

*Pancake & Hen*

**Pancake & Hen**  
*Flights of Fantasy*

*Pancake & Hen*

## Author's Note

This is my second collection of short stories about Pancake & Hen. Like the past collection, there is no ongoing plot. Rather, it's a series of vignettes that allow us to look through the imaginative eyes of the two main characters. In most cases, only children can truly appreciate the freshness of the world, a world in which anything can happen, and the mundane take on mystical qualities. So it is with Pancake & Hen, a pair with insatiable curiosities.

Also, I've left in the original introduction from the first volume. This is not to cheat you readers of a story, but rather to help get everyone back into the spirit of things before starting the new stories.

## Dedication

To my family, all of them, who're part of this story one way or another, and to my wife, who affords me the time to do this...

*Pancake & Hen*

# Table of Contents

## **The Nature of Names**

<Leave No Child Unnamed Lest They Disappear>

--

## **Pancake and Puppy**

<Everyone Loves Pancakes>

## **Brown Bread and Wool**

<Real Boys Have Chest Hair>

## **The Mud Hole Trap**

<Bullfrogs and Baths>

## **The Ghost in the Garden**

<Howls and Hauntings>

## **Blanket Thieves**

<Bedroom Burglars>

## **Grandma**

<The Great Weaver>

## **Rooster and Hen**

<Mismatches and Misnomers>

## **War in the Willows**

<Return to the Great Castle>

## **Diamonds and Gold**

<Jewels for Fools and Big Payoffs>

## **The Season Tree**

<Evergreens and Wrapping Paper>

--

## **Things Explained Needlessly?**

<About Me and About the Book>

*Pancake & Hen*

*Pancake & Hen*

**The Nature of Names**  
*Leave No Child Unnamed Lest They Disappear*

## *Pancake & Hen*

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

## *Pancake & Hen*

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

## *Pancake & Hen*

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

## *Pancake & Hen*

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

## *Pancake & Hen*

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...

*Pancake & Hen*

**Pancake and Puppy**  
*Everyone Loves Pancakes*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Hen stared questioningly at the blue-eyed, blonde ragamuffin who sat next to her younger brother and was attached to his arm. The girl's hair had more tangles than Pancake's socks had brambles, which was to say a lot, since he always tromped through the tall weeds along the creek, picking up brambles of all shapes and sizes. Missing a couple front teeth though she was, the girl was unashamed to smile, and she did so widely, dimpling her round face almost cutely, except for the obnoxious giggle that burbled out of her mouth as she did so.

"Who is this?" Hen demanded, placing her hands on her hips and drawing herself up to her full, authoritative height. Pancake had friends, a grimy lot of ne'er-do-wells that he frolicked about the swamps and climbed trees with like a pack of wild monkeys, but they were all boys. She and Mother were pretty much the only two girls in Pancake's life, and Hen didn't like the intrusion of a new girl into her relationship with her brother. It would throw off the whole dynamic.

"This is Puppy." Pancake declared, staring awestruck at the girl beside him, as if she were a beauty of great renown.

"Yup." Puppy declared, bobbing her head as if only a few slim marionette strings were attached it to her body instead of a series of vertebrae.

Hen huffed. "Puppy? What kind of name is that?"

## *Pancake & Hen*

“It’s a pet name. Mother and Father use them for each other, so I have one for her.”

Hen rolled her eyes. “Pancake, a pet name doesn’t mean you call her an animal. It means something sweet, like honey, cookie, or pumpkin. Everyone knows that.”

“Why is it okay to call me food, but not an animal?” Puppy asked confusedly, worry creeping into her eyes.

Pancake looked at Puppy and shrugged. “Beats me. I don’t know who makes these rules up.” He looked at his sister pointedly then and asked, “Do you know? I’d like to have a word with them about these strange rules they’ve made up.”

“I don’t know who makes that stuff up, but I just know that you don’t call her Puppy because you want to be cute. You’re too young to call someone a pet name anyhow.” Hen knew she was right on this, because she hadn’t even begun to date yet, and she certainly wasn’t going to let her younger brother start making kissy-face with this foolish girl.

“You’re not that much older than me, and you get to be called ‘Hen.’” Pancake protested.

“That’s a *nickname*, not a pet name, silly. There’s a difference. Why did you choose puppy anyway? You’re Pancake, shouldn’t she be ‘Syrup,’ ‘Blueberry,’ or something like that?”

Puppy looked lost once more. She looked at Hen as if she’d just spoken in a foreign language, like adults did sometimes when they spoke of business and

## *Pancake & Hen*

important things. “Why would I be called one of those?”

“Because pancakes and syrup go together, and so do pancakes and blueberries. Who ever heard of pancakes and puppies going together?”

“Puppies *love* pancakes!” Pancake exclaimed, springing up from his seat on the porch, which consequently sent Puppy’s rubbery neck to flopping. It took several seconds before it had stopped wobbling.

“What?” Hen asked, her question nearly lost in Pancake’s exuberant launch from sitting position.

“Every time I go to Martin’s house his mother feeds the extra pancakes to the dogs and the grey jays. And his grandma gets some, too, because she only has three teeth. They’re about the only food she can chew now.” Pancake explained, smiling as he mentally replayed the imagery of that trio of yellowed teeth happily cutting through the buttermilk flapjacks like they were meant for it.

“Alright. Call her what you will, but it seems pretty ridiculous to call someone ‘Puppy’ when she doesn’t even have a tail or floppy ears.”

“You don’t have a beak, except for that pointy nose.” Puppy observed, studying Hen’s face.

Hen’s eyes widened in surprise and horror. Never had anyone called her nose a beak before, and it was surprisingly terrible to hear a protrusion on her face compared to anything on a chicken’s face. Other than fluffy, yellow chicks, chickens were ugly creatures.

“Hey! You can’t say that.”

## *Pancake & Hen*

Puppy continued her observations, saying, “Your feet are kinda scrawny and wrinkly, also.” He made claws with both of his hands and shook them at her. “I guess I can see why you’re named Hen.”

“You’re both impossible. I can’t live like this. I need to go talk to Mother. Maybe she can talk some sense into you both.”

Pancake grimaced as his sister ran past him and into the house. He didn’t know if his fledgling friendship would survive a grilling from Mother. She tended to be selective about who he could play with, and he didn’t really know Puppy well enough to explain her situation to her. Puppy was, after all, a new girl at the schoolhouse, and her family didn’t really know anyone yet. No one could really vouch for Puppy’s character, but Pancake suspected that the girl was harmless, a kindred soul even, of the sort that liked to search for polliwogs and bugs.

They had met at recess. He had seen her catching centipedes near the swing, and the other girls had not liked her. They’d all been wearing pretty dresses with ribbons in their hair, and they certainly didn’t want creepy-crawlies being thrust at them by Puppy. Pancake, on the other hand, *did* want creepy-crawlies thrust at him, so he had instantly befriended her. In the passing of a critter from her hand to his, they’d affirmed their bond, and sealed it with a frog he traded to her in return. That frog was likely still in one of the pockets she had in her overalls, but it might have been squished since recess.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Mother came out shortly after, trailed by Hen. As usual, Mother had her tired, happy face on, and her eyes brightened upon seeing Puppy sitting quietly beside Pancake. Normally, Pancake was given to fidgeting and fiddling, and could hardly sit still unless he had some sort of creature in his hands or some sort of confection smacking loudly between his lips. At that moment, he was neither fidgeting nor fiddling; he was simply sitting and waiting.

“Hello, Puppy is it?” She inquired, offering the new girl a warm smile.

Puppy nodded vigorously. “Yup.”

“See, Mother? They’re two strange peas in a pod.”

Mother laughed softly. “Would you like to stay for dinner, Puppy?”

“Yup.” Puppy’s head bobbed again.

Hen’s intake of breath formed an audible gasp, and only Mother’s calming hand on her shoulder stilled a potential outburst. “Make sure you wash your hands then, all three of you. Father will take you home in the wagon after dinner, Puppy. Is that okay?”

“I think so. If I stay the night, my parents might get worried.”

Mother grinned at that. “Yes, they just might. We’ll make sure you get home responsibly. Do they even know you’re here though?”

“Yeah, I told my older brother that I was going to run over to Pancake’s house to play.”

“What did they say?”

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Umm... I think he misunderstood me. My brother asked me to bring him some, too. He doesn't know Pancake yet.”

“Well, we'll get you home right as soon after you eat. Your mother and I will have to have a chat, and next time make sure you let them know where you'll be so they don't worry.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Mother turned then and ushered Hen back into the house. Pancake and Puppy could hear Mother say something like, “She seems nice enough.” It was hard to tell exactly what Hen said in return, but Pancake didn't care.

“Looks like you won.” Pancake declared. “Hen has been vanquished for now, and she hates losing an argument.”

Puppy grinned lazily and mussed her hair up a bit. “Well, I hope she likes me. I don't have many friends here.”

“You have one, though.”

“Yup.”

After that, there were a few minutes of silence, punctuated only by the trading of sweets from their pockets. It didn't matter that the sugary tidbits had bits of lint attached to them or if the hands that offered them weren't anywhere approaching clean. They tasted just fine anyway.

When the candy was gone, Pancake stood up and rocked on his heels like he had seen Grandpa do once or twice. It made him feel older. “Want to go wash up

## *Pancake & Hen*

for dinner? Then I can show you my beetle collection. You want to see it, right?”

“Yup.” And she did, too.

She found beetles to be fascinating, especially the ones with antlers and horns, and Pancake happened to have one of those. He'd said so at school. She grinned. This was going to turn out well. A better friend she couldn't have met.

*Pancake & Hen*

**Brown Bread and Wool**  
*Real Boys Have Chest Hair*

## *Pancake & Hen*

"My dad says, 'Real men have chest hair.'" Martin declared.

"Why?" Pancake asked.

"Well, it's what makes them men, like how dogs have tails and floppy ears."

"Oh."

Pancake lifted his shirt and looked for any signs of hair. Martin did the same, squinting at his skin for hints of anything more than the slightest indication of fuzz that typically coats a body. There was not much to be seen, but not for lack of looking.

As it was, Hen just happened upon them at this point. Hen was pretty used to her brother's exasperating antics, having had years of practice in seeing him do the odd and unbelievable, but this was bizarre even for him.

"Whatever are you doing?" Hen asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Looking for chest hair." Pancake declared.

"You don't have any." Hen replied, hoping to cut off the search right then. She knew that Father and Grandpa had some, but Pancake certainly didn't. She saw him when they went swimming together, and he was no furrrier than she was.

"Here's one!" Martin announced proudly, placing his thumbnail next to the suspect along his ribcage.

Hen and Pancake gathered around and looked closer. Sure enough, there was a single brownish hair

## *Pancake & Hen*

protruding on Martin's left side from the center of mole the size of a speck of dirt.

"Wow! I want one." Pancake's envious eyes were unable to leave the glorious hair, the badge of Martin's masculinity.

Martin beamed. "You'll just have to wait until you grow up, I guess."

Hen stepped back and looked again at Martin, seeing him in a new light. "I wonder when you'll start getting a beard."

"Probably tomorrow." Martin answered, rubbing his cheeks as if they were already feeling a bit rough.

Hen wasn't so certain. "I don't know. That seems pretty young. You're only eight, right?"

"I'm nine now. I just had a birthday."

"Maybe when I'm nine I'll have some chest hair." Pancake said wistfully, already dreaming of the mane he would have, something like a rug that stretched from collarbones to his belly button.

"My uncle always said that eating brown bread crusts help you get hairy, and he's like a bear. I know, cause I've seen his shoulders when he chops wood in the back yard with no shirt on."

"He must be a baker or something." Hen surmised, considering Martin's theory. She wasn't sure if the bread thing was true, but it might be. Father had some hair on his chest – she'd seen it sometimes when he wore an old shirt with a loose neck – and he ate brown bread. It could be true, but Mother ate brown bread too, and her chest wasn't furry at all.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“He is a baker!” Martin exclaimed, as if he’d finally made the connection between his uncle’s hairiness and profession. The secrets of the universe were being revealed, their code finally decipherable.

“Well, I’ll have to eat some brown bread tonight.” Pancake decided.

“I’m not going to.” Hen said, mortified of looking anything at all like a bear just because she liked bread crusts. They were the tastiest part of the bread, but if they made her look like one of the family’s goats, she wasn’t going to eat them anymore.

Martin shrugged. “You don’t need fur on you. You’re already pretty.” He smiled at her, using his winsome charms as best as he knew how, which was not very well.

Hen frowned, unused to such attention, and Pancake frowned as well. Martin had often had his eyes on her, but he’d never been so forward before. She found herself blushing, and, unable to deal with the unexpected flirtation, she punched him in the shoulder suddenly. Martin yelped as Hen retreated, running out behind the house, hoping the boys would not follow.

Pancake stared at his friend. “Why did you say that?”

“I want her to play with us more. It’s boring just the two of us sometimes, and three people can play more games.”

“It is kind of tiring to battle with swords all alone. Two people just aren’t enough for huge battles.”

## *Pancake & Hen*

Martin nodded. “Yeah, if she’s here, we have a princess to fight for.”

Pancake nodded, though his ideas were a bit different: “Or a troll to defeat.”

“Exactly.” Martin agreed, imagining quite clearly what Pancake saw in his mind. Besides, a troll was just as fun as a princess, and probably more.

“I just had an idea.” Pancake said.

Pancake’s mind had been stuck on the rug of fur across his torso, and he’d thought of sheep being sheared. Surely the animals had a bit of hair to spare. He quickly explained his idea to Martin, and Martin agreed to help him out. After all, if one hair was nice, a whole swath of it across his chest was surely better. So, they set about borrowing this chest hair from a nearby herder, and then both went back home.

By dinnertime, Pancake had a whole plume of whitish-grey wool poking out of his shirt, at the back, around his neck, and even by his armpits. He’d stuffed his whole shirt so full of wool that he looked twice his normal size. It was an itchy mess, and he spent more time digging at his neck and scratching through his shirt than he did trying to down his mashed potatoes and corn.

Mother and Father could only stare in confusion and wonder. Father, upon recovering from the shock of seeing his son so attired, sent him to his room, only to countermand his own order by sending Pancake to the bathtub instead. Once doused in soapy water, the glue Pancake had used to attach his fur to his chest, shoulders, and arms began to

## *Pancake & Hen*

dissolve. That which didn't come off easily, Father helped to scrub off, but he did so gently. As he worked, his brow furrowed and unfurrowed, and his mouth worked below his mustache as if he wanted to say something but couldn't.

Finally, after he'd scrubbed the last of the wool free, and it was floating freely in the bath water around his son, he spoke. "What exactly were you trying to do?"

"I wanted to be a man. Real men have chest hair, right?" This was to be the first in a series of Pancake's questions and his father's rocket replies. They seldom talked at length, and when they did, it was like this, with son asking many things and Father responding as best he could.

"Well, most of them do, but that doesn't really matter."

"It looks nice."

"Perhaps, but you don't need any, not at eight years old."

"When will I get some?"

"Maybe in ten more years."

"Why do I have to wait?"

"That's how it works. You'll get it when you grow up."

"How about if I eat lots of brown bread? I'll get some then, right?"

"No, you can't have any until you're an adult, regardless of what you eat."

"What if I drink more milk, like lots, so I grow faster?"

## *Pancake & Hen*

“You might get chubby if you drink a lot of milk, but you won’t get chest hair...”

On and on it went, as if it were a game of twenty questions with no point, no riddle to solve or answer to find. Eventually, Pancake relented, content to wait a decade for his chest hair to arrive naturally, delivered by the chest hair fairy his mind had concocted. Surely, something as mystical as chest hair had to arrive by means of a fairy.

There could be no other way.

*Pancake & Hen*

*Pancake & Hen*

**The Mud Hole Trap**  
*Bullfrogs and Baths*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Father looked up from his coffee and reading at the kitchen table when he heard the front door swing shut, expecting to hear Mother's humming as she returned from the market. Instead, timid little footsteps slowly approached the kitchen, hesitated before entering Mother's warm domain, and finally ended when Pancake appeared between the uprights of the doorframe. Father blinked in outright amazement, ceased drinking his coffee in mid-sip, and eyed his boy with dismay.

Covered from head to toe in mud that was still dripping on the worn floors, Pancake was more muck than man. Like some terrifying monster out of tales that he often read to his son, all Father could see of Pancake were the whites of his eyes and a few pieces of light-colored hair that had somehow resisted being coated with the thick mud that caked the rest of his body.

"Whatever happened to you?" Father exclaimed. "You look like a mudpie!"

Pancake nodded solemnly and looked around expectantly. "Where's Mother?"

"She's at that market. I'm afraid she cannot help me, so you'll have to deal with me, Pancake."

"I see..."

"Do you?" Father inquired as his son quietly wiped mud away from his eyebrows, mud that was threatening to fall down into his eyelashes.

Pancake nodded again, still looking disoriented and

## *Pancake & Hen*

confused. “What should I do?”

“Why take a bath, of course. If Mother comes home with her arms full of market goods and she sees the mess you’re making on her floors, it’ll quiet assuredly ruin the good mood she usually has upon returning from shopping.”

“Oh.” Pancake replied, worriedly scanning the obvious tracks he’d left along his path of egress.

“That wouldn’t be good at all.”

“Well, don’t just stand there like a statue, let’s get you cleaned up, and you can tell me all about it while I’m helping you scrub the mud from behind your ears and between your toes.”

“Mother usually cleans me up when I’m this messy.” Pancake declared hesitantly, as if Father might not be capable of such an involved cleaning job.

Father cleared his throat nervously, wondering how much mess his wife actually put up with on account of their son. He was a busy man, and didn’t always see every effort she put into keeping their children and the house neat. “Exactly how often *are* you this messy?”

“Once or twice a month, perhaps.” Pancake admitted.

Father grimaced and chewed on the corner of his mustache, frowning as he imagined just such a thing. “We’ll have to work on that, Pancake. You’re old enough now that you need to start keeping your affairs much more tidy, but that’s a conversation for another time. Right now, we need water, copious amounts of water.”

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Yes, copious.” Pancake agreed. “What’s copious?”

“Lots, plenty... It means a lot, not too little. And, for a mess such as you, it will be no small amount of water to get you clean.”

Pancake looked satisfied with the answer, enough so that he offered his hand to Father when he left the table to take his son to the nearest washtub. As he followed his father to the tub outside, the one nearest the pump, he stepped carefully to avoid tracking mud across the rugs in the house. Mud, Pancake knew from experience, cleaned up fairly easily from wooden floors, but less so from woven fabrics.

As Pancake stood beside the wooden tub that had been fashioned from half of a large barrel, a large enough receptacle for him but not large enough for either of his parents, Father worked the hand pump steadily to fill a bucket with water; he did not fill the tub, not yet. Then, when the bucket had been mostly filled, Father rather unceremoniously dumped the contents of the bucket over his son’s head, inspiring a gasp and a widening of eyes that made him laugh.

“Blaghhh!” Pancake sputtered. He’d not been ready for the bucket, but he steeled himself before the next one came, and shook himself like a dog to fling the mud and water from himself as Father spilled the second bucket over his head.

“Careful now. You’ll get me soaked and covered with mud, too.” Father warned Pancake, who did his best not to shake so vigorously when the third bucket came.

After the third bucket, Father began filling the tub

## *Pancake & Hen*

instead of dumping any more buckets over Pancake's head, something that Pancake was pleased about. Buckets of chilly water poured over one's head are nowhere near as pleasant as being almost entirely submerged, like a river stone, in a tub of water. Father, in his adroit manner, swiftly filled the tub and then peeled the sodden clothes from his son's body. Then, he plucked Pancake off his feet and plopped him into the tub with a splash.

"Scrub yourself clean. I shall get a bar of soap and a brush to scrub you down. When we are done, Mother won't have a clue what we've done, except for the fact that you smell reasonably clean."

"Then I shan't use more than a bit of soap, so she doesn't figure it out." Pancake suggested.

"Agreed." Father said with a nod, departing to find the cleaning implements necessary to vanish any traces of Pancake's mess from both the floors in the house and from his son.

Father was a man of action. Oh, he was prone to idling about with a baked good or two and a cup of coffee to consider the matters of life at length, but when it was time to work, he set about it with a can-do attitude and a tireless sort of attack that quickly diminished a task into a rapidly fading memory.

So, he located the mop with only a little time wasted in searching out the unfamiliar domestic tool, and erased the tracks his son had left about the entryway, the kitchen, and the rest of the house. He even wiped up the front door handle, lest any small sign of

## *Pancake & Hen*

Pancake's passing remain. Within minutes, he was back at his son's side, bringing the business end of a scrub brush to bear on Pancake's grubby paws, which only caused him to squirm and wriggle like a fish on the hook.

"Why don't you try explaining to me what happened, rather than flopping about uselessly?" Father suggested.

Pancake looked puzzled. "What happened when?"

"I mean, how is it that we find you in such a distressing state of filthiness? How did you get so insufferably covered with mud and grime?"

"A frog."

"A frog?" Father repeated, easily imagining Pancake trying to catch a frog beside a pond, only to tumble in after it.

"Not just any frog, either. It was the biggest one ever." Pancake through his hands wide. "It was the size of our dinner table, with eyes the size of ham sandwiches."

Father resisted the urge to protest that such a size was unreasonable. He went with the story instead, knowing that boys, especially his, were prone to exaggeration. It was basically a fish story, and he knew fish stories very well. "That's a large frog indeed. It must have been a bullfrog."

"Why, was it half cow? That would explain its size."

"No..."

"Then why would it be a bull-frog?"

Father shrugged. "That's just what they call those large frogs that make deep throat sounds. That's what

## *Pancake & Hen*

they're called."

"Yes! That was it. It was talking to me, like you said, with throat sounds."

"It wasn't talking to *you*, Pancake. It was talking to other frogs. Frogs only talk to other frogs. It was calling a mate, or telling other frogs to stay out of its area."

"No, it was most certainly looking at me when it talked." Pancake declared adamantly.

"I sincerely doubt that. It was most likely looking in your general direction, but it wouldn't have talked to you. Frogs have nothing to say to people."

"Have you ever tried to talk to one?"

"No."

"Then how do you know that they won't talk to people?"

"It would be a waste of time for frogs to talk to people. We have different business, so there would be nothing to say. People talk to people, and frogs talk to frogs. We don't communicate together."

"Well, I tried to, and it talked back to me. We had quite a long conversation."

"How exactly did you communicate with an amphibian?"

"Am-fee-bean?" Pancake tried the unfamiliar word unsuccessfully.

"Amphibian." Father corrected. "It's like a reptile, but without scales. They like to spend time near water, but sometimes they come out, like newts and salamanders and frogs."

"Oh. Well, it was a cow frog, like you said, making

## *Pancake & Hen*

throat noises, not at all the ribbit or croak I expected. I just copied what it did, and talked to it.” Pancake demonstrated by emitting a throat rumble that sounded more like a burp than a frog, and Father’s brows furrowed.

“That’s as fair an imitation as any man could probably make, I guess. So, you did this, and what did the frog do?”

“It winked at me and stuck out its tongue, so I walked closer and did it again.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, we went back and forth a dozen times. I’d say something, and it’d repeat it, blowing out its neck like a giant piece of bubble gum. I got closer and closer. I must have only been about three feet away, when, suddenly, the ground went out from under me. It was a mud hole! When I crawled back out, he was gone, but the frog trapped me! I think he must have wanted to eat me.”

“Or he was mocking you. I think it’s a lesson never to trust a frog again or try to talk to one. They’re sly creatures.” Father said, with a twinkle in his eyes and a restrained smile twitching at his lips.

“Amphibians definitely don’t like little boys.” Pancake agreed.

“That they don’t, no more than boys like baths.”

Pancake gave a mournful sigh, suddenly realizing that he was clean. “Baths are pretty bad.”

Father shook his head and lifted Pancake into a towel, and then threw Pancake’s soiled clothes into the bath water why Pancake dried himself off. “Go

## *Pancake & Hen*

get some fresh clothes on, and then come back to help me hang these on the line to dry.”

Pancake nodded and ran back into the house, towel flapping around him as he flew through the door. He did as Father asked, and when Mother came home later with Hen in tow, humming together as they carried their bags of apples, flour, sugar, and other staples, Mother asked about the clothes drying on the line. All Father would say, though, was that it was ‘just another battle in the ongoing war of man versus amphibians.’ It was an answer to which Mother had no reply, just an amused, questioning stare. Hen, being inquisitive by nature, demanded to know what that meant, but Father would say no more, no matter how many flaky pastries or savory coffees he was offered; Pancake’s secret was safe with him.

As for Pancake, he dreamed up ways to get revenge on the bullfrog that had lured him into his muddy trap. The battle might have been lost, but the war was far from over, at least so long as nothing more interesting cropped up to steal Pancake’s attention.

*Pancake & Hen*

*Pancake & Hen*

**The Ghost in the Garden**  
*Howls and Hauntings*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Late in the fall, when the shadows were growing ever longer as they reached toward the chill season that would inexorably follow, Pancake and Hen began to hear the quaintest noises at night. The odd noises would descend upon the house around twilight, and they would end just before night had completed dropped its shroud across the land. Father and Mother never seemed to hear them, or if they did, the noises concerned them little, which puzzled both of the younger members of the family.

Hen had a theory, which was that Father and Mother were very busy, too busy, in fact, to notice small noises during the deepening hours of the day. After all, they rose early and went to bed as early as any adults Hen had ever met. Of course, Mother and Father both needed far less sleep than either she or Pancake needed, owing to the fact that they were adults, and not growing young souls, as Grandpa called them. Still, it was curious that they heard nothing of the noises, even with their longer waking hours.

Pancake also had a theory. His theory, like much about him, was far more imaginative and wild than Hen's. He had surmised that a spectre was whispering to them. This particular ghost was interested only in juvenile human and not adults. Therefore, his speech, be it whistles and moans or actual syllables, was audible only to children. Hen was

## *Pancake & Hen*

dubious about his idea, but had no proof to disprove it... yet.

“The only way we can be sure is to go out and check.” Pancake insisted, poking his head out between the curtains to peer through the window glass that his curious breaths steamed up too much to allow much visibility.

Hen clucked her tongue, frowning and crossing her arms. “What if it *is* a ghost though? Phantasms aren’t known for their friendliness and inviting natures.”

Pancake’s face scrunched up thoughtfully. “I don’t know what you just said.”

Hen sighed. She enjoyed using her vocabulary on Pancake, because he was the only person in the house who she was smarter than; though she was loathe admitting it. Unfortunately, her vernacular often left him confused, and she was forced to repeat herself in simpler terms, like so: “Ghosts aren’t always kind, Pancake.”

“Of course not. Pirates aren’t either.”

“What do pirates have to do with ghosts?”

“I don’t know. Why? Do you know something I don’t about this per-tick-you-lar one outside?”

Pancake queried, his expression shifting to a guarded look of suspicion.

“Why would I know anything?” Hen demanded, shaking her head in irritation.

“Why indeed?” Pancake asked. As he spoke, he stroked his chin like his friend Martin’s father did when he said something that everyone with earshot was supposed to ponder.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Martin's father said the word 'indeed' a lot, but never seemed to say much. He seemed to be of the school of thought that each man or boy was to figure out everything on their own, with nothing so much as a 'Why indeed?' or 'That's something to consider' from another man now and then to prod the confused person in the right intellectual direction. Martin's whole family was certainly odd.

"Talking to you is about as worthy a use of time as talking to that ghost out there." Hen replied angrily, her face coloring as Pancake said something especially infuriating. Where he learned to say these bizarre adult phrases was a mystery to her, but she sincerely wished he'd stop.

At that exact moment, as the last sounds of her utterance hung on the air in waiting of Pancake's reply, a sinister howl streaked past the window, rattling the last couple rows of cedar shakes on the roof and setting the wind chimes aflutter. Pancake's eyes widened like saucers, and he latched on to his sister's forearms like a cat about to be tossed into a pool of water might cling to its tormentor's flesh. Hen, for her part, didn't notice the death grip so much as the noise, and, though she did her best to still her racing heart, she couldn't help but quake in her boots.

When the voice had quieted, they waited for another reply. There was none.

"Do you think it really heard us?" Hen asked worriedly.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Once more, the noise rippled down past the porch, strong enough to set the swing rocking in motion this time. The moan seemed lonely more than anything, yearning for attention.

With his sister now as firmly attached to him as he was to her, Pancake suggested they do the only sensible thing left to them at this point, “Let’s go look for it.”

Spine was not something Hen was normally lacking, but she suddenly found herself lacking any courage whatsoever. She just could not imagine facing the thing that made such terrible racket. Surely it was a goblin that would drag them into its underground lair or a ghost that would render them blind for spying upon it. Only terror waited for them outside, but Pancake already had his coat and hat on. Somehow he’d separated himself from her, and he’d begun to get his boots on.

Waning spirit or not, she would not let her younger brother face the danger alone, so when he looked at her expectantly, she moved to get ready for the outdoors, sluggishly at first, but then faster. As she armored up with layers of cotton and wool, she found herself warm, and less afraid of the unknown. A goblin might very well snag her off the porch and carry her to a cave to eat, but at least she’d be warm. There was a lot to be said for warmth.

With a cheery sort of vigor and an intrepid look upon his face, Pancake swung the front door open and went out on to the porch. Hen reluctantly stepped on his shadow, following right behind him.

## *Pancake & Hen*

No sooner had the door swung shut behind them than were they assaulted by a rush of air that nearly lifted Hen's hat from her head and actually *did* lift Pancake's hat off his head. Pancake did a strange dance, reaching for his hat as it floated eerily through the air, seemingly on a ghost's fingers; he bobbed it when it fell back into his hand. Hen's mouth was a large 'O' even after he'd placed the hat back on his head.

"This wind is pretty strong." Pancake remarked, tugging his hat down a bit further for extra measure, nearly covering his eyes.

Hen felt her face reddening again. Here she was thinking it was a ghost, and Pancake believed it to be nothing more than wind. Usually she was the sensible one, the one that was grounded in reality, but these noises had her so unnerved that she was jumping to illogical conclusions. "The wind, yes. It's very strong." She agreed hurriedly, if only to look less frightened in comparison to her brother's bravery.

Pancake lifted a hand to his ear and listened. Then he stepped forward toward the edge of the porch and pointed. "This way, I think."

Hen used the stairs and then trotted along beside her brother after he leaped down off the porch and onto the leaf-covered ground, descending with an adventurous whoop of glee. She followed Pancake across the blanket of dead leaves. Try as they might, the winds and weather could not peel all the wet leaves off the ground. They'd been packed down for

## *Pancake & Hen*

good, left to decompose and vanish in the spring, a phenomenon that always amazed Pancake.

They worked their way to the barn, where the noises seemed to be coming from. Indeed, even as they progressed toward the building, the sounds grew in volume. It was odd for Hen to find such a building frightening, because she'd spent uncountable hours in the barn, digging around with nails for grubs and bugs of amazing varieties that called the packed dirt and cobwebbed corners their home. Now, in the near dark, those mundane architectural details in the building had taken on an unwelcoming tone, and the aged wood that had always given the shack so much character in days past now seemed to add a rickety, dangerous quality to the structure.

"I don't think we should go in, Pancake." Hen said quietly, lest they be overheard once more as they stood before the tarpaper doors.

"Nonsense." Pancake declared, throwing the doors wide open, or as wide as his short arms allowed him without taking several steps.

A gust of wind blew past them when the doors opened, flinging them wide apart and nearly dropping Pancake to one knee. He braced himself on the doorframe in the face of such a strong blast of air. Hen shrieked and covered her ears with her mittened hands. Her brother's questioning gaze made her drop her hands to her sides and clear her throat as nonchalantly as possible.

"Come on then!" He said, reaching over and taking one of her hands.

## *Pancake & Hen*

With a tug, she was in the dark, musty building, and the darkness swallowed them up like a great whale, at least until her eyes adjusted to the dark and the sudden quiet. Out of the direct path of the wind, it was surprisingly calm in the barn, enough so that she could listen to the creaking of the old building and the rustling of bats in the rafters.

As they stood, mouths agape and eyes wide, a resonance filled their ears. It was near, rather than far, and high, rather than low. They both knew a moment's terror, but it was Hen who realized first what it was that they'd been hearing. It was Pancake's turn to stand frozen in fear as his sister dealt with the demons in the dark. She shook his hand free of hers and ran off into the shadows.

He heard nothing more than her footfalls upon wood, and she was gone, only to return into sight a moment later as she lashed the window shut along the roof, and then disappear once more. Seconds later, she was once more at his side with an odd metal contraption. They took it out into the light, and determined it to be a watering can.

When they held this watering can up into the wind, it made a whistling noise that changed as they changed the direction it was pointed into the wind. Both laughed as they realized they'd been spooked by a rusty old watering can and wind, nothing more.

“So much for a ghost.” Hen said with a relieved sigh.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“I’m a bit disappointed.” Pancake said, eyeing the can with as much disapproval as he might have had if it’d stolen the last cupcake rather than sharing.

“That there isn’t a ghost?”

“No, that there wasn’t a creature living in our barn. I thought for certain you’d gone off to save me from some creature, and all you did was close a window and fetch a can.”

“Why would you want me to have to fight a creature?”

“It’s more fun.”

“Maybe for you, but I’d be the one battling some beast with big fangs and nasty claws.”

“What about all the glory you’d get if you won?”

Hen snorted and thrust the can at her brother. “Do what you will with such glories, Pancake. I may not have saved you from a creature, but I have solved the mystery. That alone will bring be glory.”

“Not if I tell Mother and Father first!” Pancake howled, sprinting for the back door of the house.

Hen started after him, but stopped. She knew Father would be angry if they left the barn door open. Racing her brother was no excuse for being lax about her duties, so she walked back to the barn door, and reached out to shut it. As she reached for it, another sound rose up behind her like a wave threatening to engulf her.

Hen whirled around, but could see nothing at first. Then, as she looked closer in the woods on the far side of the house, she saw a coyote. It was small, smaller than most dogs she’d seen, but its eyes met

## *Pancake & Hen*

hers, and it lifted its muzzle once more to howl. This sound, distorted by the wind and trees, was what they'd heard the last few nights, not the watering can. After the coyote howled, it disappeared once more into the underbrush, fading from sight.

Hen laughed and quickly shot the door. Then, tightening her coat about her, she ran back to the house. This small revelation she kept to herself, rather than sharing as an elaboration to the yarn that Pancake was still spinning to Mother and Father about the beasts in the barn and the ghosts that rattled the porch, all of which they fended off with a rusty old can that was better than any knight's shield.

The coyote was her secret, and girls know best how to keep secrets; boys just exaggerate them and share them around until they have no meaning. No, this was hers and hers alone.

*Pancake & Hen*

**Blanket Thieves**  
*Bedroom Burglars*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Breakfast at home was usually a warm event, filled with savory smells, conversation, and happy eating noises spread as thickly through the air as Mother's preserves were smeared across toast and fresh buttermilk biscuits. Today was no exception. Crunchy waffles were being soaked with freshly churned butter and maple syrup collected from the trees a few acres down the road, and they were being summarily devoured alongside mixes of fresh berries topped with heavy cream.

However, today Mother and Father were engaged in the most interesting conversation that Pancake ever recalled hearing over breakfast. Certainly, breakfast had its fair share of intriguing subjects, perhaps more than supper and certainly more than lunch, but this one was the best that Pancake could remember – though at his age his memory did not stretch back all that far. The riveting topic of the day was none other than thieves.

“Every morning, my covers are gone.” Mother said with a sigh, as close as she ever came to actually complaining. “My feet are cold, and I wake up with the sniffles. I’m going to catch my death, Father!”

“I know, I know.” Father mumbled over a mouthful of waffles. It was clear to Hen that he was less concerned with Mother's plight than with his breakfast, but Pancake took it as a sign of inability to fix the problem. Besides, he was curious about the whole ‘catching my death’ thing.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Can you actually catch death?”

Mother smiled softly and shook her head. “It just means get really sick, Pancake, maybe even sick enough to die.”

“That’s awful. I’d rather catch my health.”

She smiled. “Or catch your breath?”

“Yes.” Pancake nodded. “I hate to lose that, because I can’t run very well then.”

“That’s the point.” Father grunted. “It means your lungs need more exercise to get strong.”

“You’re never out of breath then?” Hen inquired, curious about her Father’s invincibility.

Father finished chewing his mouthful of food. His mouth twitched, and with it the mustache that danced atop his lips as he swallowed thoughtfully. Then, when he was good and ready, and had washed his food down with a sip of coffee, he answered, “Well, on occasion, but not often. Every man has his limits.”

“I see.” Hen replied, frowning her brow as she wondered just how many miles Father could jog, how many fence posts he could put in the ground, and how many hours of relentless labor he was capable of before he reached his limits.

Pancake was already past that subject and on to the more entertaining one, though he kept his considerations to himself. Clearly, Mother and Father had some sort of burglar problem. Mother’s covers kept disappearing, and he knew for a fact that it took hours for Grandma to quilt a nice big blanket, so this was a particularly distressing issue for him. He

## *Pancake & Hen*

couldn't quite puzzle out how Father could be so cavalier with their bed linens when Mother was about to catch her death and they were putting so much stress on Grandma's thin, old fingers. A plan was needed, and he had just the idea he thought he needed to solve this problem, but it would have to wait until after he'd finished his berries.

That night, Pancake stole into Mother and Father's bedroom before they slept, wearing his pajamas with extra thick wool socks. Typically, he was never let in Mother and Father's room, so this was a bit of a stretch of the rules, but it was for a good cause. As it was, he had to resist the urge upon first entering the room to peruse the treasures his parents had accumulated in their years. Certainly they must have things beyond his imagining, and though he wished to lay his hands upon their treasures, he denied himself that boon. No, though he'd oft dreamt of digging through their valuable possessions, he knew he had a mission, so he remained focused on that task.

He had already set up his pillows beneath his covers so it would look like he was actually in his bed, and he'd piled his clothes on the bench beside his window, so it appeared as if he'd actually gone about his normal evening routine prior to bedding down for the night. The only thing that was different was that and he was camped out under Mother and Father's bed, rather than sleeping in his own. Beneath the bed, wrapped up in a small blanket and quiet as a mouse, he waited for Mother and Father to sleep. Like a

## *Pancake & Hen*

knight of old, he would stand vigil over their bedchambers, warding off and possibly even catching the thieves who stole so daringly from his house.

In that late hour that Mother and Father retired to their room, later than children were supposed to still be wakeful, Pancake fought a valiant battle against the sleep that tugged at his eyelids and caused him to drool upon the dust bunnies that inhabited the underbed region with him. His parents' arrival drew him back into wakefulness, and he remained watchful once more until after they'd turned down the lamps and crawled between the down comforters and mattresses that Pancake had foregone this night.

The dark, he expected to bring criminals. He fully imagined dark-cloaked men popping open the window through some craft that only the manually dexterous could accomplish or at least slip through some hidden door in the closets. Then, they would assuredly abscond with the quilts and duvets his family had guarded so long against hungry moths and wear. No mothball smell or sleeping adults would halt these crooks, but a boy raising the alarm might, and that was why he was camped out here, ignoring the comforts of his own bed that seemed to beckon from across the hall. No matter, those things were through a latched door and thus beyond his reach. He was here for the long haul, all the way until morning.

That long haul proved to be longer than he expected, because even when the moon had long been high in the sky, bathing the room in its silvery light through the framed panes of his parents'

## *Pancake & Hen*

bedroom windows, no burglars, thieves, cutpurses, or pickpockets materialized. Eventually, even the most determined and well-intentioned boy cannot fight off the advances of weariness that march upon him.

When dawn peaked through that same window that had hours before permitted only moonlight, Pancake woke with a start, fearful that he'd missed the ne'er-do-wells he'd waited for. He scurried out from under the bed and jumped up, his dust bunny inhabited blanket swirling about him like a cape. Mother blinked at him in surprise and sat up.

"What are you doing in here, Pancake? It's very early." Mother said sleepily, more worried than angry.

Pancake did not answer immediately. He was too busy looking at Mother's bare feet sticking out toward him, ten toes blatantly declaring the presence of a thief the night before. Mother noticed his attention on her extremities and frowned. She shook her head and elbowed Father in the spine. He grunted, but he was entirely wrapped up in the family's prized quilts. Like a fancy dessert, he'd become ensconced in the middle of a frilly, tasseled mass of blankets that looked terribly warm. Meanwhile, Mother's feet were a purplish shade of blue and her breath was almost steaming in the cool room.

"We've caught the thief!" Pancake bellowed.

Father raised his head, his hair mussed from sleep. He turned one blurry eye upon his son and grunted. "What's wrong?"

"You're the thief! You stole Mother's blankets."

## *Pancake & Hen*

Pancake accused.

Father just stared at his son for several seconds, as if he'd said something incomprehensible. Then, he looked at Mother, who sat with her arms folded across her chest, and frowned. "Ahem. So I have."

Father unrolled himself from the quilt, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. Mother tucked a shoulder in, taking one corner and rolling over until she'd fully covered herself, and Father's feet were uncovered. He did not complain, but, rather, he hugged Mother and stayed close to conserve warmth.

"Thank you, Pancake. Your duty is done." Mother whispered to Pancake as Father's light snoring began once more in earnest.

Pancake nodded, and let himself out of the room. He'd solved the crime, and so he marched back to his room and finished his morning in the comfort of his own bed, accompanied by enough dust bunnies to populate the dark spaces under half the furniture in the house. He'd earned his sleep.

*Pancake & Hen*

**Grandma**  
*The Great Weaver*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Only on rare occasions would Pancake and Hen spend the day with their grandparents. Typically, the pair would spend all day at school learning their lessons or at home playing around the house or helping out. However, when it was necessary for both Mother and Father to be out of the house, they preferred not to leave Pancake and Hen alone if they could not all go together to wherever they happened to be going, so they'd take them to their grandparents' house. Rather than these rare occasions being a disappointment to the two youngsters, they were actually something of a reward, a reason to be excited. You see, they quite liked their grandparents' house, and it was a treat to visit.

Early in the morning, with fog still hanging in the air and dew shimmering white upon the grasses like the glaze on Mother's homemade donuts, they arrived at their grandparents' houses. Father mumbled something quick about them behaving and gave them both a stern look to show that he was serious about this matter, while Mother gave each child a brief hug and a pat on the back before sending them toward the doorway. As quick as that, they were gone, leaving Pancake and Hen to shuffle up the gravel walkway to the door.

They did not race for the door as one might expect. That wasn't fitting at all. Grandma and Grandpa's house was a place of wonder, so it could only be approached with trepidation, never boldness. Their

## *Pancake & Hen*

quiet steps upon the crushed gravel were quickly dispersed into the morning, lost amongst the cawing of blackbirds squawking at each other amongst trees and cows mooing in nearby fields.

The house they approached was not overly large, but with the shadowy eaves that lined the peaked roof, it looked much larger than it actually was. Then, there were the bushes that hedged in the entry and the crab apple trees that lined the crushed limestone trail that wound its way to the reclusive doors that were hidden along the side of the home. The stones crunched underfoot as the pair progressed closer to the doors, though Pancake's neck seemed to swivel as if detached from his spinal column while he surveyed the lay of the land. Temptations of trees that begged to be climbed and dark holes under shrubs that pleaded to be explored for evidence of rabbits or woodchucks seemed to slow his walking, but Hen's firm grip upon his right hand allowed them to reach the doors in a timely fashion.

A brass bell hung to the side of the door, so Hen rang it, creating only two short peals of sound before releasing the ringing cord, lest she irritate her elders by creating an 'unholy lot of racket,' as she had once done by ringing the bell several dozen times to herald her arrival. That was a mistake she'd only made once, after reassuring her grandparents that she was not, indeed, a train that needed to trumpet her nearing for the entire neighborhood.

Within seconds of the bell's song dissipating from their ears, a blurry figure appeared on the other side

## *Pancake & Hen*

of the frosted glass that was leaded into the doorframe. The door swung open, and a waft of warm air brushed past them like steam escaping a shower on a winter morn. With the breath of air came scents of lilac, vanilla, sandalwood, and various floral scents, along with other indistinguishable odors of the sorts that Grandma liked. Her home was a veritable cornucopia of scents and flavors.

Grandmother's hair was carefully coifed, and her clothing was meticulously arranged. There was not a hair on her head that was out of place, nor was a wrinkle present in the fabrics of her clothes that didn't seem to have a purpose. Her eyes crinkled up around the corners and her face split into an infectious grin.

Pancake leapt past Hen, nearly elbowing her off the stoop as he tackled Grandma. Old she might be, but sturdy enough was she to avoid being bowled over by the force of a young man throwing himself at her.

Hen was a bit more reluctant in her affections, if only because she saw a bit of Mother in Grandma's face; it always made her feel a bit awkward when she looked closely at Grandma, if only because she thought she was cheating time by peering into what lie ahead for Mother. Still, Grandma was the second-most beloved woman in her life, and even a timid thought such as that would not keep her away from an embrace.

As she hugged Grandma, Hen looked past her into the foyer, which was a tidy room with a bit of a cabin feel to it. A plush rug made of soft loops of yarn

## *Pancake & Hen*

stretched across half the floor, wicker furniture topped with doilies graced the room, and there were also a few colorful wall hangings that absolutely crawled with vibrant colors. Hen knew that Grandma's nimble fingers had crafted everything in the room except the walls. Those fingers now had thick knuckles, the kind made from a lifetime of use. With reeds and wicker or with thread and needles, there was little that Grandma could not make.

On more than one occasion, Hen had watched Grandma for hours on end as she worked the shuttle across the weft and warp of her loom, creating pictures from thousands of strands of thread. It had become so second nature to her that she could even carry on conversations and sip tea while she worked. Stories she had aplenty, and she shared them generously whenever she worked.

"Come in, come in." Grandma bid them, detaching the two children from her shoulders and waist.

"Is Grandpa here?" Pancake asked. Grandpa was quiet but very adventurous, like a deep pool that was still on the surface but lively with activity in its depths – very well suited to Pancake's personality.

"He is out in the garden, surveying his efforts thus far this season. He will be in later. You know how he is. He might stand like a statue, looking upon all he's done for an hour as he decides what must be done next. It is as though he thinks he can change the weather and make things get to growing faster merely by standing and staring."

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Maybe he can.” Pancake whispered. He had his own theories about Grandpa’s magic, a force no less potent than Grandma’s skills with her fingers and a collection of threads. But, if Grandma was gifted with a spider’s talents, Grandpa was like the land and the clouds themselves, and therefore suited to tasks in the outdoors.

Grandma’s eyes shone with humor at Pancake’s suggestion. “There is coffeecake waiting.” She declared, wishing to close the door finally.

“I don’t drink coffee.” Pancake replied, making a sour face. The bitter, murky beverage of Father’s choice did not fit his palate, not at all.

“I’ll have a little.” Hen answered, trying to be a bit more grown-up and gracious than her ill-mannered, younger brother.

“Very well. To the kitchen!” Grandma proclaimed boisterously, setting her grandchildren to scurrying as she closed the door.

The kitchen, much like the rest of the house, showed evidence of Grandma’s handiwork, but also Grandpa’s. Strands of dried vines ran along the ceiling, creating a structure prone to being decorated. Harvest colored gourds, dried berries, and birds’ nests had found their way into the décor, and more weavings hung across the wall and were draped across the chairs and table, but these things were not the sort of things that interested hungry young children.

Sitting atop the table was a silver platter, with several white ceramic pots the size of Pancake’s fists

## *Pancake & Hen*

resting beside it. The platter was the current home to a loaf of steaming, savory bread with berry jam and icing laced across its crown. The pots were filled with various condiments and flavorings for either food or drink. Two large glasses of milk sat on either side of the table, though Grandma quickly put a few swigs of coffee in a teacup next to Hen's milk.

Woven napkins were quickly tucked into shirt collars as the youngsters attacked the bread. In minutes, the bread was half gone, missing a large chunk from its side, like part of a volcano's walls might collapse after a particularly powerful eruption. Pancake eyed the bread and picked at its toppings a bit more, but was mostly done, despite the demanding of his tongue for another piece. Hen was likewise full, but she was not playing with her food.

Grandma set right to clearing up the dishes after the two visitors had stuffed themselves completely. Hen made a showing of trying to assist Grandma, but Pancake was busy exploring the contents of the cupboards and digging through drawers in a manner that would have embarrassed Mother.

To spare Grandma any further grief, Hen finally suggested, "Can Pancake and I look around the house?"

Grandma nodded. "Just don't disturb my weaving or make any terrible messes. Otherwise you two may have free run of the house."

Pancake whooped excitedly and darted out the kitchen, vanishing past the doorway into the rooms beyond without waiting for so much as another

## *Pancake & Hen*

syllable or his sister. Hen hollered after him and took off, trying to find him.

It was not an easy thing to do, even in a modestly sized house. Pancake was small and fast, and the house was filled with the possessions that can be made and accumulated only in a full life. Hen imagined that in many years, her parents' house would be similarly full, and grandchildren twice as rambunctious as Pancake would be tearing through Father's collection of fishing lures and dumping out Mother's careful stacks of recipe cards – not that she needed them any longer, as those things had long ago been committed to memory.

Hen ascended the narrow staircase to the second floor, following the noises her brother left in his wake. The stairs were steep, so she held on carefully to the handrail as she went. While Pancake was assuredly ahead digging in some closet, looking for some disused toys that were in the house for the sole purpose of entertaining grandchildren, Hen was more interested in Grandma's work. Every wall seemed to have one hanging or another, and each flat surface had a doily or a piece of crochet work upon it, each one custom sewn and fitted to the size and shape of the area. Then, here and there were secret caches of yarn, thread, and needles of all shapes and sizes. There were also baskets full of frames upon which needlepoint projects could be stretched, much like painters' frames.

She wandered into one room after another, admiring the handiwork. Here, there was an autumn

## *Pancake & Hen*

scene with oranges, reds, and rich browns. Apples were being collected in giant crates by an old man on a ladder, presumably Grandpa. Then, there was a scene with large pumpkins growing ripe and round in a field suffused with green leaves that were so real she could almost feel the hair on the leaves when she touched the hanging. Another scene in the hallway was of children playing at a water hole beside a large tree, not unlike the one that she and Pancake often went swimming in. Evocative scents, sights, and sounds seemed to be infused into the careful illustrations, so lifelike were they, and there were dozens of these all over the house, each one a glimpse at life in the area, a memory stolen from time. Yet, the greatest one of all was unfinished.

“I see you found my work room.” Grandma announced, appearing suddenly beside Hen, who stood at the doorway of the room that the giant loom dominated, unwilling to enter but curious enough to peer in.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to peek.” Hen blurted out, feeling her cheeks burn.

“It’s alright, dear.” Grandma said, patting Hen on the shoulder. She moved past her to take a seat at the stool before the giant loom. “Besides, you didn’t touch anything, and eyes never hurt any weaving I’ve ever done, quite the contrary, really.”

Hen nodded and took a step further into the room, just a scant few inches beyond the threshold. Her eyes took in the room. She’d only been in here once or twice. Usually, when she watched Grandma, she

## *Pancake & Hen*

was sitting on a chair somewhere on the main floor or outside, enjoying the sunset as she worked on a small piece of craft. This, though, was a massive undertaking. It was the size of a bed, and it was not quilted, but woven entirely. Floor to ceiling shelves on one side of the room were filled with baskets, each jam-packed with spindles of colored thread, hundreds of them all told, representing every color of the rainbow and every color Hen ever recalled seeing in her short life.

As amazing as this collection was, as beautiful as these colored strands were, like a cloud of fairies had descended and laid pieces of their own hair here for Grandma to weave with, the threads paled in comparison to what Grandma was making. The materials were majestic on their own, but they were being utilized to their utmost potential in this new creation that Grandma had halfway finished. She'd begun to make an image of her house, along with Grandpa working the fields behind it, Father drinking a coffee on a bench outside with Mother sitting beside him, Grandma visible in an upper window weaving away at her loom, and, finally, Pancake was hanging upside-down from one of the crab apple trees out along the walkway at the side of the house. Only Hen was missing, and it both puzzled her and hurt her to see that she'd been excluded from such a wonder.

“Ah, I see you don't see yourself on here.”

Hen bit her lip and nodded.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Don’t worry. I plan on working you in.” Grandma reassured her.

Hen sighed audibly, relieved that she wasn’t being left out. She’d had all sorts of terrible thoughts racing through her head, of being adopted, of being unloved, and other horrifying eventualities that would exclude her from the picture.

“I knew you were coming, and I was stuck on where exactly to put you. I haven’t decided just where as of yet. So, I thought I’d have you help me put you into the weaving.”

Hen’s eyes widened incredulously. “Really?”

Grandma smiled. “Of course. I know you’re always tagging along with Pancake, and it would have been easy to have you waving your hands at him from below the tree he’s in here,” she indicated the fittingly silly pose Pancake was in, “but I thought you might want to stand alone for once. As close as you two are, you needn’t always be about his business. You will find your own place in the world soon enough, and, though you needn’t rush, you should at least start thinking about such things.”

“I could be next to you in the window.” Hen suggested.

Grandma’s expression brightened. “I’m flattered. That would be very nice, but remember what I said about standing alone. You may put yourself anywhere you want on here. I can rework it very quickly. So, choose anywhere you want. Where would make *you* most happy?”

## *Pancake & Hen*

Hen folded her arms across her chest and moved to Grandma's side. She surveyed the whole image carefully, and, after due consideration, she raised her hand to point at a spot on the weaving. "I like this place."

"Oh, that is a very nice place." Grandma agreed, looking at the small pond on the far side of the house with lily pads and a pair of swans upon its surface. "We will work you in there, and you will help me."

"Me? I don't know how to do this."

"Oh, but you will!" Grandma grinned. "Now, go fetch me some colored threads you like. We will make your dress out of them, and perhaps a bonnet."

Normally, Hen would have protested the bonnet part, but she was so excited by the chance of helping Grandma that she did not utter a single syllable of disagreement. Instead, she raced to the far wall and began digging through the bobbins and spools for colors she liked, going about it in a fashion not unlike how Pancake was digging through closets in the adjacent rooms. When she'd found a few she liked, she took them back to Grandma, who began to show her how the weaving was done.

When Mother and Father returned that evening to pick them up, Hen's fingers ached. She was not used to doing such small, delicate work for so long. Her image had been worked into the weaving, though a few minor details remained to be finished. Hen had painfully extracted a promise from Grandma, who had agreed at length not to finish Hen's spot in the weaving until Hen could return to help do it herself.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Instead, Grandma would work on the treetops and skies, finishing that part first.

As for Pancake, he'd tired of toys and his sister's busyness, and he'd spent the day getting dirt under his fingernails with Grandpa. He'd slain weeds and helped to sew seeds, and Grandpa had not even bothered to straighten his rows, though they'd been a bit out of the careful lines the rest of the gardens conformed to.

Tired and full of the sense of accomplishment, Pancake and Hen both slept the whole way home, leaving behind the candle-lit windows of their grandparents' house and the magic that took place both inside and outside of its walls.

*Pancake & Hen*

**Rooster and Hen**  
*Mismatches and Misnomers*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Hen stared, dumbfounded, at the tall boy beside Pancake. It was bad enough that Puppy was standing beside Pancake, with her head lolling to and fro as she scanned the trees for monkeys absentmindedly, but this new stranger was even worse.

The pointy-nosed boy had a stripe of spiked red hair running down the middle of his scalp from front to back. Whether intentionally greased to stand up or not, the boy's messy hair had somehow managed to stand up like a rooster's comb. Not only that, but the way he walked, with his hands clasped behind him and his knees kicking high, reminded her of the same poultry. It only made sense then that his nickname was actually Rooster, as Pancake was getting around to announcing.

"My friend here is named Rooster. Naturally, Hen, I thought you'd want to meet him."

Rooster's eyebrows rose and fell a couple times, and then he cracked a thin-lipped smile at Hen.

Hen regarded Rooster with an abhorrent expression that he seemed to read as bashfulness. She had begun to appreciate boys, if only slightly, so it was not his approach that bothered her so much as his appearance. Tall he might be, but he had dark freckles splashed across his nose, buckteeth, and that shameful mop of hair atop his head. He was foolish looking, and not at all the sort of boy she found pleasing to the eye.

Hen shook her head and grabbed her brother by the

## *Pancake & Hen*

shoulder, whispering angrily in his ear, “Wherever did you meet this boy, Pancake?”

“He was hanging around the schoolyard, picking on another classmate. He looked like a rooster to me, so when I went up to him to ask his name, I immediately thought of you when I found out that his name actually was Rooster, as I supposed.” Pancake beamed at her and then nodded encouragingly to the new boy.

Puppy smiled and waved at Rooster, who waved back quickly before straightening the necklace of shark teeth he wore, a testament to the cruelty in his nature so far as she was concerned. Frankly, he looked rather dim and quite pompous, and that didn’t even take into account Pancake’s story of him pummeling another schoolmate.

“Well, I don’t know why you bothered to bring him here.” She grumbled.

“He said you’d like a new friend.” Rooster offered as explanation.

Pancake nodded. “I have Puppy now, and I was worried you’d be lonely, so I thought you needed a buddy, too.”

“I have friends!” Hen protested. The idea that a misfit like Pancake was suddenly a social butterfly irked her. She had always been a favorite of the local girls, and she was invited to every party and social event. Pancake, on the other hand, rarely went anywhere without her, and was often placed in her care so that he could tag along whenever she went somewhere.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Puppy stuck her tongue out right then between her missing front teeth, not in a mean fashion, but just as something to do while she listened. Hen frowned at the idiotic pose, and sighed. She would have to go about this carefully, because Rooster was much taller and stronger looking than any of them, so she didn't want to hurt his feelings – for practical reasons as well as just being a nice person.

“Well, Rooster, I'm sorry to say that I have a lot of homework to do. I'm also a very boring person. I waste time staring at rocks and glancing up at the skies. I'm not the sort of girl you would like to spend time with.”

Rooster's smile never faded. Like a mask, it was frozen in place, and his breath whistled between his over-large teeth. “I like throwing rocks at things.”

“Don't we all.” Hen admitted. “Well, maybe tomorrow I'll see you at school. Pancake and I have to go home for dinner.”

“Oooh! Can I come?” Puppy inquired, blinking her large, vacant eyes several times rapidly.

Hen shook her head at Puppy's request. “I don't think so. We're having a special family meal tonight.”

“Really? What is it? It must be pot roast and steamed potatoes or maybe grilled fish!” Pancake exclaimed, already rubbing his stomach and imagining the garnishes and sauces that would accompany tonight's meal.

“I like fish.” Rooster remarked, still not wanting to be left out.

“No, I'm sorry. It's a family-only meal tonight.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Mother was very specific, but maybe next time, Rooster. For now, we'll have to part. Perhaps we'll speak tomorrow at school, though."

"I guess." Rooster mumbled, his face finally shifting from its ecstatic pose to a disappointed one.

"I guess I'll go home then, too." Puppy declared, spinning around until she had located the direction home and made herself dizzy all in one bizarre act. She hugged Pancake quickly, licked his cheek like her namesake animal might, and trotted off in a rubbery fashion, her limbs flailing alongside her.

Rooster climbed off into the brush and went on his own after Puppy left, holding his arms behind him, hands clasped across their opposing wrists. His highstepping carried him quickly off in the direction away from the way Pancake and Hen both had to go. When he had gone into the woods like some wild pheasant and was far beyond earshot, Hen rounded on Pancake angrily.

"What were you thinking? Really!"

Pancake frowned. "What's wrong?"

"You can't just thrust weird boys at me because you have a girlfriend."

"I have a girlfriend?" Pancake had the nerve to look astonished that she'd even suggest such a thing.

"Puppy?" Hen reminded him.

"She's my friend, and she's a girl, so I guess that's true. I never really thought about it like that."

"Whatever the case, I just can't have you telling weird boys with dopey hair that I need to meet them." Hen insisted.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Why?”

“Because that’s not how it’s done.”

Pancake still looked confused. “How what’s done?”

“These things... this matchmaking.”

“What’s matchmaking? Is that like fire building? Father doesn’t let me build fires without him.”

“No, it’s like coupling up young ladies and men to find a suitable partner.”

“A partner for games?”

“No. No. No. Matching them as social partners, maybe marriage. They have to be compatible. It’s important they understand each other and get along.”

Pancake scratched at his head and squinted, trying to get her point. It wasn’t going well, though.

Hen sighed. “You’re too young too understand. Please just promise me that you won’t bring any other boys home to meet me.”

“Well, I don’t understand why, but I guess it wouldn’t hurt to promise.”

Hen spit on her hand and held out her palm. It wasn’t something a young girl liked to do, but it was a currency of trust that Pancake understood well. When he took her hand after spitting on his own palm, they shook vigorously, until they were both laughing from the super strength handshake.

“Deal.” They both echoed as one, and Hen thought the matter was at an end...

The next day, Pancake had another friend with him. Happy as bees on flowers, they walked along the dusty road, Pancake in his clumsy gait, and the other boy in his waddling duck steps. He was a short,

## *Pancake & Hen*

heavysset boy with a large red bowtie on that sat around his neck like a fat wattle. In her mind, on anyone other than Grandpa, a bowtie was a ridiculous accessory, but it was no doubt a fabulous piece worthy of any haberdashery in his view.

Hen stared at the pair coming up the road, taken aback when she saw them together. Flashes of their agreement, the massive handshake, and Rooster returned to her in an instant, and she immediately bolted off toward home, leaving Pancake hollering after her futilely.

She hid from him until just before dinner that night, and then only revealed herself after she carefully deduced that he was alone. It seemed entirely possible that it was safe to talk to him then, but she couldn't be certain that there weren't any boys hiding in his closet – or hers – so she met him in the hallway.

“Pancake.” She muttered quietly, trying to get his attention without alerting any other boys that might be lurking around.

“Oh, Hen! You missed Turkey.”

“Turkey? What is this business of avian friends you're about?”

Pancake's mouth puckered and his eyes glazed over as he tried to pronounce the word. “Ay-vee-ans?”

“Birds. It means birds. Why do your friends suddenly have bird names?”

“I don't know, but they should be good matches for you.”

Hen crossed her arms and drew herself up to her full height, towering imposingly at just a few inches

## *Pancake & Hen*

over her brother. “I thought we had an agreement yesterday.”

“About boyfriends, yes. Turkey just wanted to see your rock collection. He heard from Rooster, while Rooster was pounding him during recess, that you liked rocks.”

“Oh.” Hen said, laughing suddenly. The deal still held then. “Well, bring him over sometime. I’ll show him that part of the agate I have that Father gave us, and my other stones, too.”

Pancake nodded. “I’ll tell him.”

“So, you’re sure you’re done matchmaking?”

“I’m done – one hundred percent done.”

“Excellent.” Hen offered her brother her arm.

“Good sir, let’s go eat dinner. It’s actually special tonight: sweet potato pie for dessert.”

“Excellent.” Pancake echoed, taking his sister’s arm when offered. Pie was, after all, his second favorite food, just behind pancakes and fresh syrup.

In his head, though, Pancake was pondering another boy at school, a blonde boy with fuzzy hair that everyone called Chicken. He had an inkling that he might be more to his sister’s liking, but he had promised, hadn’t he?

Well, certain rules could be bent on occasion.

*Pancake & Hen*

**The War in the Willows**  
*Return to the Great Castle*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Regardless of the season, Pancake had a certain pilgrimage into the woods that he loved to make. Today, despite the chill winds and the ankle-deep layer of powdery snow upon the ground, Pancake was going to make the trip once again, and Puppy was going to go with him.

With thick felted boots on, fur-collared coats tightly cinched against the breezes, and mittens upon their hands, the pair marched beyond the split rail fence that held Bessie, the family cow, and left the grounds that belonged to their parents. Bessie might not have cared, but the chickens clucked discouragingly as they huddled together in their coop and watched the pair retreat into the woods. They left behind that quiet little clearing on the edge of the woods and passed into the realm of the fanciful, heading toward the Castle in the Willows.

Winter might have stripped the leaves off most of the oaks and other deciduous denizens in the forest, but there were still enough evergreens left to obscure the trail into the center of the woods. Besides, the terrain was not so flat as one might think. There were still gullies, low spots that had filled with melted snow and frozen over enough to offer small skating rinks as diversions from their true goal, and hills that were lined with enough tree trunks to make them look like porcupine hides.

It took some doing, especially with Puppy's wandering gaze, but they eventually made it to the

## *Pancake & Hen*

Castle of which Pancake had often spoken. There, surrounded by several large willows with their leafless, yellow tendrils swaying in the wind like strands of hair, was the Castle. It hadn't changed much since he'd seen it last. It was as timeless a monument as Pancake knew, his Pyramids or Stonehenge.

The single story log cabin was still very long on each side, though not quite as long as it had once been – his legs were an inch or two longer now, after all. Vines still crawled all over the walls, but they'd lost their leaves, giving the building a brown, veined look, rather than curtaining the wood beneath them. The tower, a small extension of the building at one corner that looked something like a large wooden chimney, still poked its way skyward, a hunting platform for the owners of this lodge. The mosses and decaying leaves that covered the slate roof just a season ago had been buried beneath the snow, giving the whole building a snowy, white cap.

For Puppy, it was her first time visiting, and she was impressed, so much so that her head spun as she tried to take it all in. She wobbled on her feet and Pancake reached out to steady her before she tumbled onto her rump.

“It's great, isn't it?” Pancake beamed.

Puppy nodded in her floppy-necked manner. “It's everything you said, maybe more.”

“More.” Pancake agreed, taking a step closer to the door.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Puppy moved up beside him as he reached hesitantly for the steel ring. It was a ritual, to always try to open the door, but it had never worked, no matter when he came or how often he came. He gave it a pull, fully expecting it not to work, but a part of him always hoped it did, so he pulled with his eyes closed and his breath held just in case. Magically, the door budged, if just slightly.

Pancake gave out a surprised holler and stared wide-eyed at Puppy, whose partly toothless mouth twisted into an “O” as she hollered right along with Pancake, even though she didn’t know the reason for creating such a ruckus. She had heard stories, but she could never suspect the depth of Pancake’s need to see the inside of this building. The contents of this building were the things of legends with him. He’d dreamt up so many treasures and riches that might be waiting for him inside that there was scarcely room for anything else in his mind.

Carefully, as if to not jinx this chance fate had proffered, Pancake gave the door another slight tug. He’d not let go yet, just in case a mere slip of his digits would cost him this once in a lifetime opportunity. As he pulled, the door slid open a bit more, only to get caught on the detritus strewn underfoot and the snow that had bunched upon it. With a nervous grunt, Pancake kicked at the rubble caught along the bottom of the door, working to free up the door. Puppy figured out what he was doing and dropped to her knees so she could scrape at the ground with her mittens and help him free the door. Then, the door

## *Pancake & Hen*

was free. Yet, just as he swung it open to reveal the wonders within, a shrill cry pierced the afternoon air.

Pancake wheeled around to see Hen standing at the edge of the clearing, just a stone's throw yonder.

Puppy stood back up, wobbled for a moment, and then waved emphatically at Hen with both hands.

Hen ran over at full speed, loping easily past

Pancake's small footprints and Puppy's even smaller footprints like a hungry wolf following a rabbit trail.

Cheeks puffing from having run all the way here and eyes blazing with fury, Hen slid to a halt just before the door. Her gloved hands were balled into fists and her eyes screamed accusations that preceded actual ones. "How can you take her here? This is *our* place!"

Pancake jutted out his chin defiantly. "You've pointed out to me on several occasions that this is not *my* Castle."

Hen looked ready to snarl and bite off Pancake's head, but she just couldn't, not with Puppy standing there and watching, not to mention still waving because she'd not been recognized. Hen frowned at Pancake's friend, her replacement, or so it seemed. "Yes, I see you, Puppy."

"Hi, Hen. Isn't this place nice?"

"Yes, it's very nice." Hen seethed, her anger barely constrained. This goofy girl had come to the place that she and Pancake had been coming to alone for what might very well have been their entire lives. It was a betrayal of the greatest confidence she had.

"The door is open."

## *Pancake & Hen*

Hen peered at the door, and only when she noticed that Pancake was correct did her sour expression fade to one of wonder. “It is...open.”

“Should we go in?” Pancake asked her, clearly willing to assuage her feelings of exclusion by offering her a part in this historic entry.

“I don’t see why not.” Hen replied, looking around to see if anyone was watching them.

There was no one to protest this time, so Pancake pried open the door with his forearm first, and then wedged his body between the doorjamb and the door and forced his way in. Like a stuck zipper, he was caught at first and then slid freely, tumbling to land in a heap within the room. Hen gave a shout and pushed Puppy out of the way to check on her brother. Puppy followed immediately after, humming excitedly to herself as she came in beside Pancake and Hen.

“We’re in. We’re finally in after all these years.” Pancake announced, laying upon his back and looking up at the rafters that were barely visible in the dim room.

Hen hauled her brother to his feet before taking a gander for herself. When she did, she was surprised to see the place so modestly decorated. In her mind she’d always seen plush satins and gold leaf, but this was all rough-hewn timbers and hand-made furniture. Oh, it had a charm to it, no doubt, but it was not at all the robber’s hideout filled with jewels Pancake had made it out to be. There was no filigree, nor any tasteful tapestry, not even any stained glass.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Pancake, for his part, seemed unfazed by the lack of finery. As his eyes adjusted, he walked around the room, trailing his fingers across the shellacked furniture and the roughly mitered joints in the framework around the shuttered windows. He took it all in as if it were a king's forest retreat. It was not disappointing to him in the least, especially the pole ladder that ran up to a loft and another one that ran from there to a hatch in the roof.

"I need to see up there." Pancake declared, lifting his hand to point toward the hatch, around which only the slightest bit of light could be seen. Directly beneath the hatch there were a few stains on the floor, where the wood had warped and discolored as a result of rain and melting snow seeping through the gaps around the rotting edges of the hatch cover.

"I don't think it's safe to go up there." Hen said worriedly, but Pancake had already reached the ladder by then and his hands were already reaching up the rungs.

"We may never get a chance like this again." He called over his shoulder as he stepped up once and then a second time. Before she'd even thought of a reply, he was already almost to the loft, and by then it was too late.

Pancake dismounted the first ladder, climbing over the railing to the loft. He looked down at the faces of his sister and his friend from a distance of almost three times his height. "Halfway!" He cried cheerfully, mounting the next ladder.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Hen watched in a mixture of amazement and nervousness. Pancake never hesitated when a chance came his way. It was the thing she admired most about him, other than his imagination. Puppy also watched. She clapped her hands together behind her and stared upward with her head tilted back at such an angle that her throat seemed to have a hinge on the back of it.

When Pancake reached the summit of that second and last ladder, his fingers quested upward, seeking a latch. He located it and tugged at it, but it would not open without some effort, enough that it seemed he might tumble to dash his brains out upon the floor of the cabin before he managed to open the hatch. Hen's breath caught in her throat as he worked the latch and grunted from the effort of tugging on the metal apparatus, but it came loose at last. Then, Pancake took another step up on the ladder so that his head was bent and his shoulders were pressed against the hatch. With a mighty heave and a cry that was befitting such a monumental effort, the hatch lifted, sending a cloud of white powder crashing down on the two girls.

Hen screeched as the snow splashed down her neck, sending chills through her body. Her arms instinctively went up to defend her head and neck against winter's surprise attack. Puppy did the exact opposite; her arms lifted to embrace the cold, and her mouth opened to seek out the cold flakes that descended from above. When the cloud of snow had

## *Pancake & Hen*

finished falling, the two girls looked up, and to their surprise, Pancake had vanished.

Hen's eyes were wide and her heart pounded in her chest as she ran to the ladder, skidding across the snow-covered floor, and began a hurried ascent. She nearly fell twice as she climbed, finally dismounting the first ladder in such a way that she landed in a heap on the plank floor of the loft. Grunting, she picked herself up and went up the second ladder. Only when she poked her head out into the afternoon light at the top did she pause, and then only to let her eyes adjust to the brightness.

Pancake was crouched on the hunter's platform beside her, ensconced in a pile of snow as pristine as she'd ever seen. He looked so utterly content that she dared not even utter a syllable until he looked at her and spoke invitingly: "We've made it at long last."

"We have." Hen agreed. She climbed up to sit beside him.

"Are you there?" Puppy called up to them, her hands cupped around her mouth to better project her voice up toward them.

Hen leaned over and looked down at Puppy through the hole, inadvertently sending another hail of small, white, icy pebbles down at her. Puppy scrambled around madly for a moment, her arms flailing about as she tried to catch a few in her mouth. Hen knew she'd tried to catch snowflakes or raindrops on her tongue before, but she would have never thought she looked so foolish doing it. She

## *Pancake & Hen*

made a mental note to herself to never do such a thing again, at least not with anyone watching.

“We’re okay. You can come up if you want. There should be room for you.” Hen announced.

Puppy shook her head. “That’s okay. I like staying on the ground. That’s too high.”

“Puppy belongs on the ground.” Pancake agreed.

“That’s nonsense. Hens and Pancakes don’t belong up here any more than Puppies do.”

“Why not? Hens and pancakes both fly, but puppies do not, even if they have large, floppy ears.”

Hen grunted. “Why do you always make so much sense here? This is the center of your powers. Nowhere else in the world do you ever argue so well. It’s enough to make me not even want to speak around you in these woods.”

“A quiet Hen – that would be very odd.”

“Quiet yourself!” Hen replied curtly, standing up.

Pancake stood beside her and looked around. “It’s all very different from up here.”

“But even this close to the sky there is no lack of monsters.” Hen said sagely, folding her arms across her chest as she cast a disapproving glare down upon the shadows that were beginning to form around the willows.

“Aye.” Pancake nodded, imitating the way Grandpa sometimes said ‘yes’ to other old men. Then, he stooped and made a snowball. “Luckily, we have lots of ammunition.” He launched the snowball down into the trees, splashing white all over a grayish-brown trunk.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“You got one!” Hen laughed, making a snowball of her own.

Hen whipped the packed ball of ice and snow as hard as she could, determined to repeat Pancake’s feat. Only, instead of hitting a tree, she smacked a different sort of monster, the sort that talks a lot and goes to school with little brothers. This particular one was named Martin. He was another common face in these parts, and he’d visited the Castle on several occasions, though nowhere near as often as Pancake and she did, so his claim on the tower was much weaker.

Martin yelped in surprise as his hat was knocked clean off his head by her throw. His mittens clapped over his hatless and suddenly cold head, and he looked around in abject terror. Ghosts might have well have just stolen his heart clean out of his chest for all he knew. He probably would have ran had it not been for two boys with him, for there is power in numbers. One chubby boy next to Martin pointed skyward at their assailants.

Pancake and Martin knew each other well, and were usually good friends, but today was a special day. Today, Pancake had made a great discovery with his sister and Puppy, and he was feeling brave. He yelled down at Puppy to seal the front door to the cabin, which she did with an efficiency that surprised Hen. Pancake would not share his great fortune, and he shouted down as much to Martin and his band of cohorts.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Denied the pleasure of scaling the ladders to the top of the tower, Martin issued a challenge that neither Pancake nor Hen would back down from. With a battle cry, the Great Winter War for the Castle began. Missiles were launched upward and downward, casualties were claimed, and deeds of valor and cowardice filled the late afternoon, until, at long last, the guardians of the Castle in the Willows repelled the monsters for the last time...

Afterward, they descended to the realm of mere mortals and collected Puppy from where she slept on a rough bench beside an even rougher looking dining table that had been cut from a disk of a tree's trunk. Sleeping Beauty she was not, for she woke with the lightest of shakings from Pancake, and stumbled happily in his footprints all the way back to his home for dinner. It was a good ending, even for Hen, who did not begrudge Puppy the secret of the Castle in the Willows. She was good to share it with, especially since she didn't like to climb up into the tower.

There would be more trips to the Castle and more battles to be sure, especially now that they knew what waited for them inside. Of that, she was certain.

*Pancake & Hen*

**Diamonds and Gold**  
*Jewels for Fools and Great Payoffs*

## *Pancake & Hen*

**P**ancake and Hen had just arrived at the site of a recently cleared field.

The scarred ground was pitted where large stones had been laboriously hauled out from their subterranean places of slumber by teams of mules. Furrows had been scraped into the ground by hooves and the edges of rocks alike as the rocks were pulled to the sides of the field. Then, teams of men with axes and saws had sprinkled the land with twigs, leaves, and sawdust; piles of brush had been gathered in seemingly random locations across the field to be burnt.

The ground bore testament to the efforts in this area over the last week, and a bit of rain had only made the mess worse, turning the disheveled field into a mud hole and filling the empty pits the stones had been in into puddles for frogs to lurk in. However, it had also been a blessing in disguise to a rock hunter, in that it had rinsed the dirt off of many of the rocks that had been stacked in a row at the southern edge of the field, the side nearest the road where Hen was standing with Pancake.

Eventually, the rocks would either be hauled off for use in fieldstone houses or be stacked and packed with mortar to make them into a knee height fencerow along the field. For now, the pair had free pick of the piles, a great honor. They were free to take whatever they wished, so long as they could carry it.

## *Pancake & Hen*

To that end, Hen had on a hat to shield her eyes from the sun and to allow her better sight of the stones beneath her, and a pair of gloves to protect her fingers from sharp edges and critters that wound their way through the rubble. Her brother, Pancake, had a small spade and a bucket. He was the assistant in this excavation, though he believed himself to be the leader. She let him exist in his delusion and would even play along, so long as it benefited her, but she was the true leader of this mining expedition.

Rock hunting was one of Hen's favorite activities. Everyone for miles around knew she was the girl to talk to about rocks, or the girl to show a neat chunk of stone to if it was stumbled across, if it had been found whilst stubbing one's toe, or if it had just been dug out of a field. She wouldn't dare admit it to another person, but she actually just liked the colors, the shiny facets, and the sparkles on the stones she collected. No one would have come to that conclusion though, not knowing her. No, for her it must be her analytical nature, her need to put everything in its place in the world that made rocks appeal to her. Their very nature made them mysteries to be categorized.

Pancake also liked stones, though they appealed to him on an entirely different level than they did for his sister. He was looking for the 'big score.' He was convinced that if he turned over enough stones, one of them was bound to be valuable. So, every stone that looked interesting or precious to him wound up in his pockets, and they would stay there indefinitely,

## *Pancake & Hen*

nestled with dozens of others. Indeed, some of them stayed in his pockets for so long, through washes, school, and adventures, that when they came out they were practically polished smooth. The unexpected appearances of these completely forgotten treasures only served to reinforce Pancake's love of stones.

With a great deal of eagerness, the kind a person can only summon at the beginning of an endeavor, the duo attacked the pile, discarding immediately those stones with less than uncommon attributes. Then, they began making a pile of more remarkable stones to be checked over later, but, as was the unspoken rule between them, they would immediately inform the other if any exceedingly rare stones were found. As it happened, luck was with Pancake on this afternoon.

"I found one!" Pancake declared, pulling a large chunk from the pile.

Hen quickly stepped over the pile toward him, practically starting a scree slide on her way over to her brother's finding. She seized it from his hands, and, in that moment of excitement, broke it to pieces. The puzzled look on her face quickly faded to be replaced by one of anger as she realized she'd been had. She glared menacingly at Pancake and shook the mule dung from her gloves.

"I'd take this more seriously if I were you, Pancake. You could fit quite nicely in some of those pits out there, and I'd leave you there for the wolves and owls to feast upon." She hissed.

## *Pancake & Hen*

Pancake blinked. Rarely if ever did Hen speak so threateningly and morbidly. Then again, rarely if ever did she have to shake mule droppings from her hands. Hen, realizing what she'd just said, mumbled an embarrassed apology and went back to work on her part of the pile, away from little boys' cruel pranks. Luck found her next, real luck, not the sort useful for making fun of gullible siblings.

When Hen turned over a dull-looking but large rock, it released an even larger rock from its precarious perch, and sent her scrambling out of the way in order to preserve her limbs from the designs of the merciless crushing force of a rock caught in gravity's pull. She danced sideways and waited for the rocks to stop trying to mash her like a potato under Mother's kitchen utensils, and, when the slide had come to a halt, she rolled her eyes skyward to take a relieved breath. As she turned her head back to the ground and the stones upon it, a glittering stone caught her eye.

She moved in on the stone like an eagle on a fish too hovering too close to a lake's surface, and scooped it up in her talons. It glistened upon her gloved palm like dew upon a rose at first light. She was enraptured, enamored, and transfixed, all at once. It was like finding out the world was round instead of flat, only something more relevant to ten year old. She'd found it, this gold nugget the size of a walnut, and she was completely speechless.

"Wha'chyer got there?" Pancake inquired, having just noticed that his sister had stopped searching for

## *Pancake & Hen*

treasures. When she did not immediately reply, he hauled over to see what she held as fast as his shoes would allow him. Upon seeing what she held, which required him standing on a tall rock next to her, because she would not allow him to pull her hands down from their protective cupping of the stone, he proclaimed, "It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

"It's gold."

"It's certainly that color." Pancake agreed, but, never having seen gold before except in the form of a crayon, he wasn't sure.

He *was* sure that he wanted his own piece of the gold though. So, after he demanded to know where she'd gotten hers, he started digging around where she said she'd found the nugget to see if he could find another one. He didn't find that, but rather something else that was very shiny.

From the spot that she'd found the gold, he drew out a large, glassy chunk of stone. Like an icicle, it bent the light that hit it, but it was clear, crystal clear like expensive glass. Hen was so shocked by the appearance of another valuable stone that she nearly dropped her nugget of gold as her jaw actually did drop when she saw Pancake's find exceeded her own.

"You've found something... amazing." She stammered, searching for words.

Pancake held the crystalline stone up to his face and peered at her through one of its several faces, and nodded. "I have. It's a diamond, I'm sure of it."

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Diamonds and Gold. We’re rich, Pancake! Rich beyond dreams! We can buy dogs, dresses, peanuts, and...” Words failed her, but that was fine, because Pancake had some of his own ideas.

“We can buy bug cages and fishing poles!” Pancake shouted, getting into the materialistic mood also.

“We can buy rings and money and apples!”

“How about sponges and books about bugs?”

Hen frowned. These were odd items to want to buy with newly acquired wealth, but Pancake was a bit odd anyway. “Yes, I suppose you could buy those, too.”

Pancake regarded his diamond and then her gold. “How do we change this stuff into money?”

Hen shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess we could just go to a store and trade with it.”

“How? I don’t want to give someone my whole diamond for one item, and I don’t think I can crack this into many small diamonds. We should show Father. He’s always using money. He should know how to spend this stuff.”

“That’s a great idea.” Hen replied.

She tucked her gold nugget into the front pocket of her overalls, grabbed the bucket in one hand and Pancake’s hand in the other, and started running for the house. Pancake hurried along next to her, still staring at his diamond.

Father was hitching up the wagon when they arrived breathlessly at the end of their driveway. He’d heard their pounding footsteps approaching and had walked out to meet them, just in case Pancake had

## *Pancake & Hen*

brought home another stray dog or they'd went off and done something foolish or silly, as was wont to happen with two children like his. It was none of that though. He'd no more than reached the mailbox before Pancake and Hen arrived and thrust two shiny objects up at him, as if he were some deity in need of offerings.

"We have gold! And a diamond!" They shouted in unison.

Peering down past the curl of his mustache and the tip of his nose, he surveyed the items held up to him like gifts at an altar. He eyed the 'gold' and the 'diamond' carefully before pronouncing his verdict. "You have found some fool's gold and a very nice piece of quartz, maybe calcite. Where'd you two get these?"

"Fool's Gold? What's that?" Hen asked, ignoring Father's question. She was suddenly very worried about the profoundness of her nugget.

"It's iron pyrite, something that looks like gold but isn't. Real gold is more dull, where this is shiny." Father explained.

"So it's not really gold?" Hen's heart hammered in her ears. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Not wanting to disappoint his daughter, Father thought for a moment before he answered. "Well, it's *fool's gold*, but not real gold. So, I guess it is and it isn't."

"Quartz? Calcite? If hers is fool's gold, are those like fool's diamonds?" Pancake asked, scratching at his head as he looked at Father through the clear stone.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“You could say so. They’re clear minerals. They’re pretty nice, and I’ve not seen one quite that clear and that large in a long time. It is a nice specimen.”

“Special men?”

“No, speh-si-men.” Father sounded it out carefully.

“It means sample.” Hen explained to her brother, beaming when Father nodded in agreement.

Pancake had already forgotten the new word and was now worrying about those sponges, bug cages, fishing poles, and books about bugs he’d planned on buying with his share of the loot. He got right to the heart of things and asked, “Are these worth anything?”

“Maybe to the right person. They’re not terribly valuable, but they are worth something.”

Hen regarded her stone carefully, wondering if she’d rather keep it or sell it, as Pancake was still suggesting. Just to help make an educated decision, she asked her Father, “Where can we sell them?”

“Well, I’m going to the market now anyway, so you could tag along if you promise not to run off by yourselves, and if you help me do some shopping. There’s a guy I know there that sells trinkets and whatnot. He might take them off your hands so he can cut them and make decorations or jewelry from them. It’s what he does, and those are pretty nice samples you two found, wherever you found them.”

It took little to get Pancake and Hen to agree to these terms, so rare a treat was it that they actually got to go to the market, especially with Father. Even if he’d told them that he was trading them away for a

## *Pancake & Hen*

pair of oxen, they'd probably still have gone along with him. And, if Father regretted taking them even in the least because he had to listen to their excited chatter the whole way, he didn't show it at all. In fact, he even joined in, helping them imagine what they might be able to purchase with their new wealth, if all went as planned.

They continued to imagine and fantasize about their spending power even as Father haggled with the vendors and made his own purchases, first emptying out the wagon of the farm's produce and then filling it with what they needed. Then, at long last, he took them over to the man he had spoken of, whose colorful tent was festooned with ribbons from which hung all manner of metalwork and knickknacks.

Walking up to the man's booth was like stepping bodily into a kaleidoscope. Wrought iron curlicues with various devices and designs welded to them hung beside colored glass shaped like birds, boxes filled with rings of every shade of metal, and gemstones of such hues that Hen had not even imagined rocks could be.

Those things were interesting, but Pancake gawked at the old man most of all. The old man's wrinkled hands were slender and deft as could be. They danced among a plethora of tools and stones and metal, twisting, bending, shaping, welding, and joining pieces together. He was an artist, but he worked with things of the earth, not with pigments and brushes.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“Jakob, I’ve brought a couple kids with a couple of stones they’d like to show you, and perhaps barter with you for something.”

“Is that so?” The old man’s eyebrows rose. He smiled secretively, set aside his work, and got up out of his creaky old chair to lean over his counter. He extended both of his hands, into which Pancake and Hen’s rock hunting finds went.

Then, Jakob eased himself back into his chair and put a monocle up to his eye, so he could better see what he was being offered. He grunted once or twice and licked his dry lips as he squinted at the samples before finally turning back to his young customers. “These are nice, but not so valuable as I could give you anything you wanted. I might be persuaded to let the two of you pick a nice item for your Mother, though. It is, if I recall from years past, about time for her birthday?”

Father nodded silently; this was one of the reasons he’d come today. His response elicited a squawk from Hen. She’d forgotten. Pancake never remembered dates because he was so young, so he didn’t feel bad, but Hen felt awful.

“We must get something for Mother, Pancake.” Hen insisted. It wasn’t hard to convince her brother though.

“Okay, but what? There are so many choices.” Pancake replied, looking woefully at what seemed to be a thousand items arrayed before him.

Hen leaned forward and scanned the things on the counter, but one jumped out at her. It was a small,

## *Pancake & Hen*

hand-painted brass stem with leaves that sprang up from a black stone. Purple amethysts were set into the crown of it to make it look like a lilac, and a polished tiger-eye stone had been cut and shaped with more brass to form a bumblebee that looked to be buzzing happily over the flowers.

“It’s perfect.” Pancake declared when she reached out to select it.

“Oh, that one? It’s a bit expensive. That was one of my wife’s favorites, too. My daughter helped design it.” Jakob’s smile was sadly reminiscent.

“Mother will love it. I’m certain, mister. We simply must have it.” Hen said pleadingly, trying not to think about having to make a second choice for a present when this one was already perfect.

“Well, if you put it that way, I suppose I could part with it, but only if your Father invites me over for dinner some night, and you must show me this stone collection the kids talk so much about.”

“You have a deal!” Hen exclaimed, reaching out her hand to shake Jakob’s before he could resist. Then, turning to Father, she ordered him, “Father, invite the man immediately.”

Father blinked at her in surprise and stammered out a hasty invite, which Jakob cordially accepted, while Pancake and Hen took the gift into their possession. After that, the three of them made a hasty retreat to the house, because their shopping was done and three stomachs were getting making hungry grumbles.

## *Pancake & Hen*

It was a hushed ride all the way home, which Father enjoyed thoroughly. He spoke sparingly, only when trout in the stream they crossed over or a particular cloud in the sky caught his fancy enough to point out to his two passengers. Overall, it was a very quiet trip. Pancake and Hen were much more concerned about getting the present home safely than with anything else. The pair sat huddled together on the sacks of oats, feed, and corn for Bessie, the goats, and the chickens, cradling the delicate treasure between the two of them.

Upon arrival at home, Hen vaulted down from the wagon before Father had even finished locking in the brake lever, and Pancake lowered the treasure down to her. He threw himself down after her, stumbling and dropping to his knees before he got up to race after her so he could open the door for her. Pancake wasn't going to allow any door to risk damaging their present.

Father, being a man of fair intuition, had already deduced that they would not be able to wait until Mother's birthday to give her the present, but he'd thought they'd at least wait until he'd unloaded the wagon. Sighing, he locked the brake in place and went inside first so he could see his wife's expression, and it was well worth it.

Mother was just setting the dinner table when Pancake and Hen burst in. Father came in and stood behind them, watching with great pride and much approval. The two of them thrust the present up at

## *Pancake & Hen*

her much as they had done to him with their stones, and they shouted, “Happy Birthday!”

Mother’s ever-present soft smile vanished in an instant, replaced by something approaching rapture. Never had she expected such a gift from her children, and the fact that Father had somehow been involved in this made it all that much better. From the three of them came perhaps the most wonderful gift she’d ever received. She was brought to tears and rushed to embrace them all, being careful not to crush her gift, which was dazzling, but not so dazzling as her children’s expressions.

That night, she had to do some extra baking to say thank you, and those apple dumplings were filled with more love than anything she’d ever baked, at least they certainly tasted that way. Even Father couldn’t help but comment on how good they were as he asked for seconds over his evening cup of coffee.

“We need to find gold more often.” Hen declared as she rubbed her belly happily after she’d eaten.

“And diamonds!” Pancake chimed in.

Mother looked inquiringly at Father, but he just shrugged and laughed.

It would have to be a mystery...

*Pancake & Hen*

**The Season Tree**  
*Evergreens and Wrapping Paper*

## *Pancake & Hen*

Father, Mother, Pancake, and Hen were all decorating the Christmas tree. That meant it was evening and the beginning of December. According to family traditions, tree decorating had to be done at night by firelight and candlelight. To do it otherwise was to do a disservice to the tree. After all, an evergreen had given up its life to allow for the sprucing up of the living room or family room, so the decoration of its limbs must be a pleasant, but somewhat solemn occasion. Even the addition of colorful ornaments and the sipping of mulled cider or a bit of wine could not steal away from the ambiance of such a night.

Hen was currently helping Mother string popcorn around the tree, having just finished hanging several very aromatic gingerbread men decorations around the boughs. Pancake was handing Father random items to hang on the tree, since he had the height to fit the job and Pancake was good at choosing items and locations for them. Soon, the tinsel, bows, and other decorations would come, followed eventually by the star that would crown the tree.

Pancake, after handing Father several items, stood back and frowned. Father, noting a cessation in the parade of items given to him, looked over at his son, wondering what had interrupted the flow of ornaments. It surprised him to see a troubled look on Pancake's face. Normally, Pancake loved hanging items on the tree. Never before had he hesitated so,

## *Pancake & Hen*

even in selecting the location of a particularly difficult decoration.

“What’s wrong?” Father asked, stepping over to his son and bending over so he could be more on Pancake’s level.

“We killed this tree.” Pancake said sadly.

“There are many more. Don’t worry about it. It looks pretty, so it’s fulfilling its purpose.”

“But why did it have to die?”

Father’s mustache twitched over a smirk that tugged on his lips. The answer was obvious to him, if not his son. “Because it’s hard to dig up an entire tree out of the frozen ground, roots and all, and fit it into a room. It won’t fit in the tree stand that way either, so it would fall over even if it wasn’t too tall for our ceilings.”

“What if we got a smaller one so it fit in the room?”

“Then it wouldn’t be able to hold all the decorations.” Hen answered. She didn’t know why Pancake was so bothered about one tree when they lived amongst thousands of them. They could cut one down every day of the year and there would still be enough to go around.

“That would be a shame. They’re all so pretty.”

Mother agreed, still stringing popcorn strands around the tree. Her children had helped make many of the ornaments in school or on winter evenings, and only once a year were they showcased. Having too small of a tree would make that very difficult, and she didn’t want to be the one to have to choose what went on and what remained in the box.

## *Pancake & Hen*

“But, what if we got a big pot and a small tree?” Pancake asked.

Pancake was being very persistent on this point. Father’s eyebrow rose. His curiosity had been aroused. Surely Pancake was going somewhere with this. “What if? What is the point?”

“Because we could have a tree all year then.”

“But why would we do that? It would be a hassle.”

“We all love decorating the tree. It’s the prettiest thing we have in the house. Why must it only last a month?”

Father understood this point. He loved being in on this family event, but even so he couldn’t well imagine the thing sitting in the corner all year. “Well, being short-lived makes some things special, like a butterfly or a flower that only lasts a while. If it’s here all year, it’s not so special anymore.”

“Not to mention it would be hard to dust.” Mother declared. She hated dust, and the idea of dusting off millions of little needles – those that didn’t fall on the ground anyway – bothered her.

“Spiders would love it. There’d be thousands of webs in the tree and all the dead bugs they catch to eat.” Hen added. She didn’t mind bugs, but spiders were another story.

These were all valid points, but Pancake still wasn’t satisfied. He resumed handing items to Father, but he wasn’t done yet. “But, if we could keep it clean and keep the tree alive, couldn’t we decorate it differently sometimes so that it was still special?”

## *Pancake & Hen*

Hen finally understood where Pancake was going with this. “That would be great! Can you imagine a birthday tree for me? I’d have all sorts of cute things on mine.”

Mother grinned. “Or how about a Mother’s Day tree?”

Father frowned over at his wife for encouraging Pancake’s nonsense. “That’s a lot of work. Not to mention, we’d have to store all these implements and decorations for the different holidays somewhere.” Deep down, he felt a slight tremble of fear at the prospect of his workroom being taken over by crates of random holiday decorations they didn’t really need.

Pancake put on his best pleading look. “It would only have to be a few times a year. Couldn’t we try it?”

“Aren’t you forgetting that this thing is going to die? Its roots are cut.” Father was almost happy that this was so, since it protected him from having to have a tree in the house all year long.

“We could get a new one come spring and start then.” Pancake explained.

Father sighed. “We could, but I come back to the original question, ‘Why?’”

“Every holiday would be even better with a tree, and every present seems more glorious when it comes from under a tree. I can truly say, I’d even like getting new socks for my birthday if they came from under a tree.” Pancake replied, and he said it with such a

## *Pancake & Hen*

straight face and with so much sincerity that everyone in the room burst out laughing.

“Alright.” Father relented. “We might just have to try that. We could have a tree all year.”

“Our very own Season Tree.” Pancake declared, and it was so. He’d started a new family tradition that would carry on for years without even intending to.

*Pancake & Hen*

Things Explained  
Needlessly?

*About Me and About the Book*

## *Pancake & Hen*

I'm currently 29, married and teaching in the U.S.A. now. I'm happy to revisit these characters, but also eager to move on to the next ones.

Many of the people who read this ask where I get these ideas. They wonder how much of my family or me is in these characters. Well, there's a lot of both my family and myself in these characters, but mostly me. To some extent, I'm almost every character at least in part. The others are an amalgam of people I've known, cobbled together for the sake of the story.



*Pancake & Hen*

*Pancake & Hen*