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Opening extract from

The Boy on the Porch

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I



The young couple found the child asleep in an old cushioned chair on the front porch. He was curled against a worn pillow, his feet bare and dusty, his clothes fashioned from rough linen. They could not imagine where he had come from or how he had made his way to their small farmhouse on a dirt road far from town.

"How old a boy is he, do you think?" the man asked.

"Hard to say, isn't it? Seven or eight?"

"Small for his age then."

"Six?"

"Big feet."

"Haven't been around kids much."

"Me neither."

The man circled the house and then walked down the dirt drive, past their battered blue truck and the shed, scanning the bushes on both sides as he went. Their dog, a silent beagle, slipped into his place beside the man, sniffing the ground earnestly.

When the man and the dog returned to the porch, the woman was kneeling beside the old cushioned chair, her hand resting gently on the boy's back. There was something in the tilt of her head and the tenderness of her touch that moved him.

2



The young couple, Marta and John, were reluctant to go about their normal chores, fearing that the boy would wake and be afraid, and so they took turns watching over the sleeping boy. It did not seem right to wake him.

For several hours, they moved about more quietly than usual, until at last John said, "It is time to wake that child, Marta. Maybe he is sick, sleeping so much like that."

"You think so?" She felt his forehead, but it was cool, not feverish.

They made small noises: they coughed and tapped their feet upon the floor, and they let the screen door flap shut in its clumsy way, but still the child slept.

"Tap him," John said. "Tap him on the back."

She tapped him lightly at first, and then more firmly, as if she were patting a drum. Nothing.

"Lift him up," John said.

"Oh, no, I couldn't. You do it."

"No, no, it might scare him to see a big man like me. You do it. You're more gentle."

Marta blushed at this and considered the child and what might be the best way to lift him.

"Just scoop him up," John said.

She scooped up the boy in one swift move, but he was heavier than she had expected, and she swayed and turned and flopped into the chair with the boy now in her arms.

Still the boy slept.

Marta looked up at John and then down at the dusty-headed boy. "I suppose I'd better just sit here with him until he wakes," she said.

The sight of his wife with the child in her lap made John feel peculiar. He felt joy and surprise and worry and fear all at once, in such a rush, making him dizzy.

"I'll tend to the cows," he said abruptly. "Call me if you need me."

Her chin rested on the child's head; her hand pat-patted his back.

"It's okay," Marta whispered to the sleeping child. "I will

sit here all day, if need be."

Their dog normally shadowed John from dawn until dusk, but on this day, he chose to lie at Marta's feet, eyes closed, waiting. Before John went to the barn, he scanned the drive again and circled their farmhouse. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he hurried on to his chores.

Marta closed her eyes. "It's okay, it's okay," she whispered.

3



She must have dozed off, for she was startled by something tapping her face.

The child's hand rested on her cheek, his eyes wide, a deep, dark brown, and his face so close to hers that she had to lean back to focus.

"Oh!" Marta said. "Don't be afraid. We found you here, on the porch, don't be afraid."

He gazed back at her steadily and then turned to take in the porch, the trees beyond, and the beagle at his feet. He let his hand drop toward the beagle—not reaching for the dog, but as if offering his hand in case the dog should want to sniff it.

The beagle sniffed the hand and then the boy's arms

and legs. He licked the dust from the boy's feet.

"I am Marta," she said. "What are you called?"

The boy made no motion to move from her lap and he did not answer.

"You must be hungry," Marta said. "Would you like something to eat? To drink?"

The boy looked out at the bushes, the drive.