

Pearls And Granddads

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A SHORT STORY

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~1~

Shelly watches the water shoot up into the air and land on the ground all around her. She is quite proud of herself, after hopping into a rain puddle the size of her Uncle Lesley's truck tire. The water had gone even farther than her big brother Albert's game-winning splash had gone the week before. It had been a rainy Saturday afternoon and Albert and his friends had made a sport out of jumping into rain puddles.

"Sherelean Carey!" barks the stern voice behind her.

Shelly gasps and covers her mouth with her hands. She had forgotten that her mother was only a few steps behind her. Now she turns around and sees her mother standing with a dark look on her face and her hands akimbo. Her mother's

beige dress is speckled from collar to hem with dark spots and a splash of mud trails down her cheek. Her dark brown eyes are narrowed under curly, shoulder-length, jet-black hair. Shelly looks down and sees that her own pink dress is much worse.

“Come here to me right now!” her mother says.

Shelly’s eyes tear up and she slowly moves towards her mother. They had just come back from the town, where Shelly had to wait for hours in the bank’s sitting room. Her mother had gone into another room to talk to one of the bank men, and when she came out, Shelly could see that she had been crying. Her mother had been crying a lot lately. Ever since her daddy had gone to the hospital three weeks ago and he didn’t come home.

Shelly arrived at her mother’s skirt with her head hanging low and tears streaming down her brown cheeks. When her daddy was leaving for the hospital, he had told her to be a good girl and not to upset her mother.

“Am sorry Mama,” she said. “I was just trying to splash in the puddle like Albert, I didn’t mean to mess your dress.”

Francis looked down at her five-year-old and sighed. The mud had gone all the way up to her ponytails and pink ribbons. Now the whole of her needed a good

washing. Her little girl's almond-shaped eyes refused to meet her own and she seemed to be regretting her decision.

Francis lifted her hand to wipe away the mud from her cheek.

“What did I tell you about following after everything you see your brother and his friends do?”

“You said girls shouldn't play in the mud and dirt like the boys, but Mama, I forgot this time, I really did. Can I have a blue pass, Mama, please?”

“Elroy and his blasted passes,” Francis mumbled under her breath. At the mention of the passes, Francis eyes began to fill up with tears. Her husband had a box of blue, red, and yellow cards that he liked to use to discipline the children. A blue pass meant you were forgiven but had to clean out the pig pen for an extra week. Both kids despised this chore and Shelly had now started taking turns with Albert. The red pass meant you had been warned, and the next time you broke that rule a whipping would surely follow. The yellow card had never been used and was still a mystery to them all.

Francis wiped a tear from her eyes and turned away from her daughter.

“No passes today. Let's just get home and get cleaned up, okay?”

“Yes Ma’am,” Shelly said quickly. As she looked up at her mother’s teary eyes, she was both happy and sad that she didn’t get any punishment.

They resumed the walk home in silence. Shelly occasionally looked up into her mother’s sad face along the way. A line of worry creased her little forehead. She knew she only got away with splashing in the puddle because Mama was too worried and sad about daddy to bother.

As they turned the corner on the dirt road, the roof of their small green and white house came into view. The rain clouds from that morning had drifted away to the west, and now a streak of colors curved over their house and down into the forest.

“Wow,” says Shelly, staring wide-eyed up at the sky. “What’s that, Mama?”

Francis looks up and sees the rainbow hanging above their house.

“It’s a rainbow baby,” she answers.

“What’s a rainbow, Mama?” Shelly asks. It’s the first one she’s ever seen and the wonder is high in her voice.

“Oh, that’s just God saying hello,” Francis says, absentmindedly.

Shelly jumps up and down and waves her hand at the sky. “Hello!” she shouts in excitement. “It’s beautiful Mama!” she exclaims.

“Yes it is honey,” Francis says, sparing one more glance up at the sky.

They reach the front yard and Shelly is still staring up in awe.

“Where does it go, Mama? Can we go and see it?”

Francis smiles despite her dim mood. “No, we can’t go baby; it’s out there in the forest. We wouldn’t be able to find it.”

“Does it go down into the ground?” Shelly asks.

Francis sighs; her brain is too tired for this line of questioning.

“I don’t know baby, but some people in the world believe there is a pot of gold and a mean old leprechaun living at the end of a rainbow. I just know that God made it and it is beautiful.”

“Wow,” Shelly says, even more awestruck by this new information. Then she suddenly frowns.

“What’s a lep-pra-can?” she asks, struggling to pronounce the strange new word.

“Okay, that’s enough for today Shelly. Let’s go inside and get cleaned up and I will tell you more about it tomorrow.”

Shelly’s mouth droops at the corners but she takes her mother’s outstretched hand and walks into the yard.

Just as they’re about to go up the porch’s short flight of stairs, they hear a loud honk behind them. They stop walking and look up the road to see an old silver station wagon rattling up to the house in a cloud of dust.

Francis recognizes the car immediately. It is her friend Audra’s. She’s a nurse at the hospital. Her heart kicks up into a frantic pace. There’s only one reason her friend would be coming to see her in such a hurry.

“Go inside Shelly,” she orders. The command in her voice leaves no room for questions and Shelly walks up the steps and goes inside the house. She pushes the door forward, but does not close it, so she can still peep at what is happening outside.

The car parks and her mother talks to her friend for a few minutes before hurrying into the front passenger seat. Audra spins the car around and they head back into the town.

Shelly opens the door and walks out into the yard. She watches the car until it disappears over the hill; then, she turns and looks up at the sky to see the rainbow again. She smiles up at the mesmerizing colors and waves her hands wildly.

A voice comes from the back of the house and she looks in that direction. Now she moves to follow the sound of high-pitched laughter.

~2~

Now in their backyard, Shelly sees that her brother Albert and three of his friends are playing a game under their huge sapodilla tree. It probably was the last dry spot they could find in the yard, after the heavy rain that fell early that morning.

“Can I play too?”

Her sudden voice startles the boys and a few of them yelp in surprise. Her brother stands up and looks at her crossly.

“Where’s Mummy?” he asks instead. His thick brows are furrowed and he folds his arms across his chest. He is tall for his ten years and the most outspoken among his friends.

“Mama went back into town with Aunty Audra,” Shelly answers.

Albert nods his head. “Well, what did you two do in town? Did you go to see daddy?”

Shelly shakes her head. “No we went to the bank and they made Mama cry.”

Albert’s face falls. “That means daddy can’t have his surgery.”

“What’s a surgery?” she asks him.

Albert takes a heavy breath and walks to her, leaving his friends to continue the game. They resume playing quietly for the most part, understanding the situation more than Shelly can.

Albert puts his arms around her shoulders and leads her back to the front porch.

“Daddy’s sick Shell, and we don’t have the money to give the doctors so they can make him better.

“But I have money,” Shelly says. “I have two whole dollars right under my bed.”

Albert smiles sadly. “That’s not enough, Shell. We need much more than that.”

“How much more than that do we need?” she asks.

“Much, much more,” he says, gently turning her to face the door. “Now go inside and bathe and change your clothes before Mummy gets back home.”

“But how much more, Al?” she persists, looking backward. “Like a big pot of gold?”

“Something like that,” Albert answers. A look of confusion flits across his face and then he turns and leaves her, going back to his friends.

Shelly watches him go, hovering at the door until he goes around the corner of the house. She knows just where to get that pot of gold they need for daddy's surgery. It is in the forest, sitting at the end of the rainbow with the leprechaun. If she leaves now, she can be back before Mama comes home, and everyone would be happy.

Shelly walks out the front door and closes it quietly behind her. She skitters down the porch steps and makes a beeline for the bushes. She is just seconds away from the perimeter of the yard when their old dog, Shepherd, runs into her path, wagging his tail and scampering around her legs.

“Can't play now, Shep,” she says. “I gotta go and get the pot of gold for daddy's surgery.”

Shelly weaves around Shep and tries to take off once more, but he latches onto the hem of her dress and she has to stop to wrestle it from his teeth.

“Okay,” she says. “I guess I have to take you with me, since you won’t stay. Come on, boy.”

Shelly walks into the thick bushes with Shepherd trailing behind, on her way to find the end of the rainbow.

~3~

Francis gets home and is bone-tired after the scare at the hospital. She had to sit in the waiting room at the hospital for almost a half hour, before the doctors finally came to sit and talk with her. She had to listen to them talk about how desperately her husband needed this surgery. It angered her a little. It was almost as if they thought she just didn't want to save him. Couldn't they see how hard she was trying to get the money? All their savings, donations from friends and family, and money from everything she could sell had been put into the fund. It still wasn't enough.

She walks into the house and it is too quiet. She could hear the boys outside, but Shelly's voice was not among them, and her daughter was never quiet for long. Even when she was alone, she was singing some tune she pulled out of her active brain and vibrant imagination.

After a walk through the house to be sure Shelly wasn't in it, Francis goes outside to talk to Albert.

The boys are gathered on one side of their picnic bench, aiming slingshots at soda cans lined along the ground. Albert gets up when he sees his mother walking towards them.

“Ally, where is your sister?” she asks him, coming to a stop at the line of cans in their view.

“She should be inside, Mummy,” he answers. “That’s where I sent her after you left. I told her to go in and bathe.”

“Well, she’s not in there, Albert. Are you sure she went inside?”

“Yes Ma’am,” he answers quickly.

Francis sighs and rubs her forehead. She can feel her agitation rising rapidly.

“Well, come with me over by Mrs. Larrimore’s house. Let’s see if she went over there to play with Neka.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he says, dropping the slingshot onto the bench.

After running inside to grab his hat, he hurries out to join his mother at the gate. And together they walk down the street to the Larrimores’ house.

~4~

Shelly hops into her second puddle of the day. This one is bigger than the last one. She giggles and Shepherd whines behind her, as if he knows she would get in trouble.

Her pretty dress is splotted with more brown mud. Knee-high stockings that were once white are now dirty and torn from passing through the thick bushes, and mud covers both her feet.

She's been going now for almost thirty minutes, and she huffs and looks up into the sky. She gasps when she sees that the rainbow is gone. And then before the tears that begin to pool in her eyes can fall, the clouds roll away, revealing the rainbow once more. It is still bright and beautiful but no closer than it was before. Shelly frowns and folds her arms over her chest.

She is annoyed and tired. She has already been walking for such a long time and still she has not reached the end of the rainbow.

Shepherd barks up at the tall branches above them and Shelly looks up into the sky once more. More clouds have filtered by and she sees that the rainbow is now going down into a wooden roof.

“I think we found it, Shep,” she says. A smile comes to her face. “The pot of gold has gotta be inside that house. It’s a good thing you came, Shep boy. I think we may have to run off a grumpy leprechaun to get it.”

Shepherd barks and wags his tail.

Shelly now peers through the trees at the wooden house a few yards away. It is sitting high atop a hill, with a broken-down fence around it.

“Whoa,” Shelly says out loud. “The leprechaun sure has a big house.”

She steps out of the puddle and stomps some of the mud and water from her feet. Now they are off again and she is skittering through the bushes and jumping over rocks, on her way to the house. The path soon narrows into a rocky track road.

As they reach the fence, Shepherd begins to growl beside her.

“Shush, Shep,” she says, putting her finger to her lips. “Maybe we can sneak up on the leprechaun and grab the pot of gold before he can catch up with us.”

“That’s a strange thing to do,” says a voice at her right.

Shelly jumps in surprise and Shepherd begins barking wildly.

“It’s okay, Shep,” says the husky voice of a man. He moves into view from behind an old silk cotton tree that’s hanging over the fence into the yard. He is dressed in faded jeans and a blue dress shirt. His hair is snow white and a pair of spectacles is perched on the tip of his sharp nose. Suddenly Shepherd is wagging his tail and he trots over to the old man’s side.

Shelly’s mouth drops open as she watches her dog rub all over the stranger’s legs.

“Wow,” she says. “How do you know my dog?”

The old man walks closer, taking his time, putting an old brown cane in front of each step as he moves to the gate. He comes up right in front of her and stares down at her with a strange expression on his face.

“Are you Shelly?” he asks. His voice cracks and tears fill his eyes.

“Yes Sir, I am,” she answers.

The old man sways and quickly balances his weight on his cane. The afternoon sun comes over his shoulder, causing Shelly to squint up at him through the glare.

“Do you know my Uncle Lesley?” Shelly asks. “He’s got the same eyes as you do.”

The old man blinks rapidly and it’s only then that Shelly realizes that he is crying. Now he sniffs and quickly wipes the tears from his eyes.

“Yes, I do know your Uncle Lesley. In fact, I know him very well. Does your Mummy know you’re all the way out here, girl?”

“No Sir,” Shelly answers. “I wanted to make Mama happy so I came to get the pot of gold for daddy’s surgery.”

She leans closer now and whispers. “I think you may have a leprechaun living in your house. See that rainbow over there? It goes right down into your house.” She points up at the sky above his roof.

The old man covers his mouth to hide a grin that forms on his face.

“My name is Isaac, and it’s nice to meet you, Shelly. Why don’t you come into the yard for a cup of lemonade so you can tell me all about the leprechaun and

the rainbow?” He puts out his hand towards her and Shelly looks at it for a minute. Her gaze goes to Shepherd who is still slobbering over the man’s feet, and she decides that he must not be a bad man if her dog likes him.

She takes his hand and they turn and walk through the gates. She proceeds to tell him all about the rainbow and how she wanted to help her daddy get his surgery.

~5~

Francis would know that bark anywhere. She's had Shepherd since she was a little girl. He had been a gift from her father and the little German Shepherd fast became the joy of her childhood and her most fierce protector.

She stands with Albert at the front door. They had just returned, disheartened, from the Larrimores' house. Neka and her mother hadn't seen Shelly, nor had they any notion of where she could be. Francis had just made the decision to go down to the police station when the distant sound of barking came from the forest.

The barking immediately stopped and now she's unsure.

"Shep and Shelly may be together, Mummy," Albert says from beside her. He too had heard the barking and knew it was their dog. "Maybe we should go look for them first before heading into town."

Francis is still looking in the direction from which she heard the barking with a new weariness in her eyes. There is only one house in that direction, a few miles into the forest. It's the one she hasn't visited since she met her husband twelve years ago. It is her father's house.

Francis takes a deep breath and rubs her hands over her face. She had promised never to go there again.

With her mother long passed away, and her brother Lesley recently moving away from the Caribbean, her father has been on her mind a lot lately. Her brother had been the one to check in on him and he expected her to do the same, now that he was gone.

Her heart is not ready to go there today, but no contention between them would get in the way of her finding her daughter. In fact, her heart becomes a little lighter at the thought of her being there. She knows if Shelly did manage to find her Granddad, she would be confused but safe. None of Francis' children had ever met him, or even knew he lived so close by.

“Come on, Ally,” she says to her son. “I think I know where she could be.”

~6~

Shelly falls back in a wave of laughter when her spinning top knocks Isaac's top from the circle for the third time. Isaac has a whole box filled with spinning tops, even more than Albert and his friends. They are laid out in the grass in all colors and sizes. He had told her she could take any of them she wanted and she preened at the thought of how jealous Albert would be when he saw them.

Shepherd is lounging under a tall, blossoming mango tree, while she and Isaac talk and play games. Her brother Albert never played with her this much, and the old man was fast becoming her new best friend. She decided then that she would have to ask her mama to come and play with him some time.

At the thought of her mother, Shelly springs up and a look of panic comes to her face.

“Oh no!” she says. “Mama is gonna whip me for sure this time. I gotta run home, Mr. Isaac,” she says, and she rushes over to give him a quick hug.

When she lets him go, he gets up from his crouching on shaky legs. He grimaces, and Shelly now sees that he must have been in some pain for a while. Her mouth droops at the thought.

“Hold on one minute, Shelly,” he says. “I have something else for you.”

Shelly sits back onto an old crate and watches him hurry into the house. She is fidgeting when he comes out five minutes later with a small gold pouch in his hands and gives it to her.

“I chased that old leprechaun away a long time ago and took these from him,” he says. Shelly pulls the pouch open and her eyes widen. Inside are fifteen perfect pearls.

“Wow,” Shelly says. Her voice is filled with wonder. “Will these help get daddy his surgery?”

Isaac nods. “You just give that pouch to your Mama when you get home, okay, baby girl?”

“Give what to her mama?” says a voice at the gate.

Shelly starts and hides behind the old man’s legs.

“It’s okay, baby girl,” says Isaac. “I think I am the one who’s about to get a whipping, this time. I should have taken you home a long time ago.”

Francis walks up to her father with Albert close at her side.

“Hello, daddy,” she says, and both her children’s mouths drop open.

“Can we go inside and talk, Fran?” Isaac asks.

Francis nods and tells her children to sit and wait for her under the mango tree. They do as they were told and Shepherd walks over to sit beside them.

Francis turns and follows her father up the rickety steps of the rundown porch. She stops when she sees her mother’s old rocking chair, pushed up into a corner and covered with a dusty brown cloth.

Now the sound of laughter echoes in her mind as memories flood in quickly. She hears little feet pounding down the wooden porch, while a yipping young Shepherd scampers down the porch beside her.

Her father comes out and grabs her up and sits on the steps with her in his lap. He snuggles her into the crook of his shoulder for one of his fantastic stories. Somewhere in the middle of the tale, her mother would always come out and join

them on the porch. She would sit and rock herself to sleep to the sound of his voice and the evening chant of the crickets.

In the present, her father now stops in the doorway and looks back at her as if he could hear the rummaging of her mind.

“Your mother would be very disappointed in us, wouldn’t she?” he asks.

Francis nods and wipes away a tear that was running down her cheek. They had severed ties for so long that Francis could hardly remember what was said that had caused the falling out between them. The exact words that did so much damage were lost to time, but the pain of it was a living, breathing thing that had yet to be put to rest. In the end, he had forced her to make a choice and she chose Elroy. Her heart had been broken, but perhaps today would be the day she could begin to glue those pieces back together.

~7~

Only a few minutes had passed, but to Albert and Shelly, it seemed like the two adults had been in the house for hours.

When they finally came out, Albert was sitting on a low branch of the mango tree, while Shelly spun around in circles with Shepherd below him. Isaac and Francis were holding hands and their eyes were puffy from crying.

Francis puts out her hands and beckons her children forward.

“Come and meet your granddad, kids. I’m sorry I never brought you guys here before. Granddad and I just needed to have a little talk first.

“Grown up stuff?” Albert asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Grown up stuff,” Francis agrees, smiling and crinkling her nose.

“Woohoo!” Shelly squeals and runs over to give her granddad as big a hug as she can give.

“This is the best day ever,” she says. “Now I can come and play with granddad all the time.”

When she lets go, Albert takes her place and gives his granddad a tentative hug, for the first time.

Isaac looks him over and places a kiss on his forehead. “It’s really nice to finally meet you, Albert.”

Albert smiles shyly and drops his head. “It’s nice to meet you too, granddad.”

Shelly rushes over to her mother and hands her the gold pouch.

“These are for daddy’s surgery, Mama. Granddad took these from the leprechaun and chased him away.”

Francis opens the pouch, and when she sees the pricey natural pearls, tears again fall from her eyes and she covers her mouth. Isaac walks to her and puts his arms around her.

“There really isn’t any gold or leprechauns at the end of a rainbow, Shelly,” Albert says. “People just like to say that.”

At his words, Shelly looks up at her granddad with a frown on her face. “Is this true granddad?”

Isaac nods his head sheepishly. “Am sorry, Shelly, but there really aren’t any leprechauns.”

Shelly’s mouth drops open and she looks between Mama and Granddad as if they are career criminals. Then she sighs and throws up her hands in the air in resignation.

“Well, okay,” she says.

Albert comes up and puts his arm around Shelly’s shoulders and Isaac takes Francis’ hands in his own as he talks to her.

“Mr. Taylor down by the jewelers said he would take them off my hands for a pretty penny. He’s been after me for them for a while now. I collected them when I worked on the fishing boat overseas. I never sold them to anyone, because I wanted to save them for you.”

Francis throws herself in her father’s arm and now the tears that fall are those of joy and relief.

“Thank you, daddy,” she whispers. “They couldn’t come at a better time.”

“Pearls and granddads,” Shelly declares, causing them all to look down at her in confusion.

“What about pearls and granddads, Shell?” Albert asks.

“That’s what’s at the end of a rainbow. Pearls and granddads,” she says with a smile.

A light comes to Francis’ eyes and a deep rumble of laughter rises up from Isaacs’s chest. Albert just groans and shakes his head.

“Come here, girl,” Francis says, and Shelly rushes into her mother’s arms to get kissed all over.

“I don’t know what I am gonna to do with you, but for now let’s just get home and get clean, okay?”

“Can we come see granddad tomorrow, Mama?” Shelly asks.

Francis sighs and smiles. “We’ll come and see granddad tomorrow and many more days, my loves.”

Satisfied, Shelly skips away to play with Shepherd, and Albert trails behind her to join in.

“Oh, there’s just one more thing,” Isaac says to Francis, reaching into his pocket.

When his hand comes out, there is a yellow card in his grip and he hands it to a bewildered Francis.

“Where did you get you get this?” she asks, looking up to search his face. “Did Elroy come and see you?”

Isaac nods his head in affirmation. “He comes here once a week. Checks on me and tells me about the kids. He told me that I had to build up the courage to give you this one day, so I keep it in my pocket.”

“But I don’t even know what it means,” she says, turning it over in her hands.

“He said it means I made a mistake, I love you, and I’m sorry!”

Francis feels her legs get weak and she flops down onto the steps.

“Elroy reminded me that parents aren’t perfect, even though we would like to make our children believe otherwise. He said one day we may be the ones having to tell our kids we are sorry, we were wrong, and we love them more than

anything in the world. That's one hell of a man you have, girl. You better get your butt down there and bring him home to his children."

"Sure took you long enough to say that," Francis says with a grin.

She leaps up from the steps with a holler at her children, and they hurry home with the hope of a new day in their hearts.