varying temperatures, shouting at them, singing to them...

Finally, Father declared an end to the experiments when Pancake's two eggs began to smell rotten. Pancake wasn't convinced about the chicken and egg thing, but his mind soon found more interesting pursuits that were less troublesome as far as Father was concerned.

Pancake continued to eat his dessert before his

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dinner, but at least he forgot that he'd changed his name was Contrary.

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King of the Ants
Learn to Live Like Another

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One day Hen was observing the swirl of colors caused by oil on a puddle, a rainbow dispersing and wavering as the water slowly sank into the soil. Pancake, never one to let someone do something alone that he might also want to join in on, came over to see what she was doing. He squatted next to her, wrapping his thin arms around knees bruised from climbing trees, hopping over fences, and stumbling a bit too often.

“What are you looking for?” He asked after watching her wordlessly for several minutes.

“I’m looking for ‘The World.’” She announced, hoping he would leave her alone if she offered up a nebulous answer.

“It’s on the ground? How did you lose it?”

“If I knew how I lost it, I’d not have lost it, but I’ve given up finding it now.” Hen began to rise, silently praying that he would stay here so she could go off by herself.

“I’ll find it for you then.” Pancake promised excitedly.

“Thank you.”

“What’s it look like though? It’s hard to find if I don’t know what I’m looking for.”

“It’s shiny, beautiful, and very small.” She explained, waving her hands about like she’d seen adults do when they tried to explain something that couldn’t be easily put into words.

Pancake’s eyes seemed to glaze over as he imagined

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what ‘The World’ might be. Then his head sank slowly to the ground as he tried to find something that matched his perception of what she’d lost.

“I’ll be back later to see if you’ve found it.”

His head bobbed up and down as his eyes searched every speck on the ground for ‘The World.’ Hours later, after she’d finished prancing about in the fields, examining an abandoned fox den that Father had pointed out to her a couple days back, and chasing a myriad of butterflies that had eluded her grasping hands, she found Pancake still bent over at the task of finding ‘The World.’

“Any luck yet?” She asked with an amused grin. She couldn’t believe he was still there. Pancake was gullible, but usually his attention didn’t last this long.

“No.” Pancake replied evenly.

Hen felt a brief twinge of guilt for taking advantage of him, but then she pushed it aside. It was his own foolishness that caused his problems. “You didn’t have to look all this time for it.”

“I know.”

“You can stop now.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t really lose anything.” Hen admitted finally.

“I know.” He said for the third time. “I figured that out after awhile.”

Hen scratched at her head, tossing careless curls of reddish-orange to and fro. “Then why are you still here?”

“There are some ants here.”

“Ants?” Hen asked, stooping to see what Pancake

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was poking at with a twig. Sure enough, there was a small pile of dirt with dozens of small reddish ants the size of rice grains scurrying about.

“They’re my subjects.” Pancake said proudly. “I help them build so that they respect me and make me their king.”

“You can’t be the king of ants.” Hen protested, clicking her tongue critically.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re too big for one, and you’re not an ant for two.”

“They’ll look past those things if I’m nice enough.” Pancake insisted, remembering what Mother had said many times about kindness making friends.

“Kindness overcomes all,” she often told him.

“It won’t work.”

Pancake was unruffled by her declarations. “We’ll see.” He replied calmly.

“Ants don’t wear clothes either.” She said grumpily.

Pancake looked at her, cocking his head to the side like an owl. Then, he stood abruptly and began tossing his clothes off in a rush to become more like the ants. Hen shrieked and ran away, but at the same time, she felt responsible. So, she went to get Mother to tell Pancake to put his clothes back on.

By the time she’d gotten Mother to come with her, for she didn’t believe such a tale to be true, Pancake’s back and arms were burnt red by the sun despite having burrowed partway into the ground. In her absence, Pancake had dug a hole that was half his size, and he was laying in it. Mother groaned in

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disbelief and lifted Pancake out of his oversized anthill. When he was standing on his own two feet and Hen was averting her eyes, Mother set about redressing him.

She lifted his arms as she said, “Reach for the stars,” and pulled on his shirt.

“But, Mom, ants don’t wear clothes.” Pancake protested.

“You’re not an ant.” Mother replied.

“But I’m trying to be.”

“He sort of looks like a red ant now.” Hen said with a chuckle after peeking over at her brother.

“Hen!” Mother shot a look promising a spanking if Hen didn’t quiet down and stop teasing her brother.

“I’m a red ant!” Pancake exclaimed, tearing loose from Mother immediately after he’d been repantsed.

He ran around repeating this over and over while flagging his dirty socks around, accidentally stepping on the small ant mound that had been his kingdom after about his fifth lap. This act of unfortunate destruction earned him a few bites on his ankles as the angry ants retaliated for what he’d wrought.

Hen broke out laughing to see her brother’s eyes widen in surprise as he hopped up and down and batted the ants off his feet with his socks and howled with each bite. Even Mother was laughing by the time Pancake finally came to a rest, sitting on the ground to examine with morbid interest the pink bite marks that were beginning to show – the results of being overthrown as king of the ants.

“Every kingdom must end.” Mother said, grinning

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her lazy grin.

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Of the Elderly and
Kissing
Clearly Two Horrible Things

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Pancake stopped scuffing up stones with his feet as they walked to look at an old crone pushing a cart of sticks that seemed destined to become firewood down the dusty, rutted road. Her hair was stringy and thin, and her back was hunched over from years of labor. Still, she plodded on with her cart, working in a dutiful manner that only the most diligent and elderly can manage because of the hardships they've endured.

"That grandmother is old." Pancake announced, probably just loud enough for her to hear. "I'll never get that old."

"That's not nice to say," Hen scolded her brother in her most maternal tone, "And I, for one, can't wait to grow up, Pancake."

"Whatever for? You just get hairy or bald or fat, and you're ugly enough already, Hen."

Hen ignored his insult, spinning around dreamily in a poorly executed pirouette. "I'll be neither of the three. I'll be marvelously beautiful, so I'll have a wonderful husband. He'll be handsome and kind, and we'll spend all day stealing kisses in the shade of the willows."

"Kissing? That's disgusting!" Pancake replied, wrinkling his face up like one of those small dogs with smashed-looking faces they'd seen at a faire once. "And why do they call it stealing kisses? Are they locked up somewhere?"

"It's not disgusting. It's romantic." She replied,

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ignoring his last question because she didn't know the answer.

"No, kissing is gross." Pancake insisted, as sure on this point as any eight year old could be. "It's where babies come from. Martin kissed Susan, and now she's telling everyone she's going to have his baby. How she got it from him, I don't know. I mean it *is* his after all. She really shouldn't steal. Father always says not to take what isn't yours."

Hen rolled her eyes at her little brother. "You're so clueless, so naïve."

"What's naïve?"

"It's a grownup word. You wouldn't understand."

"You're just saying that because you don't know what it means either! You probably heard Mother say it to you when you were being bad and now you're using it on me." Pancake accused, waving his finger at his older sister.

Hen hmped and began to walk away, but before she'd stepped thrice, she wheeled back around with her reddish curls swinging and her skirts fluttering about her like a butterfly's wings. "I *do* know what it means, and I just don't want to tell you, or else you'll try to act smart and use it on me. Then I'd have to stomp you badly, Pancake." She took a deep breath and held up a hand to block his coming rebuttal, signaling she was not finished. "And, kissing does not make babies. Have you ever seen chickens kiss?"

"They kind of peck at each other like kissing," Pancake admitted, "but they don't really kiss because they don't have lips. They have beaks."

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"Yet they have babies. They lay eggs and make babies all the time."

Pancake's eyes widened to their largest possible extent. "They kissed, so Susan is going to lay eggs?"

"You're hopeless." Hen sighed, walking away for real this time, though she had to stifle a giggle as she imagined the straw-haired girl at school laying eggs.

"Eggs! She's going to lay eggs!" Pancake called out aloud as he chased after Hen to catch up. "I wonder what they'll taste like and how big they'll be, perhaps like duck eggs or a goose's?"

It was well into the afternoon before that line of questioning ended, and then only when his attentions were drawn by the wondrous sight of a frog chasing after a dragonfly that always seemed to land just beyond the frog's reach.

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Touching the Skies
Of Eagles and Angels

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Mother went out onto the porch of her family's modest home to be free from the oppressive heat of the kitchen, where bread was cooling on flat stones and flour powdered everything like a misplaced breath of winter. She fanned herself with a half-damp hand towel, which smelled of eggs and milk, but those were as pleasing of smells to her as lavender and jasmine were to fancier ladies. She sighed and shoed away an errant fly in a causal manner as her eyes leisurely surveyed the yard about her.

All was right on the homestead.

The chickens clucked and pecked at the ground, the goats chewed laboriously in their side-to-side fashion at the long tufts of grass that had escaped them thus far, and Cindy the family heifer was swishing her tail to chase of flies that found her backside a rather pleasant place to alight. The breeze was gentle but filled with the scents of the trees, grasses, and yonder fields, and the skies were covered only with the thinnest of cirrus clouds that stretched across it like the lace detailing of a woman's nightgown.

Then, to spoil the serene ambiance, there was an eight-year-old boy clambering ever higher in a willow at the edge of the fencerow just a stone's throw away. He was already dizzyingly high and swinging carelessly to the next higher branch in such a fashion as to stop Mother's heart stone still in her chest with worry.

"Pancake, whatever are you doing up so high in that

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tree? You're about to worry me to death that you'll fall and split your head open like a raw egg!" Mother yelled up the tree and across the yard at her son, not thinking as she clenched her hands into white-knuckled fists around the kitchen hand towel that yelling in such a fashion might just upset Pancake's precarious holds on the branches that stood between him and the distant ground.

Pancake grabbed hold of the branches firmly and turned toward his mother, looking through the leaves that hung on the hair-like strands of yellow willow cords between the two of them. "I'm looking for eagles, Mother."

"Eagles?" Mother exclaimed. "Heavens, Pancake, there aren't any there in that tree. Come down and look for eagles from the ground."

"How do you know there aren't any in this tree?"

"Because if there were, you'd see them flying to their nest and then leaving sometimes."

"What if they just got here today so you didn't see them before?"

Mother sighed and put her hands on her hips, the hand towel dangling from one fist. "You can't check that tree everyday to see if eagles have arrived sometime in the night."

Pancake paused between branches, his hands outstretched as he considered this. "How about just this once then?"

"Pancake, don't make me tell you again to come down from that tree."

"You just did." He pointed out.

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“Pancake! You’re going to be seeing angels and not eagles if you don’t come down this instant.” Mother said gruffly, raising her voice in a rare showing of anger born of concern.

“Alright, Mother. I’ll be down.” Pancake relented, beginning his slow and careful descent.

Honestly, the boy had been thinking of nothing but birds lately. It didn’t matter if they were sparrows, crows, magpies, pigeons, swallows, cardinals, owls, or even eagles – he just wanted to know about them and see them. He’d already filled his small loft bed in his room with as many small bird eggs and insect-ridden nests as he could find, creating quite a mess for her to clean up. It had only been when he’d begun itching far too much for a little boy and she’d tracked down and discovered the culprit to be the insects that had invaded his bedding by means of the bird nests.

One day he’d even gone as far as to paste feathers all over his body, for which he’d had to pilfer honey from the kitchen to use as a sticky substance when his glue had ran out. Why that had certainly given Father quite a fright when his bird son had walked into the kitchen for dinner, with bees and flies abuzz about him and ants crawling all over to get at the honey. Father had scolded him rather harshly and then paddled him for bringing bugs into the house, though that was not so much of a concern to him as having wasted so much expensive honey. It had almost seemed like this punishment had ended Pancake’s interest in birds, until this.

It wasn’t as if she wanted to stifle the boy’s

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imagination, but there had to be limits to his fanciful notions, or he'd always have his head in the clouds. He would hardly help out around the house unless someone made things into a game or pretended it was an adventure that he could go on through accomplishing his chores.

Eventually his two small feet touched the ground, though not without leaping down the last yard and tumbling in a way that made Mother cringe. He bounded up from a roll and pulled himself over the thick-railed fence to make his way around Cindy's cow pies to his trembling Mother's side. She knelt beside his flushed face and looked him in the eyes. He smiled warmly as if he'd done nothing wrong, as if worrying his Mother wasn't at least a minor crime in itself. Mother closed her eyes and took a breath.

"If there are no eagles, can I be an angel?" He asked, seizing a thread of thought that Mother had suggested just minutes before.

"Not until you've died, and that won't be for a long time if I have anything to say about it." Mother said fiercely.

"I can die?" Pancake wondered aloud. His own mortality had never occurred to him before.

Mother sighed and patted his head. "Of course you can. Everything dies eventually, just like your cat, Mr. Samson, died."

Pancake put on a severe and troubled look as he remembered his tabby cat. It had grown large and fat under his care. He had fed it so much milk and so many table scraps that Father had become irritated,

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proclaiming that the cat ate better than he did. Under his tutelage, the cat had learned dozens of tricks and interesting habits that all seemed to irritate Father even further, but those had all come to an abrupt end the day their wagon had crushed the fat cat beneath its wheels. It had grown too fat and slow to get out of the way in time, though Pancake still thought sometimes that Father had ran it over on purpose so it'd stop trying to sleep on his face during the middle of the night. Father had nicknamed the cat Mr. Smothers-me-in-my-sleep, which Hen had had to explain to him at the time. It was a funny nickname.

"Well, maybe I should die soon." Pancake announced as he put the memories of Mr. Samson behind him.

"What?" Mother exclaimed, taken aback. "Don't ever say that!" Mother resisted the urge to try to grab him by his little shoulders and shake the idea from his head.

He put on his puzzled face, tilting his head. "Why? I could fly if I were an angel, and walk through walls, and start fires with my fingers."

"Start fires and walk through walls? Who have you been talking to? Is it that Martin again? That boy fills your head with utter nonsense sometimes." She shook her head and made a mental note to speak to that boy's mother. "And don't ever say things about dying. You'll break my heart."

"I'm sorry, Mother." Pancake said contritely. "I just thought it'd be nice to fly and do things that angels can do."

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“Think about it this way then: you like running through the forest, climbing trees, eating pies, swimming, and catching frogs, right?”

Pancake’s head wobbled up and down excitedly. “Of course.” He said, rolling his eyes as if this was a silly thing to even ask. Adults did ask strange questions sometimes though, but he was sure that Mother was going somewhere with this, so he humored her.

Mother grinned. “Well, if you’re an angel, you can’t do any of these. You can only watch little boys do these things. You get one life to act and play and run and jump, and then when that’s over you can only watch. Now being an angel is surely a nice thing, but you must make the most of every day while you can still do things. There’s an eternity to watch.”

“What’s an eternity? Is it like forever?”

“That’s exactly right, so don’t make forever come sooner by climbing those trees so high because it’s dangerous.”

“I won’t do it again.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He declared, sticking out his hand to get an official shake, which Mother took gladly and shook firmly with a hand strengthened by years of kneading dough.

After that, Pancake never climbed quite so high, at least not where Mother could see, and even then he was always sure he was a branch or two lower than he had been that day. He did, however, spend most the next week wearing a halo woven of yellow willow

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branches and his white linen bed sheet for ‘eternity practice.’

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Caverns and Toadstools
Faerie Secrets and Hidden Dragons

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Pancake came barreling into the house with a full head of steam, stomping carelessly past where Hen sat practicing her letters. She grunted in disgust as his disturbance made her smudge the ink and splatter black from her quill across the page.

“Pancake!” She shouted, not looking up as she blotted the extra ink with a tissue. That which had soaked onto the page would have to be carefully scraped off later.

Her brother didn’t even hear her. He was too busy dragging a heavy chair over to the wall, which he then climbed onto so that he could pull a glass-shuttered lantern off the hook. He carefully eased that down into a hug, knowing Father would tan his hide if he were to break it, and then he hopped down off of the chair because he was too excited to be cautious anymore. Caution and excitement had waged a short battle, and excitement had walked away the clean victor.

“Where are you going with that?” Hen demanded, feeling she was owed an explanation after the trouble he’d caused her.

Pancake’s little red cheeks puffed up on either side of his freckled nose, and he looked for a moment like he might explain. Instead, he just shook his head at her and ran out the door. Hen was mystified by this behavior and curious as to what her brother might be doing in the middle of the bright day with a lantern. She glanced quickly to see if Mother or Father were

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around to see her abandon her homework. Seeing no one to scold her, she darted out the door after her brother, her skirts flowing behind her like a mane. Her shoes touched the wooden porch only once before they carried her onto the grass and dirt path after Pancake.

Despite the shortness of his legs, Pancake was a fast runner, though not so fast as she, especially when he was burdened with something half the size of his torso. When she finally caught up to him and called for him to slow down, he did so reluctantly, but from the way he was breathing she could tell that he'd probably have had to slow down shortly anyway.

"Where are we going? What have you found?" She asked between gulps of air.

Pancake looked up at her, his hands tightening around the lantern. "A dragon's cave."

"A dragon's cave? How do you know there's a dragon in the cave?"

"There was smoke coming out." He answered.

Hen frowned, trying to think of what he might have seen. "Was it smoke or steam?"

Pancake grimaced upon hearing new words and not being able to discern the difference between what Hen seemed to think were two separate things. "It smelled like fire and burning." He offered.

"If there is a dragon, why are we going to see it? Why wouldn't it eat you alive and melt Father's best lantern?"

Again, Pancake grimaced. Clearly he had not thought of such a thing in his exuberance to

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investigate what he was rather certain must be a dragon's cave. "I don't know." His steps faltered and he glanced back toward the way they'd come and then forward to where they were going.

"Well, maybe we should check just to make sure?" Hen suggested, now as curious as he was in what laid within the cave she'd not yet seen. "We'll just have to be very quiet."

"Are you sure?" Pancake asked worriedly.

"Yeah. I think dragons don't live in this area anyway. They like mountain lands where there are lots of pretty girls to eat. At worst we'll probably find a lizard or snake, possibly a bat."

"Snakes? Lizards?" Pancake repeated, and these words seemed to hurry his steps, for he very much liked to catch both of these. "Bats?" This one was something he'd never caught, but had seen flitting about at night. Bats presented a new challenge.

Hen shivered, for she liked none of these things, but if they were what stood between her and exploring a cave, she would bear them. Besides, any snake or lizard in Pancake's hands was one that wouldn't be crawling up her skirt or into her hair. It was the loose ones you had to worry about, she figured, deciding that Pancake's presence was a good thing, since he could be her shield against bugs and other crawly critters.

After several minutes of walking into the peripheral reaches of the ever-present forest, they came upon the cave, which would have been easy to overlook were you not a too-curious boy who crawled over

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every rock and up every tree he could find. At first it seemed to be little more than a dark crevice between three dark boulders that had been overgrown with mosses and lichens that struggled to catch sunlight among all the twigs and leaves that had fallen around them.

Disappointment at not seeing a gaping cave mouth like she'd imagined began to set in almost immediately. She nearly said something rude about Pancake wasting her time, when they looked closer and saw a wisp of grey issuing out of the dark recesses.

“See? There’s smoke.”

Hen sniffed the air. It certainly did smell of burning or something foul at least. “Quick, light the lantern so we can see further inside.”

Pancake dug out the flint and steel from the side compartment of the lantern, trimmed the wick, and began throwing sparks at the wick like he'd seen Father do dozens of times before. Father had always made it seem to be magic, but Pancake found he, too, had Father's fire starting magic in that he could quickly light it. He adjusted the wick once more and pulled up the shutters so that light would escape only in the forward direction, which beamed very weakly into the slice of darkness between the boulders.

“Do we go in?” Pancake asked, his voice probing the murk with echoes that promised that the narrow cave did indeed go deeper.

“Alright, but you must lead since you found the place. It's an explorer's right.” Hen said, unwilling to

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admit that she was a bit afraid and she'd rather be closer to the exit than her brother if it came to be that they must flee the horrors inside.

Pancake needed no further invitation. He simply stepped into the gap between the dark stones and pressed forward with the lantern held as high as his little arms could support it. Hen stepped in after him, holding her breath and lowering her head to avoid bumping it on the unpredictable ceiling. Odorous smells wafted around to meet them as they stirred what was otherwise mostly still air. Pebbles and stones crunched beneath their feet, and every sound seemed to echo.

“Open the lantern a bit more.” Hen ordered in her best imitation of courage. “I can’t see a thing.” Her insides clenched in anticipation of seeing something horrible as two more shutters clanked open, throwing light in 270 degrees, enough that she’d expected to see the skeletons or ghosts of the dead leaping at them from the walls. They never came.

Instead, the walls were a damp, muted grey that was occasionally veined with reflective bits of stone or slick with moisture that gathered, beaded, and fell from the low points in the ceiling to splat noisily on the worn rocks below. Twigs and other forest materials had been carried in by wind or other means to litter the cave floor. Such things had made it in this far, but they were becoming increasingly rare as they continued deeper into the cave.

There was a quick burst of air that smelled strongly of rotten eggs. Hen squeaked in fear, causing Pancake

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to turn and regard her with a face cast in sinister shadows.

“Quiet.” He whispered. “You’ll wake the dragon. Surely that was his breath.”

“Let me hold your hand, Pancake, I don’t want you to get lost.”

“I can’t hold the lantern with one arm. It’s too heavy.”

“I’ll hold it then. I’m taller so it’ll cast better light anyway.”

Pancake sighed. “Alright, but I’m still going first, even if it’s just by a half-footstep or a nose. It’s explorer’s right, remember?”

“Agreed.” Hen replied, and the transaction was done. The lantern went into her right hand while her left hand closed tightly on Pancake’s right.

“You’re hurting me.” Pancake whispered just a few steps after they’d resumed.

“Sorry.” She relaxed her grip on his palm, noticing how dry it was compared to her own.

They pressed on, hunching over when the ceiling grew too low for them to stand or huddling together when the walls grew tight and pressed in upon them. It seemed like an hour they walked, though in truth it was only about five minutes, but in near darkness where every heartbeat seemed minutes apart, time stretched toward infinity. Dripping sounds amplified to be rushing crashes of the unnatural, and the slightest of winds became like deepest winter’s blustery storms before at last they came to a place where the light they saw was not only their own.

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“What is it?” Hen hissed, trying to be quiet but failing.

Pancake’s answer was silence, and then without warning his hand slipped from hers and he was but a shadowy figure between slipping in-between the lantern’s light and the other, unknown light.

“Pancake!” Hen called out in as close to a speaking voice as she could bring herself to use in that dark place, but her voice cracked and choked as tears came unbidden to her eyes. She was too scared to be angry or irritated, but if she hadn’t been scared, she would have probably went on at length about how irresponsible it was of him to run off and leave her to worry about him while he was supposed to be under her sisterly supervision.

She thought she saw the shadow of her brother, though it looked a lot more sinister and spindly, move before the other light, blocking it out. With dread filling her every step, she tiptoed over toward the moving figure she’d seen. The spectre of evil slowly became more Pancake-shaped, eventually materializing before the lantern light with sandy brown hair and dirty overalls on just like she remembered.

“You scared me to death, you evil little boy. I can’t believe you just up and ran off on me like that. What were you thinking?” She demanded, but he still didn’t answer. She tilted her head to look over his shoulder at what he was looking at, but she couldn’t tell so she set the lantern down and knelt beside him.

They both stared for several minutes at the cluster

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of mushrooms glowing with a faint orangish light from their undersides. The light seemed fainter when the lantern's light fell upon them, or rather the stronger light drowned out the faint light, and so they shuttered the lantern so they could watch the mushrooms. Pancake pressed his head nearly to the ground so he could look under them at the gills that gleamed faintly.

"Can you eat them?" He wondered aloud.

"I don't think so. Remember how Mother always said not to eat toadstools? If they're pretty they are usually poisonous."

Pancake settled back on his heels in a thinking position. His face cracked almost audibly as he frowned thoughtfully at the cluster of mushrooms. "I don't see any toads."

"That's not why they call them toadstools, silly." Hen scoffed.

"Then why do they?" Pancake asked, turning his head to look at her instead of the glowing fungi.

"Well, that's because they look like something a toad would sit on, but everyone knows only faeries and sprites sit on them."

"I've never seen any faeries or sprites, and there don't seem to be any here now." Pancake pronounced.

"We probably scared them away." Hen shrugged. "Besides, faeries and sprites and unicorns only like to be seen by girls, just like ogres, trolls, and dragons only like to be seen by boys."

"Really?"

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“Sure. Why do you think girls never talk about dragons and trolls and things?”

“Because girls are scared of them?”

“No, it’s because we see beautiful things in life, and boys only look for the ugly, disgusting, and scary creatures.”

“But in stories, the dragons always capture princesses and the knights have to rescue them.” Pancake protested, the mushrooms totally forgotten now.

“Boys tell those stories though, not girls.” Hen replied dismissively. “Or maybe girls see only the romance in them, but boys don’t listen unless we add danger and dragons.”

Pancake had his doubts, but he wasn’t sure enough to challenge her opinions. Something didn’t ring true though, but he didn’t know enough to say otherwise. “I’d still like to see a faerie or a sprite.” He said a bit sadly. “Maybe if I dressed like a girl and acted like one I could trick them into letting me see them.”

“Well you can’t wear my clothes.” Hen warned him with a grunt of territoriality, as if the darkness had allowed her to revert to a lesser creature.

“Girls’ clothes are gross and icky anyway. They don’t have sleeves to cover your arms when you carry things or legs to protect you when you’re exploring.” Pancake declared, picking one of the toadstools and shoving it into his pocket before Hen could tell him not to eat it. He wasn’t foolish enough to do so anyway, but he heard her mouth open to boss him around and then he heard it close again when he

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didn't eat it. "You can't hop fences or climb trees in girl's clothes, and if you try to go swimming in them you'll drown because they're so heavy." He added, standing again.

A gust of sulfurous air wafted past them once more, accompanied by a gurgling in the corner of the small cavern they were in.

"That smells awful." Hen complained nasally. She'd plugged her nose with one hand and she was raising the lantern, now unshuttered, aloft.

"Maybe the dragon ate something bad and he has a bellyache?" He suggested.

Pancake hurried off toward the source of the smell, sniffing the air every few moments like a bloodhound on a scent. Hen half expected him to bay wildly like he'd treed a coon. There was a splashing sound from Pancake's direction, as he'd hurried off ahead again. This time Hen wasn't so afraid, for it seemed that if there were a dragon in here, he was either unbelievably small or he wasn't hungry. When the light of the lantern swept across a bubbling, steaming pool of water that belched out another hissing cloud of smelly vapors, any lingering hopes or fears of dragons faded. The pool was only a few feet across and it butted up against the edge of the cavern wall, and the mushrooms had been toward the other side of the cavern. They'd explored the caves to their furthest extents.

"There's no dragon." Pancake remarked in disappointment.

"At least we weren't eaten alive." Hen replied, still

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plugging her nose to block out the sulfurous fumes.

They stayed for a bit longer so that Pancake could probe the depths of the pool with an arm, which amounted to him declaring that it was deep and warm, and nothing more exact than that. They left when the lantern began to flicker and run low on oil, carrying only the one mushroom with them as they left. To take more than the one seemed somehow disrespectful to the faeries that surely dined or danced among them when little boys were not watching.

As they reemerged into the light of what was now surely just short of dinnertime, Pancake announced, “Mystery solved.”

Hen grinned, blew out the lantern, and began walking home.

They discussed how to best tell the story of their adventure to Father and Mother as they walked, and the tale grew with each revision. By the time they were done, there *may* have been a dragon, and Hen had met the royalty of the particular tribe of faeries that lived within the cave who helped them scare off a troll.

Mother ate the story up with great mirth and delight, while Father stared into his cup of after-dinner coffee, occasionally pointing out inaccuracies in an otherwise grand tale. Somehow, the actual events that had occurred that day were lost even to Pancake and Hen, but they didn't care. The memories each chose to hold instead were far more exciting than the truth, and those memories became truth for them as long as

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they remembered the cavern.

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Mother Versus Father
Opinions and Infallibility

"That boy of ours always has his head anywhere other than where it should be. He's too busy woolgathering and being a mooncalf to get his work done." Father announced one day, crossing his arms across his chest as he regarded the flecks of unmelted flavoring in his coffee.

"He's just a boy. What do you expect?" Mother asked, sighing at the latest of her husband's protests about his son, whom he loved more dearly than he'd admit. Secretly, Mother suspected that Father envied his son's freeness of mind and heart, his ability to see anything as a possibility, while at the same time he expected a lot of him because perhaps he saw a lot of himself in his son.

"I just don't know how to approach this problem. He just always has his head up in the clouds or under ground. His eyes never look at a man's level. It's as if he doesn't understand that which occurs at a normal height, since his eyes are always above or below that level." Father explained, shaking his head and chewing on his mustache after he'd finished speaking what might have been his longest statements of the week. Clearly he'd been thinking on this subject for quite some time.

Hen, who was privy to many of these conversations since she was a bit older and because she did her numbers and figures homework on a piece of slate in the kitchen where Father would occasionally glance over at her and nod or shake his head if her work was

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correct, frowned at what she was hearing. Of course, she didn't realize that this was parent's talk and that Father and Mother somehow expected her ears not to hear or her to not understand matters that were of import to adults alone. So, she broke through the barrier of parent and child by speaking just then.

"But Father, things *are* more interesting above and below where we walk."

"Whatever do you mean by that?" Father asked in puzzlement. "The most of life happens at eye level."

"The world is so tall and big, and since I'm so short I have to look up and down to see everything, or I miss most things." Hen explained, though this wasn't exactly what she meant, but she lacked the words to say it better. "Plus Pancake and I are shorter than you." She added, hoping this weighted her argument a bit more.

Father tugged at the ends of his mustache. He did not grow angry as some adults might when a child questioned them, but rather he grew thoughtful. Father encouraged his daughter to think and to speak when she actually had a point and it wasn't just a child's foolish prattling. "Alright, but that doesn't mean that what is above our below our regular height is more important. After all, we were made of a certain height because that's what we are supposed to see."

"Yet Pancake," she hesitated before adding herself, "and I, we both see things sometimes that you do not. Remember at the fishing pond when we saw those ducks before you, and then when you looked

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they were gone? Or how about the beehive full of honey that Pancake found because he always stares up in trees looking for monkeys and monsters?”

“She has a point.” Mother said with a smile, beaming at her daughter from behind cheeks powdered with flour.

Father frowned. “That’s just the point. It’s not that he’s looking for things of value. He looks because he expects that the places of the world have something fanciful reserved only for his eyes, something that is tucked under every rock, in the bow of every tree, and in every cloud. His head is full of nonsensical notions.”

“What’s a notion?” Hen asked, needing to know that word to continue her side of the conversation.

“An idea or thought.” Father replied, sipping his coffee after answering.

Hen pursed her lips thoughtfully, furrowing her brow under her bangs of red curls. “I think his ideas are exciting sometimes. He makes me forget bad things when I play with him. He thinks anything could happen.”

“When you expect anything and everything you’re disappointed by the ordinary.”

“You mean he always finds less than he wants to?” Hen asked, earning a nod. “He might not find his monsters, but he always finds something amazing. I think he knows the woods better than most adults because adults forget to look high and low... I think being an adult must be very boring, because they miss the most exciting things.”

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“We have responsibilities that take up our time.” Father replied gruffly. “Responsibilities are sometimes boring, that is true, and we don’t usually have the time to go about looking for elves and unicorns.”

“But you wish you could?” Hen asked with her sweetest smile.

“Maybe.” Father broke into an uncharacteristic and boyish grin, one that Mother saw and favored with an almost shocked grin. Father saw her expression and quickly reposed himself into his standard stoic expression, but not until after winking at his wife.

Mother broke into a soft song then, a happy melody that had no real words, as they changed every time she sang it. Father hummed along and resumed studying the motes floating atop his mug’s contents.

What none of them knew was that Pancake had heard the whole thing from a hiding place behind a stack of sacks and barrels in the pantry adjacent the kitchen. He’d been searching for a ghost that he suspected haunted the pantry, and so he’d not been able to move since ghosts were shy and wouldn’t appear if they thought a boy was watching for them.

The conversation he’d overheard had been mostly beyond his reckoning, but at some point he had understood that Hen had just won an admission from Father. He sat there trying to wrap his mind around how Hen could be right and Father wrong on some level, if only a little bit. Surely it wasn’t as simple as all that, but the fact that Father could be questioned at all was mind warping.

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Just before dinner his growling stomach made him give up on seeing a ghost, and he sneaked out of the pantry to seek out Hen so that she might further explain the monumental event that had occurred. He'd ask Mother, but she'd say it in words that he didn't understand, ruffle his hair, and kiss his forehead as if that simple ritual could impart the knowledge he wanted when he words could not.

"What did you and Father talk about when Mother was making meat pies?" He asked his sister, interrupting her study of a butterfly.

"You." Hen admitted, sighing when the butterfly flitted away.

"But you won!" Pancake said, stuttering his amazed protest as he said it.

"I won?" Hen repeated aloud, wondering as the words came out. She smiled after a moment. "I suppose I did."

"How could you win? Father is always right."

Hen shook her head and looked at him as if he were simple. "No, he's not. Everyone makes mistakes."

"Not Father. He's always right."

"Then how could I win if he's always right? You just said I won."

"I must not have understood what I heard. I guess I'm wrong." Pancake replied, sitting down on the ground as heavily as his little body could manage.

"You're not wrong. Father *can* be wrong sometimes."

"What about Mother?" Pancake asked worriedly. That Father could be wrong was hard enough, but if

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both Mother and Father could be wrong, what was the world coming to?

Hen shrugged. “I don’t know. I think she’s always right, because even Father won’t argue much with her. And if she’s wrong, I don’t want to say so because she’s the one who spansks us.”

“Her hands *are* large.” Pancake admitted.

“Yes, and I think that makes her always right.” Hen said sadly. “I can’t argue with those hands.”

As if on cue, Mother bellowed out the window that it was dinnertime. Pancake went quickly, because Mother was always right about dinner if not everything else too. That and they didn’t get dessert if they didn’t wash well and were late to the table. Even ghost hunters can’t deal without desserts.

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A Visit to the Pond Goes
Awry
Cannonballs and Great Falls

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Pancake was in a terrible hurry to submerge himself in the cool water just a few yards away, being that it was such a hot day, but it was not to be so. His hands were poised to tear his shirt off, which would be followed by his shoes and pants in little to no time, but his sister raised her hand to halt him, so he stood there with his mouth open and his limbs ready to act.

“Wait. I will go first, and you must not watch or I will clobber you senseless.” Hen declared regally, as if his following of her word was a given.

He grunted in irritation at her demand. Why should he wait? “I don’t see why you care. We used to swim naked here all the time.” He had said.

“That was before. This is now, and I want you to know that you’ll be keeping your smallclothes on, because I don’t want to see you naked. It’s not proper for children our ages.”

“Says who?”

“We’re older now, Pancake. We can’t act like children.” Hen said in her ‘adult voice,’ the one she used when she tried to seem more mature.

“I’m only eight.” Pancake reminded her.

“And I’m ten, so those sorts of things are unseemly for a young lady.”

Eventually, he relented. “Fine. Just hurry, because I’m hot.” He declared, and true to his promise he didn’t look until he heard a splash and Hen’s whoop of delight.

She’d carefully removed her dress and hung it up on

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a willow branch where it would not get dirty and ants and other manners of creepy-crawlies wouldn't easily find their way into it. Pancake considered doing something silly – she might call it cruel – like placing bugs in her dress like she had sought to prevent, but in the end the heat won out over mischief. At least it did this time.

Pancake rid himself of his clothes – except for his smallclothes since wearing less would offend his sister's newfound sensibilities. His discarded clothes had scarcely hit the ground before he piled headfirst with his arms extended before him into the water. He came up beside Hen where she was treading water, and he sprayed water from his mouth like a fountain. When he finished, he broke into a wild laugh.

Hen joined in too, cupping her hands to splash water at his face. He blinked away the water and frowned. His lower lip quivered with a studied effect that was proven to evoke sympathy from his sister, but it was just a tactic to lull Hen into a false sense of security. When she looked on the verge of apologizing, he swept his arm just under then surface of the water to send a cascade of water to douse his sister, while yelling mirthfully, “Wave attack!”

Hen blinked in surprise after the wave had passed. She wiped her eyes with a hand and sighed. “That wasn't nice.” She remarked disappointedly.

“Ha! You're just angry because I am skilled in the water.”

“Skills? You know nothing.” Hen replied, laying into a backstroke, which she used to circle around

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him.

“Okay, perhaps you’re better *in* the water, but I am better entering the water. I can out-splash and out-dive you all day long.”

“How? You’re half my size. You need size to make a good splash.”

“So you’re fat?” Pancake asked with a grin. He anticipated her angry splash of retaliation and dove under so she could not hit him.

Mischief was a close comrade for him, so he was unable to resist an opportunity to grab at her ankles as they scissored past him beneath the water. He heard her shriek even though he was underwater. Her legs thrashed wildly and struck the side of his face. Stunned, he floated back to the surface and shook his head to chase away the stars that danced before his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Hen asked, feeling only a little sorry since he’d brought it upon himself.

“I think so.” He said, looking a bit dazed still.

“Why don’t you show me your best splash then?” Hen suggested, making him forget his complaints before they began in earnest.

Pancake grinned widely and swam for the shore. He pulled himself up using the roots of a willow tree that hung over the pond. As he stood on the shore, his bare shoulders shook with anticipation, shedding droplets of water faster than the hot sun could dry them. “I’ll make a splash *so* big, that it will empty the pond.” He declared.

“I don’t know. I think I can do better!” She called

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over to him, baiting him into doing his best. Little brothers do need encouraging after all, and older ones too, she suspected.

Pancake stood back and got ready to make a charge, but then his eyes alighted on a branch that hung out over the water. Hen watched as he walked toward the water instead of throwing himself forward, and then instead of jumping, he began to climb. Pancake disappeared into the willow, obscured by its many leafy branches, drapes of yellow cords dappled with leaves of several shades of greens and greenish blues. By the time he reappeared, emerging from behind the curtain of willow branches, he was three or four yards above the water. He scooted out on the branch until he was as far from the shore as he could get.

Hen realized her brother's mind and cringed.

"Pancake, that's dangerous! Don't jump from there."

"You're just scared of my splash!" He shouted back.

"Mother would get angry if she saw you doing this."

Hen tried another tactic. Fear of Mother's wrath would stop him. He wasn't *that* daring.

"Mother isn't here, Hen, and I'm going to jump."

Pancake said bravely, puffing out his chest as he stood on broad limb, steadying himself with one of its many branches.

"Please don't." Hen pleaded. Pleading and crying were her last resorts, but she'd not quite reached the point of crying yet.

Pancake shook his head, and suddenly let go of the branch. At the top of his lungs, he cried out, "Cannonball!" Then he spread his arms like wings

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and pushed off from the branch. Hen's breath caught in her throat as her brother soared out from the branch, seeming to defy gravity for a moment, as if he might truly fly away instead of hitting the water. A shaft of sun seemed to seek out the sandy hair on his head, crowning him in a bright light that was short lived, for he eventually did fall after that brief infinite second. He passed into the tree's shadows and plunged downward like a falling dagger.

Pancake cut through the surface of the water, piercing it with hardly a splash at all as he plummeted. Hen bit her fingertips and watched in something approaching horror mixed with fascination at her brother's daredevil show. Bubbles came up behind where his feet had passed, the only signs of his passing other than the small rippling waves that washed around Hen. Moments passed as she waited for him to surface.

Ten. Twenty. Thirty!

"Thirty seconds." She mouthed slowly. "Where are you Pancake?"

Feeling the rise of panic in her heart when she reached sixty seconds, she swam over to where Pancake had entered the water, and dove down to look for him. She kicked her legs furiously, diving as deep as she could. As anyone who has ever swam with clothes on knows, the restrictions of her cotton slip as it tangled around her knees and bound at her thighs made it hard dive as deep as she might have. Her eyes strained to pierce the murk, looking for the pale shape that would be her brother illuminated by

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the errant shafts of sunlight that invaded the watery domain.

She came up for a second breath of air and dove again, ignoring the burning in her lungs as she searched for her brother. Her mind could not entertain thoughts that he might be lost and gone, for that was beyond her imagination. Pancake was and always would be, but if he had been hurt Mother would be furious at her. On her third breath, she caught a glimpse of a pale, hunched-over shape that seemed familiar. She kicked with all her might to reach it. Her hand grasped around the wrist of something warm and familiar, and she swung her legs downward and kicked for the light of the surface.

She broke the surface like a whale breaching, and like a whale she blew out a great breath and gasped for air. Her eyes were met with sunlight that seemed so warm and yet so paternal after the cold depths. At her side was Pancake, who she wrapped an arm around, tucking it under his armpits to grip him about the chest while she paddled and kicked for shore.

When the water was shallow enough she stood, and gripping Pancake then with both hands, she tossed him up on the shore. His limbs flailed limply and his lips were turning as blue as his closed eyelids. Hen threw herself down at his side and rolled him onto his stomach so that she could lift him around his middle and try to clear the water from his lungs. She shook him, alternately squeezing at his abdomen and patting his back like a mother burping her baby.

Water spilled from Pancake's mouth and he retched,

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rolling onto his back. His eyes did not open and his breathing was so shallow that Hen nearly presumed him to be asleep. She bit her lip and laid an ear to his chest, her red-orange hair mopping across his narrow chest. Tears threatened but she bit them back and sat back up into a kneeling position beside him while holding his hand in a vise-grip.

“Pancake?” She whispered in his ear.

When he said nothing and made no response, a thought came to mind, perhaps foolish to others, but a sensible idea to a young girl. She leaned down and planted a brief kiss upon his lips, hoping to wake him from his slumber like a character in so many stories she’d heard Mother tell.

Pancake’s green eyes fluttered open slowly, and he was not disturbed or startled in the least by the closeness of her face. He blinked and smiled.

“I had the best dream.” He said softly.

“What did you dream of?” Hen asked, a few tears mingling now with the water from the pond that was still on her face. Pancake was safe, and Mother wouldn’t have to punish her for letting him get hurt.

“Pirates.” He said, raising the hand she was not holding. It was clenched into a fist that he opened slowly to reveal a tarnished ring.

“Where did you get that?” Hen asked, staring at it in surprise. Her brother’s brush with the great beyond was fading as she stared at the ring.

“It was at the bottom of the pond. It’s pirate treasure. I always said there was treasure in the pond.”

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She sat back heavily, her worries for her brother forgotten completely in the space of a few words. “How do you know it was a pirate’s ring?” She asked skeptically.

“Because a pirate gave it to me.” He answered simply.

“Were there more rings or jewels?” Hen asked, jealously eyeing the ring. “I’d much like to have a pirate treasure of my own.”

“Well, you’ll have to throw yourself off that tree branch and hit your head on the bottom of the pond to get one. It’s what I had to do.” Pancake offered cheerfully, sitting up.

Hen didn’t question his story or his methods, for the ring was sure enough proof. Even later, after Father declared it a cheap brass ring, Pancake insisted it was pirate gold. Of course, when the two of them told the story, there was no mention of how he had nearly come to great harm. Hen knew though, and if she didn’t have her own piece of a pirate’s legacy, she took it to heart that she had saved her brother. It was her job after all, and harm had a great obstacle in her if it wished to reach Pancake.

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**Tanglemouse and Mr.
Samson**
Cat Dreams and Stolen Cheese

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Mr. Samson yawned, curling his rough, pink tongue at the world from where it was ensconced between a top and bottom row of sharp teeth. They were sharp teeth that complemented claws made for rendering fish, birds, and mice into tasty meals, especially mice. He eyed his paws and decided they needed another good licking, but that was a task better done while basking in the warm sun on the porch.

Now Mr. Samson was not his true name, as no name given a cat by a human can be, but it was a fair name nonetheless. Feeds-Me-Well, the young human male, had given it to him. The human male claimed his name was some nonsensical food word or something, and that was a totally inaccurate name as far as a cat could see. Still, whatever the Feeds-me-Well chose to be called in human words was fine, so long as he kept handing over the choicest bits from his dinner plate.

The cat took his place on a wicker chair that Steps-On-My-Tail, who was Feeds-Me-Well's father, used to sit on. The adult human male had since been trained to note that it was not his chair, but the cat's, though this training had been taxing and stressful to Mr. Samson, who was usually a very relaxed feline. Steps-On-My-Tail had been very territorial about what he had fancied at first to be his chair, but clearly it was a device made for cats. After all, it had a delightful series of curves just right for scratching

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one's back on, and all those nooks and crannies that would catch loose hair so it didn't have to be licked off and coughed up later.

Presently, Watches-Me-Intently came over to observe his grooming regiment, something she did often. His impressive mane and his sublime coloring no doubt overawed the young female, who admired his coloring because hers was an odd orangish shade. Tabby was a common color, but Mr. Samson liked to think he did tabby with a little more flair than most. His balance of white and orange was sublime, and his whiskers were ever so long. He was a handsome cat, and it was only right that a female – even a female human – would admire him. Occasionally he let Watches-Me-Intently groom him with her hands, smoothing the excess fur from his coat and scratching his cheeks or the underside of his chin. Today was not such a day. When she grew too close, Mr. Samson ceased his sunbathing, hopped up from the chair, and darted off.

He was a large cat, but his reflexes were sound. That he had gone soft and fat from too much pampering was not something a cat could acknowledge. Size was a reflection of one's hunting skills. A well-fed cat must be an expert hunter and quick on his feet, else he'd be thin and starved. Besides, he wasn't fat – his coat had merely gotten thicker. Yes, that was it.

Mr. Samson rounded the house and went back in through the back door. He paraded around proudly, strutting for Makes-The-Food, who was the matron queen of the house. She was clearly impressed with

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his physique and coat, for she offered him a tribute of meat scraps that were left over from her food preparation. Although, Mr. Samson liked to think that they were the tenderest morsels rather than the scraps. What a cat likes differs from a human anyway.

Yes, the cat realized, he had it quite good. It was only fitting for the king of the beasts, or at least a royal cousin. If lions were the kings of the beasts, then a cat with such obvious respect of its housemates must be an earl or count, something of that sort, but royalty for certain.

He settled down on a patch of floor warmed by the sun that invaded through the window. He napped there until Feeds-Us-Well stumbled by, his loud footfalls preceding his approach. Mr. Samson opened his eyes to regard the boy, only to be met by a jumble of old yarn being dangled before him. His claws slid out of their sheathes in his first knuckles, and he began to bat at the yarn, snagging into it as if it were the flesh of a mouse that he brought to his mouth to chew on occasionally.

Some cats deemed such toys or play as beneath them, but it was good practice as far as this cat saw it. There was a shortage of real prey around, and one had to hone their battle skills for when an opportunity presented itself. Mice, after all, were foolish creatures unable to recognize their position in the grand scheme of things even at the moment a cat's jaws and claws closed in on them and showed that they were merely a walking meal.

Cats and mice formed an interesting circle. Cats

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might hunt snakes, squirrels, birds, or other small creatures, but cats and mice were the true pairing of nature. Every cat has an opposing mouse with its own name. No matter how many times a cat might kill it or eat it, it always came back to taunt the cat again. It was always the same mouse spirit within those varied little bodies, despite appearances. A cat knew the truth of things.

Mr. Samson's nemesis was named Tanglemouse. They'd battled wits and bodies a dozen times and more. Sometimes Tanglemouse won, if escaping the field of battle with its life could be considered victory to anything but a mouse. Usually, Mr. Samson won. His belly attested to that. Lately though, Tanglemouse had been getting sneakier and faster. He had learned from their battles, while Mr. Samson had been unchallenged until of late, so his skills had not improved. Thus, such training as with the yarn was needful.

Eventually, Feeds-Me-Well tired of the yarn game and scooped him up in his arms instead. Hugging him like one might a teddy bear or a doll, Feeds-Me-Well carried him around the house and into the yard, ignoring the protests and squirming from the cat in his arms. The boy was well intentioned, but he was a bit foolish and unobservant. He had no perception of how to carry a cat, so Mr. Samson dug his claws lightly into the boy's belly flesh, not like he'd have done to tear open a rabbit's innards, but rather just enough to get himself released so that he could bound into the trees that lined the edge of the yard.

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Feeds-Me-Well was persistent, so he had to change hiding places often. This, too, was training. It was good to practice his stealth.

Some time later, Mr. Samson found himself beside the chicken coop. He watched the delicious birds squawk and prattle on in the way only empty-headed chickens can do. Unfortunately, Steps-On-My-Tail watched the chickens closely, and was quite concerned about Mr. Samson's love for the taste of their flesh. So, Mr. Samson rarely had a chance to get his claws on one, though he often subjected himself frequently to the torturous deprivation of watching what he could not eat.

Feeds-Me-Well had gone back inside, so Mr. Samson worked his way toward the woodpile in the back, where Tanglemouse often made his home. Tanglemouse not been sighted for several days, and it was time to patrol once more, if only as a show of his feline vigilance. Climbing over the woodpile was a novice's way to do things. Instead, Mr. Samson sprayed his scent in one corner of the woodpile and then worked his way to the opposite corner, where he concealed himself in the tall grasses and watched with his sharp yellow-green eyes for any sign of Tanglemouse.

There were mice, and there was Tanglemouse. Mice were stupid creatures that climbed to their deaths on awful devices strewn about the house by Steps-On-My-Tail to placate Makes-The-Food, for whom mice were a source of terror. It was a good thing she never seen Tanglemouse, for Mr. Samson

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was convinced her weak heart might give out in fear if the two did meet. Cunning radiated from the mouse, along with an unnatural inquisitiveness. His beady eyes saw more, his large ears heard more, and his feet moved a little faster than a run-of-the-mill mouse.

Mr. Samson dined on a field mouse that strayed out of the woodpile, all the while waiting for Tanglemouse to show his whiskers. Tanglemouse was more cunning than that, he decided. If Tanglemouse was hiding within the woodpile, he must expect the trap. Mr. Samson made a show of leaving the setting, strolling off lazily, contented after a large meal. Except, he didn't really leave. Instead, he climbed a nearby tree, which took him out on a long overhanging branch and then to a nice vantage point on the roof. From the roof, it was a short drop onto the woodpile and then an easy pounce onto Tanglemouse if he showed himself.

Sure enough, he needed only to leave and the arch-mouse appeared. Transfixed, Mr. Samson watched the small brown mouse emerge from the woodpile to stand at its peak. He stood there, lifting his head into the air and twitching his whiskers as he proclaimed to the other mice of the woodpile that he was greater than He-Who-Stalks-Us. An entire congregation of mice slowly assembled, because they were timid creatures fearful of the return of Mr. Samson. He could hear them wriggling in their dirty ways throughout the woodpile, but it was only Tanglemouse that Mr. Samson had eyes for.

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The mouse's tail was a bit longer and bushier, as if he had some squirrel blood in him. His paws were better formed for handling things and climbing. His eyes were wider set, so that he could see better peripherally. He was the arch-mouse indeed. Tanglemouse had been reborn again.

A rumbling in Mr. Samson's stomach caused the mice to pause. Their eyes searched, but it was Tanglemouse who spotted the cat on the roof.

"Too late!" Mr. Samson yowled, throwing himself down onto the woodpile.

Logs tumbled around them as he landed, but still Tanglemouse stood his ground even as his fearful disciples scattered into the woods or reentered the woodpile.

"You think to fill your stomach with me, but you shall not eat me this day or any other." Tanglemouse declared.

"You must learn your place, Tanglemouse." Mr. Samson hissed, pouncing forward with claws extended to catch the arch-mouse.

At the last second, Tanglemouse dove to the side, disappearing into a dark hole in the woodpile, only to leave Mr. Samson tumbling through air when the wood stack gave way beneath the shift of his weight. Logs tumbled down around him, rolling across his tail. Shrieking, he bounded away from the woodpile, where Tanglemouse's barely visible beady eyes danced in amusement.

"Too-Fat-To-Catch-Us, you go hungry today." Tanglemouse taunted.

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Mr. Samson seethed, but as his tail hurt, he vowed he'd have his vengeance another day. He retreated inside for the comfort and food Feeds-Us-Well might offer. Their battle was an eternal one, so there was no use rushing things. He would lick his wounds and prepare for the next round...

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The Forest Dragon
Of Influences and the Easily Influenced

Pancake & Hen

Martin was Pancake's best friend, but not so much out of choice as much as a coincidence of proximity between two families' houses. Martin's father happened to own the next farm over, and as he had a son of approximate age with Pancake, he felt it was only natural that the two should become fast friends, not unlike the relationship he presumed he had with Father. Unbeknownst to Martin's father, Father was not exactly fond of him.

Father was the sort of man that treated all of his neighbors with the same level of mild disdain even while doing his neighborly duties like lending a hand when a saw needs adjustment, a wagon has to be levered out of a mud hole, or when squaring away moorings and leveling posts for a new barn. Such things were suited to an observant and analytical man not afraid of hard work. He was not one who would shirk his tasks or refrain from helping his fellow man, even if he didn't particularly care for that man. After all, Father was a disciplined, careful man, while Martin's father was a man of excesses and foolishness that were just barely made up for with his hard work ethics.

Martin's father, like his son, saw spirits frequently; unlike his son, his spirits were not the intangible ones bereft of their physical existences, but rather ones with very high proofs that needed to be manufactured in yards of copper and glass tubes and processed by various mechanisms before imbibing.

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This affinity for distilled beverages frequently led Martin's father into doing ridiculous things and telling the most absurd stories in the county. It was something of a joke that all of his stories started the same, that being with a cup of something that would put fire in his belly. His son, Martin, had picked up his talents for spinning tales with the added bonus of actually believing what he made up as well as everything his father told him. As the old adage goes, "If you lie to yourself enough, you will eventually believe the lie." That was Martin.

So it went that Father was not exactly fond of Martin either, because of his similarities both genetic and personality-wise with his father. Mother wasn't so hard on the boy, partly because he was polite, though that was because of a fine and frequently used switch the boy's mother owned and not because of the father's lax attempts at discipline and instruction. The results were fine nonetheless, since Martin said, "please", "thank you", "ma'am", and "good morning" with sincerity second to none.

Why the first time Mother had ever seen the boy, he favored her with a bow that doubled him over almost as if he'd forgotten to tie his shoe. Ever since, Mother had liked the boy, even if he did help fill Pancake's head with silliness, and he seemed to have something of a crush on Hen as well. More than once he had confided to Mother that he planned to marry Pancake's sister some not so far off day, which made Mother laugh and like the happy-go-lucky boy all the more, even if she'd not let such a boy marry her only

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daughter.

Besides, Mother reminded Father on a dozen occasions, “It just isn’t right for a boy to have no other boys to play with. Hen shouldn’t be the only child he ever plays with. It’s just not natural.” Father had seen the wisdom in this. In fact, he’d even encouraged the friendship occasionally, seeing it as a chance to get Pancake more grounded in the reality that social interactions with more young boys would surely reinforce. Well, that was the plan, but the boy wasn’t just any boy, he was Martin. That particularly mop-haired boy had a wide imagination and wide aspirations, almost as wide as his familial forehead.

“Have you seen the Forest Dragon?” Martin asked Pancake one autumn evening, an hour or so short of twilight. The fire crackled in its hearth as he leaned in close to maintain the secret from Hen, who listened intently despite pretending to be more interested in her studies than the goings on of the two boys.

“No.” Pancake’s eyes widened as he realized that Martin might have seen something that he had not. “Have you seen a Dragon? Does it breathe fire? Does it have huge wings? Does it lay eggs that are hot like steam?” He fired one question after another, a barrage of words.

Martin smiled and cast a look over at Hen, who quickly averted her eyes when she realized she’d been noticed. Martin’s cheeks reddened a bit, but not so deeply as Hen’s did. He turned back to Pancake, who hadn’t noticed the exchange because his mind was still whirring along with thoughts of dragons. “No, it

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doesn't breathe fire, Pancake. It would burn down the forest, and then it couldn't be the Forest Dragon."

"Oh."

"It doesn't fly either, because all of those branches would catch its wings. It doesn't even have wings."

"Is it big then? Like a mile long?" Pancake's arms stretched out to their furthest extents to illustrate the size of the dragon.

"No, I'd say more like the size of a huge horse."

Pancake's nose wrinkled in disappointment. "That doesn't sound that big..."

"I mean like my Pa's horse." Martin's father had the biggest horse in the county, a draft horse they called Champ, which it was since it had come out on top for four years running in the annual log-pull game in town.

"Wow." Pancake whistled as best as he could, trying to sound impressed just like Father did sometimes, and he was impressed even if the wet blowing sound that passed between his lips didn't sound so. Champ was a big horse after all. "Can you show him to me, the dragon?"

"I don't know. The Forest Dragon isn't easy to find. He has the whole forest to wander. It was only dumb luck that I crossed paths with him."

"What does he look like then?"

"He has antlers, the biggest set you've ever seen. There must have been twenty points or more, and they surely weigh more than you or I."

"Dragons have horns, not antlers." Hen remarked,

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abandoning even the pretense of doing homework now as she came over to sit on the bench beside Pancake, across from the old rocking chair that Martin told his story from.

“Regular dragons have horns, but a *Forest Dragon* has antlers, because he is the king of deer and all of the creatures that live within the forest he rules.” Martin corrected her.

Hen opened her mouth to try to refute what he said, but it made sense, and as she’d not seen any dragons, let alone the *Forest Dragon*, she couldn’t say much. Her mouth clapped shut and she crossed her arms. Martin’s watched her with his wide-set brown eyes, so she stared right back and nodded her approval for him to continue his descriptions.

“The *Forest Dragon* has bark for skin, like an oak tree. It’s layered just like scales, but it’s bark. His chest and neck are hard plates like pieces of slate. His snout is long and pointed, like a willow leaf, with dozens of jagged teeth sticking out in every direction.”

Pancake nodded eagerly, his imagination drawing a picture in his mind as Martin supplied each new detail. “What about his eyes? Do they glow like swinging lanterns?”

“No, they’re cold and blue, like the icy creek that runs near the hunting cabin.” Martin shivered.

“The castle you mean.” Pancake corrected his friend.

Martin nodded and Hen smirked. Even Martin called the structure off in the middle of the willow woods a hunting cabin. Only Pancake thought the

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place was a castle.

“What sort of things does it eat? What does it sound like?” Hen asked, still not sure about Martin’s tale. After all, he once claimed to have seen a witch in his outhouse. They’d never found any proof of any witch, and Hen had her doubts.

“It eats whatever it wants, usually all manners of creepy crawlies.” Martin wiggled his fingers at Hen, enjoying the way she cringed as he began listing creepy crawlies, as if every girl doesn’t already know such things from her darkest nightmares. “It likes to eat leeches, worms, beetles, grubs, frogs, salamanders, snakes, field mice, and... badgers.” Martin trembled at the mention of badgers, something he had been terribly afraid of ever since his father told him how dangerous they were a couple months ago.

“And the sound? Did you hear it?” Pancake reminded his friend, sliding eagerly forward on the bench. He nearly fell off the edge, but Hen pulled him back. Pancake didn’t even notice that she had, he was so in the moment. “Is it like a bobcat’s roar or maybe like a bear’s growl?”

“It sounds more like a great trumpet, a hundred ducks all quacking at once.”

“That doesn’t sound the least bit scary.” Hen replied bravely. “When and where did you see this dragon anyway?”

The fire crackled loudly just then, a pop that sent sparks shooting into the hearth mat where they smoldered and died. The three of them grew deathly

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silent, Hen most of all. They slowly leaned back into their story circle when they were all sure that it had not been the Forest Dragon growling outside. After a few rushed heartbeats and cautious breaths, Martin answered Hen's questions.

"I saw the Forest Dragon two weeks ago, when I was walking home from the butcher's. Mother sent me to get some meat for dinner, and I think the Forest Dragon smelled the roast I was carrying and came sniffing around for an easy meal."

"Did you give him any of the roast?"

Martin shook his head. "No, I didn't have a knife to cut off a piece, and my mother would have tanned my hide if I'd left the whole thing. Besides, the dragon might not have known which meat was the roast and which meat was my arm! So, I hid behind the trunk of a downed tree until the Forest Dragon passed by and I saw the trees move out of the way for their king as it went on its way."

"The trees moved for the dragon?" Hen asked in wonder.

"Yeah, they climbed up on their roots and moved to let him pass, then they settled back down in their holes like nothing happened."

"I'd like to see that." Hen admitted.

Martin smiled, showing off the gap in his smile where a tooth had been knocked out when he and Pancake had been playing swords last week. "Maybe next time I can show the dragon to you two. Who knows if we'll ever see it again though? It might be a once in a lifetime thing."

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Mother poked her head into the living room just then, releasing a collection of delicious aromas from the kitchen where she had been battling against the onset of hunger that curiously overtook her family every day in the early evening. With the back of a flour-dusted hand, she brushed a stray lock of damp hair off her forehead and cleared her throat. “Martin, are you staying for dinner?”

“May I, Ma’am?” Martin asked. “Your cooking is ever so good, better than my mother’s even.”

Mother grinned at the charm the boy displayed. “Yes, Martin, you may stay, but only if you promise not to tell your mother that my cooking is better than hers. Mothers don’t like to hear that, and we should be careful of her feelings.”

“I think I might be able to promise that if...” Martin replied, fishing for an extra treat.

“If I put extra butter and brown sugar on your sweet potato?” Mother offered.

“It’s a promise.” Martin pronounced, smiling at the results of their agreement.

“I want extra butter too!” Pancake declared, suddenly more worried about condiments on sweet potatoes than some dragon his friend had seen.

“Then butter ye shall receive, but only if you wash your hands first, Pancake. And make sure you all watch out for the Forest Dragon when you go fetch the water from the well to wash up.”

Martin gulped loudly and stared at Mother. His eyes widened as he reluctantly got up off the rocking chair to follow Pancake and Hen as they scrambled to go

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outside, hoping that they would see the Forest Dragon just like Martin had.

Mother smiled sleepily, saying, “Hurry up, Martin, dear. Dinner is on in five minutes.”

Martin grew pale-faced and worriedly shouted, “Wait for me!” He ran out the door after Pancake and Hen. There was a strength and safety in numbers, especially in Forest Dragon country.

After the trio had left, noisily bursting through the side door on their way to wash up for dinner, Mother darted back into her domain where she could laugh without being heard over the noise of dishes.

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The Egg of Dreams
Of Magic in Small Places

Pancake & Hen

Father's moods waxed and waned during the year, with the highest point coinciding with his mid-fall birthday. For a week before his birthday and sometimes for a few days after, he was all smiles and nods with a spot of playfulness. He didn't even mind his son's flights of fantasy for that single week of the year. In fact, he was even encouraging of a little adventure with his children.

And if good moods were like fires in that they can grow if fed, Mother knew exactly how to stoke them with pecan pies, tartlets, and hazelnut flavored coffee that kept Father at the kitchen table for an extra stretch of time every morning before he went out to work and every evening after coming home from work. She was at the top of her culinary game for that pre-birthday week, producing a veritable festival of foods that concluded on what was the jolliest day of the year for her husband. Of course, by doing so, she ensured that he remembered her efforts when her own birthday came around, even if his reciprocation wasn't always so obvious or delicious. He'd return the favor with some sentimental trinket that meant as much to her as sugar-crusted pastries or carefully crafted meals did to him.

This year, Father found had something that tickled his fancy when he was at the market. He brought it home and placed it on the table right before dinner, setting it between a bowl of peas and next to a pile of pork chops that were waiting for their final

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accompaniments.

Pancake immediately stopped peeling the crust off his bread, something he liked to do because he ate the crust first, and Hen stopped in the middle of a sentence she had been saying to Mother, something about school and a boy who liked to pull her hair during recess. Mother looked over at the table, to where her two children sat transfixed by the dull grey spheroid sitting regally beside the peas.

“What is it?” Hen asked, wanting to touch it, but not daring to touch Father’s treasure unbidden.

“It’s a ‘Thunder Egg.’” Father replied, watching Pancake’s eyes light up at the mention of the object’s name. The name of the object itself imparted great images and fantastic ideas.

“Can I touch it?” Pancake asked, daring what his sister did not yet have the courage to do.

Father palmed the grayish ball in one of his calloused hands, and then he set it onto Pancake’s cupped hands. Pancake’s hands smacked the table, unable to hold them up with the sudden addition of weight. Such surprising weight just added to the mesmerizing quality of the ‘Thunder Egg.

Pancake slowly turned the egg over in his hands, feeling the leathery roughness of the outside of the stone, which was smoother in some places, but a little sharp in others. The ‘Thunder Egg was almost entirely grey, except for one spot where something whitish seemed to be struggling to emerge from under the darker exterior.

“My turn! Let me hold it.” Hen demanded, trying

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and failing to snatch it from Pancake's hands, which were reluctant to release Father's treasure.

Father's mustache twitched with amusement. "Let your sister hold it for a bit, Pancake." He suggested to his son, who did as asked, though his eyes never left the egg, even when she held it.

"It's warm." Hen remarked with wonder.

Father winked over at Mother, who had kept the stone near the stove for several minutes prior to dinner to that end. Mother grinned sleepily over at her family as she sprinkled a bit of sugar on some baked goods that were going to be tonight's dessert.

"What's inside of it?" Pancake inquired.

Father rolled his broad shoulders and raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. We'll have to wait for it to hatch. Then we can see what is inside."

"Hatch!?" Hen exclaimed, pressing her ear to the egg to see if there were any noises from the creature inside.

"It must be a dragon, a fairy, or an eagle." Pancake decided, frowning his brow.

"Oh, I don't know about an eagle, but anything *is* possible. The man at the market said there was something special inside, but we'll just have to wait to see." Father replied, his eyes wrinkling around the corners as he smiled.

"It's a dragon then." Pancake declared definitively. "It must be, because it's so hard and warm."

"No, Father said it's a Thunder Egg. Dragons wouldn't be in Thunder Eggs, they'd be in a dragon eggs." Hen corrected her brother.

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“Oh.” Pancake looked thoughtful, trying to adjust his theory to fit this new piece of the mysterious puzzle. “Perhaps it’s a Thunder Dragon!”

“What’s a Thunder Dragon?” Father asked, standing to help Mother transfer more dishes to the table.

“They breathe lightning instead of fire.” Pancake answered in his ‘of course’ voice, one that intimated that *everyone* should know something that he knew. Common knowledge wasn’t as universal as he thought though.

“I see. That could very well be true, but we’ll just have to wait and see,” Father nabbed the grey stone from his daughter’s hands and put it on the kitchen counter, “at least until after dinner.”

“When will it open though?” Pancake asked, his eyes pleading for information.

Father, enjoying the attention the trinket had received, couldn’t resist answering, “It might be hours, days, or even years.”

“Years?” Pancake and Hen groaned the word. Waiting years for something was a depressing notion for children whose experiences and patience was better expressed in seconds and minutes.

“Waiting is important with Thunder Eggs.” Father explained.

Hen sighed. “I’ll be an old woman before I see it open. I just know it.”

“I’ll be a hundred years old.” Pancake replied, trying to outdo his sister.

“I’ll be a thousand... and twenty!” Hen returned.

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Suddenly, there was a loud crack. Hen shrieked in surprise. Mother froze with a pan of pastries halfway out of the oven and a somewhat startled expression in her heavy eyes. Father's mustaches jerked up at the corners and his left eyebrow rose inquisitively as he looked around for the source of the sound. Only Pancake had the presence of mind to move, and, perhaps because he was the lowest to the ground, he was the one who discovered the source of the sound first.

"It hatched!" Pancake shouted, pointing at where the Thunder Egg laid in pieces on the floor.

Four sets of eyes looked at the delicately formed crystals, jagged rows of amethyst hexagons that lined what had moments ago been the inside of the Thunder Egg. The amethyst crystals had emerged from the dull grey rock bed that they had formed within, and they were dazzling in their brightness. Pancake knelt beside the shards of the Thunder Egg, wedges of grey and violet. He picked one up and held it up to the lamplight.

"There was no dragon inside." Father observed, breaking the silence as the four of them regarded the piece of the Thunder Egg Pancake held aloft.

Pancake nodded. "Yeah, but this is better than a dragon. It's purple diamonds, and they hatched *before* dinner!"

"I want a piece." Hen decided, starting an argument for who got to keep which piece that lasted even into the dinner period. Only Mother's declaration that no one would get dessert if anything more was said

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about the pieces of the Thunder Egg put a halt on the discussion.

After dinner and, more importantly, dessert, while plates were being scrubbed and coffee was being drunk, conversation returned to the Thunder Egg. The pieces were doled out according to Mother's whims, and she declared the issue finished. And, if it was finished for her, it wasn't a done deal with Pancake, who still had questions.

Pancake was still being wary though to avoid Mother's wrath, so he kept his voice down when he asked his sister, "Why do you think it was called a Thunder Egg?"

"Didn't you hear the thunder when it broke open?" She replied. "*That* is why it is a Thunder Egg."

That made sense to Pancake and that was what he would tell everyone from that point on whenever the Thunder Egg was brought up again.

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The Shade Tree and Old
Man Weather

Lost and Found

Pancake & Hen

The forest was a never-ending source of adventures and discoveries for Pancake, and also, to a lesser extent, Hen. Yet, as is the way of things, it took longer and more concentrated efforts to find each new place, each new experience within the forest. Pancake ranged further and further from his home each week, with Hen in tow as he searched for mushroom rings, rocks not previously excavated, crevices that seemed abysmally deep to children, and other wonders both mundane and semi-magical.

Normally, the two were a good pair in terms of exploring. Pancake would roam to and fro in an almost frantic manner to find something interesting, many of which held his attention only for a short period. Hen, on the other hand, took a more studied and careful approach to their explorations; she went in a generally straight vector that corresponded with the most common points of Pancake's roaming. At each site of interest, to her anyway, she would pause and observe, and then she'd move on to the next place Pancake had marked with his many little circling footprints as a noteworthy location.

On some rare occasions, when Hen was particularly intrigued by something or Pancake was moving particularly fast, the pair would get separated, not that either would admit such to Mother, lest they both receive a good switching. When such separations occurred, there were stretches of nervous hearts racing, cold sweats, and prickles tingling across scalps

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and down spines as the two searched for each other, running amidst the underbrush and shouting each other's names until they had at last found each other. Each brief separation usually ended in a tearful hug and promises to never get lost again. Then, Hen would take a deep sigh and turn the sortie around, leading them back to safer realms – for a while at least.

Still, separations are the way of man, especially of boys who range far and wide to expand the borders of their known worlds, ever challenging the extents of what they have experienced. Perhaps it was just a matter of time before Pancake became truly separated from his sister, apart for more than the ten to twenty minutes, occasionally thirty minutes, that they were usually lost from one another...

Pancake didn't even notice at first that his sister was not following in his footsteps, marking his findings as he went. He'd been hurrying ever westward, chasing the sun as it started to lower in the sky. Shafts of light illuminated dust motes floating through the forest air, many of them stirred up by his two feet. It was late fall, and many leaves had fallen, only to smother the weeds and grasses that managed to grow in the sun-fed gaps between trees. Dust and decaying plant matter gathered in the gullies and low places, illusory and often dangerously deep. Pancake knew how to avoid most of these traps after so many hours wandering the woods, those traps and others like them he could skirt around. He knew which soft logs not to walk on, which slopes were slick with

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rainwater despite the dry leaves that deceptively covered them, and which lichens and mosses would tear away from their diminutive roots upon rocks if he put his weight on them.

He went down a gently sloped hill, and up another that was steeper. The second seemed quite large, though he couldn't be sure, because forested hills were hard to judge in size when you cannot look at them without their thick covering of branches, tree trunks, and other detritus. Reaching the crest of that second hill, he could see beyond, for the land beyond was lower, a small valley of sorts. The valley was covered with an expanse of leafless trees, paper birches whose silvery white shells curled away from their heartwoods.

Birches were wonderful to Pancake. They looked so pristine, and he could peel the bark off them to use for writing upon with charcoal or wax crayons, forest messages and name placards that he liked to hang to mark each landmark of his forest: The Castle in the Willows, Dead Tree Ring, Fox Hole #2, Dragon Cave, Pirate's Pond, Mushroom Trove, Treasure Ridge, and dozens of other locales he and Hen had named. Back at their house, he had a map he'd sketched out that detailed the locations of all of their landmarks.

So the birches stood, dozens of white skeletons left by the coming of colder weather, almost entirely stripped bare of their colorful leaves. The trees spread out to cover the entire valley that the rocky hill he had just crested helped to ring in with the aid of

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another four hills of approximate size. Pancake stared at the thin trunks, imagining for a minute that they were icicles growing upward from the ground from the way they glimmered in the late afternoon sun. A breath of cool wind lent credence to the thought, but only for a moment.

Then his eyes laid sight on something neither whitish grey like the birches and their spindly branches, nor like the earthy browns and oranges of the discarded leaves and the soils beneath them. No, this was green, a deep green that was very much alive. The plume of fresh green seemed to glow beckoningly from the midst of the bare birches, so Pancake went toward it, feverish with anticipation of something wondrous that surely waited for him and him alone. Only, halfway down the hill and at the edge of the birches, he stopped.

“Hen?” He called aloud. His only answer was the whispers of the winds through the bare branches of nearby trees.

Pancake hesitated at the edge of the stand of birches, perhaps a hundred yards at most from the spot of green he’d seen from further up the hill. Distance was hard to measure for one so small and eager, though, since things seemed either impossibly far or terribly close when he was so excited. Sighing in disappointment, Pancake began to walk back up the hill. As he did, he heard a voice, something that sounded a lot like an old man’s singing voice. He had the winds play tricks on his ears before, or at least that was how Father explained it; he, however, liked

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to refer to the mournful whines he heard sometimes in the woods as ‘spirits crying.’ This, though, he was quite sure was a man singing, and not a trick of the winds or spirits crying. He could almost make out the strains of *versus* and a lilting chorus when he turned his ear toward the birches again.

“Hen would never forgive me if I didn’t at least go look.” He murmured, trying to convince himself that going to have a looksee was the right thing to do after all.

In the end, caution was no match for the might of a boy’s curiosity, but, wise or not, that was Pancake’s nature. Besides, if he was going, it would only be for a quick peek, and then he would have to hurry back to find his sister. He hurried down through the birches toward the singing, letting his ears take him toward it. He stumbled twice as he went, evidence that the ground was slick, getting damper even as he descended.

When Pancake tripped for the third time as he ran, he spilled headlong into a ring of marshy grasses that lay at the center of the small valley. He skidded to a stop, resting on his chest with his face pressed into the greenery. With shaky legs, he stood, slowly becoming aware of a rising chorus of insects chirruping and frogs croaking that seemed to have replaced the old man’s singing. He looked around in wonder.

Before him stood a thick trunk of a tree, grey like wet granite. The trunk had an irregular shape, ribbed like a bundle of cords instead of being round. The

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trunk descended into the ground, spreading its vast root system about its base like the tentacles of an octopus. Wooden knots and tangles marked the roots, which dove into the moist soil like hungry fingers. Going upward, the tree's thick collection of branches disappeared under a thick curtain of heavy green needles that cast the interior of the tree in shade, except in one bare place, where bright eyes peered out from a gap in the branches that was larger than him.

Pancake started upon seeing the large golden eyes peering out at him from the gap in the tree's branches, imagining them to be the eyes of some great serpent bent on tempting him to partake of a forbidden apple, or the peepers of a voracious, winged drake. He shrunk away from the creature, hiding all but his sandy-colored hair in the tall marsh grasses.

A throaty chuckle announced the presence of a previously unseen man who sat with his back against the tree, the source of the song he'd heard before. The old man's beak-like nose projected out from the center of his profile; his dark eyes peered out from under thick eyebrows, like grey caterpillars that matched wispy grey hair that failed to cover the numerous age spots that had collected on his scalp; his gnarled fingers were clasped together over knees he'd gathered toward his chest. Nearly toothless, his smile was arresting and warm.

"Grandpa!" Pancake called out in amazement. His father's father was one of his most favorite people in

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the world. Grandpa lived in a cottage only half an hour away from their farmhouse by wagon ride, so he saw his grandfather often. However, it was the old man's personality that Pancake loved, and not just his proximity to his family's house. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm soaking in some of the last of this season before winter comes."

"It's not safe here, Grandpa, there's a drake in the tree. You should move away from there before it gobbles you up." Pancake insisted, waving his hand in a 'get away from there' fashion.

Grandpa chuckled. "That's an owl, boy, not a drake. Although, I must confess that I was a bit worried myself when I first came upon this tree and saw something nesting up there."

"It's an owl?" Pancake took another wary look up at the gap in the branches to confirm the claim. "Are you sure it's not an eagle?" Pancake still loved eagles. "It looks to be quite large."

"Oh, owls can get quite large, and they have quite large eyes to boot. Besides, they like to eat the frogs and mice that try to hide in these weeds." Grandpa said reassuringly.

Pancake decided that his grandfather was correct. After all, anyone as old as Grandpa was surely wise enough to determine if a creature was a bird or a monster. Even so, Pancake wanted to avoid getting too much attention from the creature.

He tiptoed through the grasses toward his grandfather, taking note of the various bugs and

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creepy crawlies that he'd have to inspect in depth later. Clearing the defensive ring of grasses and muck that the tree seemed to have collected around its base, he jumped onto the closest roots he could find and began walking along them, balancing as he made his way toward the thick trunk. Once he reached the trunk, he was truly made aware of the massiveness of the tree. It was so thick that even if he, his sister, and his grandfather linked hands they wouldn't be able to reach all the way around it.

"This tree is big... really big... super big." Pancake declared.

"Enormous. Humongous." Grandpa agreed.

Pancake tried those two new words out for himself, attempting their pronunciations a dozen times each before deciding he had them memorized. Mrs. Halfort, his teacher at day school, always told him to use a new word twelve times, or he'd not remember it when he wanted to use it later. Some students complained, but he didn't mind saying something twelve times anyway, because twelve always reminded him of a dozen donuts. A donut number of times! That's how many times he'd say every new word.

Pancake rapped the tree's grey trunk with his knuckles. "This tree must be old."

"Older than me."

"Really?" The idea that anything was older than Grandpa, what with all his wrinkles and white hair, was hard to believe.

Grandpa laughed. "Just how old do you think I am,

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Pancake?”

“Like seven-hundred and seventy four, maybe nine-hundred and twenty.”

“Don’t I wish that, eh?” Grandpa smiled. “Try eighty-seven.”

Pancake blinked. “That’s it? Only that old?”

“That’s it.”

“How old is this tree then?” Pancake asked, leaning against it.

“My grandfather planted it when he was young,” Grandpa calculated for a few moments, “so that would make it around a hundred and twenty-five maybe.”

“Why is it still green if it’s so old? You turned grey when you got old.”

“Because it’s an evergreen, Pancake. They never lose their needles, not even in the winter or in old age.” Grandpa held up a heavily lined hand to halt any further questions that were readying to bubble out of Pancake’s mouth. “But wait, before you have any more questions, we need to find your sister. Where is Hen? I know for a fact that Mother never lets you two out in these parts without going together.”

“Oh, well, she...” Pancake trailed off. How could he admit that he had stopped looking after her? It was his job as a boy to protect his sister, after all. Girls needed protection from many things, especially spiders.

“Let me guess.” Grandpa’s eyes shined with amusement. “You were running around exploring,

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and you forgot about her. Then you saw this tree and heard me singing and came running?”

“Well, honestly, I thought maybe it was Old Man Weather singing. I didn’t know it was you, Grandpa.”

“Old Man Weather? Who is he?”

Pancake nodded and explained; he was surprised that Grandpa didn’t know about him. “He’s Father Time’s best friend. He sings every time the seasons change. That’s what makes the seasons change. If he doesn’t sing, they don’t change. He looks a lot like you.”

“Really? How does he look? Handsome and wise?”

“Old.” Pancake answered, earning a barking laugh from his grandfather.

Grandpa unfolded his legs and gently pushed himself up from his seat against the giant tree. “Well, young one, let’s go find your sister. And, if you’re really nice, I won’t tell your mother that you lost your sister.”

“Really? Do you promise?” Pancake asked, his eyes shining with hope that he would indeed avoid a paddling.

“As a man who resembles Old Man Weather in age if nothing else, I give my word.”

Pancake sighed in relief. “Good. Then it’s a deal.”

“Now, how about a weather song...”

Grandpa took Pancake’s hand and led him off in the direction he had come from, singing a little ditty about the rain, the winds, and the coming winter, a song convincing enough that Pancake was beginning to doubt his identity by the time they found Hen

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sobbing in the woods because she had lost her brother, an offense which would earn her a good number of swats from Mother's strong hands. Despite her state, her sobs were nothing Grandpa's embrace couldn't soothe away, that and a promise like he had given Pancake, a promise that he wouldn't tell Mother about them getting lost.

Despite the late hour, before they could go home Pancake had to do one last thing: he had to go back and pin up a sign of birch bark on the great tree. The sign said, 'The Shade Tree and Old Man Weather (Grandpa).'

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Things Not to be Unsaid
About Me and About the Book

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I'm currently 27, living and teaching abroad in South Korea. I plan to return to the U.S.A. within the next year, after which I hope to continue writing.

This book is quite a departure from my normal works of fantasy and science fiction, being that it's more of a work of fiction with only hints of fantasy that are in the mind of Pancake, the main character. This book is also a lot shorter than my normal works, for certain, and a lot less involved. Still, it's been very cathartic to write. I hope it's well received.



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