

Mae's Unicorn

May 5th, 1919

I went to the store today like I always do on Mondays. We ran out of matches yesterday before we could light the Sunday night fire, but Daddy always said that Sunday was a holy day. Shouldn't do anythin' but spend time with family and say your prayers.

I always was complainin' about it when I was little. I remember one Saturday, Sarah-Ann and her big brother Johnny were goin' down to the river two miles out, their Daddy takin' them in the big wagon. They were goin' to spend the night out there, sleepin' under the stars, makin' campfires. "Can I go? Can I *go*?" I begged my Daddy. "No," Daddy had said. "Sundays are a day for family." I cried all the rest of that day, beggin' and pleadin' that I wished I had Sarah Ann's family instead, and I didn't eat one lick of Momma's supper that night.

But Sundays were a special time. No matter how frantic Mamma was to get a new button and thread from the General Store, or how many books people were wantin' Daddy to have bound, or how much one of us begged, Daddy always made sure we took that time. We spent extra long at the breakfast table, tellin' each other what we were thankful for, and we'd all go for a walk right after.

The evenings were the best part, though. After supper, we'd play somethin', usually hide and seek. Daddy was always the seeker. Somehow, he always found Momma first, and it took them a long time to find the rest of us. I guess we were good hiders.

Then Daddy would light a fresh fire. Sometimes, if it was chilly, we'd even have hot cocoa, the three of us kids sharin' one blanket, and Momma and Daddy sharin' the other. Daddy would read us a story. Little Jim was too young to mind what kind, and Mae always wanted a story about talking animals, or other creatures that were all made up. I guess she was too young to know the difference. Her favourite were unicorns, white horses with a horn growin' out of their foreheads. "Those aren't real!" I'd tell her every time. But she didn't listen.

I always wanted stories about captains and soldiers and pirates and heroes, men who were brave like Daddy, goin' out and doin' brave things. As he read, I remember seein' the story dancin' in the firelight, as if his voice itself could command the flames.

Even when Daddy went to war, we still held our Sundays close. This time, Momma would read the stories. She tried, but it wasn't the same. Her voice always sounded sad, and the firelight lost a little bit of its magic.

Daddy was killed in one of the first battles he ever fought. "He died brave," Momma had said, clutching an army letter in her hand. She cried more than I'd ever seen her cry in my life. I held Mae tight while we all cried, and she held Little Jim. I didn't think the tears would ever stop.

But they did eventually, though the sadness never went away. And the war ended, eventually, and other Mommas and daughters got their Daddies back. Sarah-Ann and Johnny's Daddy came back, but he was sick, and he'd been hurt bad. He was missing a whole leg and an arm and was so warm with fever he could hardly talk. He died only three months later.

Most of the Daddies on our street are missing, which is why a lot of the Mommas started goin' to work. My Momma did last year, and that's when I took over the Monday shopping. "You're almost a woman, now," she had said. "It's time you learned how to run a house of your own." That had been the beginning of the end for my baby sister.

Momma caught cold at the factory, and pretty soon, we were all sniffin' and sneezin' and coughin'. She kept goin' to work, and I tried best I could to keep up with the cookin' and shoppin'.

Mae started losin' more interest in meals, and eventually, the only thing she could eat was broth made from chicken bones and a piece or two of soft bread. She got worse and worse from there until she couldn't eat nothin' at all. She stayed up in her room, and Momma sat with her for hours.

Momma came down the stairs one day while Little Jim and I were havin' breakfast. She was pale as a ghost. We knew. I took Little Jim by the hand. He squirmed; he always liked holding Mae's hand better.

We stood around my sister's bed while she breathed her last. They weren't easy breaths. I reached down and closed her eyes when it was all over. Little Jim hugged Momma's skirts. I pulled the blanket up to her chin and kissed her forehead. "There. Now you'll be warm in Heaven," I said to my baby sister.

I had a dream two nights later that a gentle, white unicorn came and took her to Heaven. Since then, I've made my peace with the fantasy creature. The unicorn was standing in a field, his silver horn sparklin' in the sun, bunch o' wildflowers all around him. We were all standing on one side of the field, all five of us: Momma holding Little Jim on her hip, me holding Mae's hand, Daddy with his hand on my shoulder. The unicorn dipped his head slightly to beckon Mae to come to him. And she did. She went runnin' across that field, and then she dug her fingers into the unicorn's mane and gave the his neck a big ol' hug. Somehow, she got on his back.

She looked so happy, she was shinin' brighter than that horn. The creature dipped its head at us, and my baby Mae smiled at us so bright and waved as the unicorn tumed around and carried her off into the sun.

Momma never really recovered from her illness once Mae was gone. She had to give up her job at the factory since her coughing fits started getting really bad 'cuz the bosses didn't like them so much. She took sewing work when she could. "Lots of women are working now," she had said. "Maybe they need extra help with their household things."

She tried one day to pick up Daddy's bookbinding, but I caught her crying into the leathers. "P...people aren't reading so much these days," she had said. "I don't think anyone needs a bookbinder, anyway." She closed the door to Daddy's study, and we never opened it since.

I worry for Momma, but I have to "care for my household," just like she taught me. Little Jim is bigger, now, and he doesn't understand why Momma can't take care of him the same as she used to, and why "Roof Cafferine" has to do all of the dinner-making. I know I can't cook anything like Momma.

It's four months gone since Mae went to Heaven. She would have been nine next week. It seems like so long ago we got to celebrate her last birthday. I'm tryin' my best to take it one day at a time. I need to be there for the family.

Momma said that I'll be startin' with the sewin' soon. I got to bring in an income if we're to keep gettin' what we need.

This day, what we needed most was matches. I picked my way around the store, puttin' a very few other items into my basket, and then took up a pack of matches to complete my small pile. I passed by a few rolled up mats and the stack of paintin's that I've looked through a hundred times. There were a couple of other women waiting to purchase their wares, so I reached for the paintin' on the top of the pile. It's the same one that's been there for as long as I can remember, a picture of a group of soldiers, dressed in their green uniforms and running in to battle. I picked it up in my hands, thinking of Daddy.

My eyes landed on the paintin' underneath it. My heart stopped. There, on the middle of a square canvas, was a beautiful, white horse-like creature, standing in a beautiful, grassy field of wildflowers with its head slightly bowed. In the middle of its forehead was a silver horn that sparkled bright. A unicorn.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. I picked up the canvas and put back the one of the soldiers. I stared.

"Miss?" asked the store clerk. "Miss?"

I looked up. The other ladies were gone, and I was the last one left in the store. The doorbell chimed at the entrance of the store and a man entered, just as a tear trickled down my cheek.

"Momin', Earl!" said the man, approaching the counter. He turned his head and looked at me. "Say!" he said, turning back to the clerk. "I see yeh got someone in'erested in one of my paintin's!"

My eyes were on the man, but my mind was frozen in that field with that unicom. *Mae*. It was as if my baby sister herself were reaching for me from the paintin'.

"Ma'am?" said the painter-man, a tall, gangly fellow with black hair and kind eyes.

I hadn't cried too much since those first few days, before the dream with the unicorn had given me a sense of peace. I still had Little Jim and Momma to care for, after all. But that morning, as I stood holdin' the paintin' with both the painter-man and the clerk staring back at me, my eyes started to pool. I dipped my head, my eyes landing again on the beautiful, painted creature. My heart beat faster and faster and I gripped the canvas tightly in my fists. I couldn't let go.

For what seemed like eternity, I stood there fightin' the rivers from comin' out of my eyes, while the men were just starin' at me. Finally, the painter-man spoke.

"Why don' yeh tell me about that paintin' you're holdin'?"

My lips quivered and I breathed in deep through my nose. I controlled myself. "My sister," I said. "She was carried away by a unicom." It was all I could manage before pursing my lips tight together. I put the paintin' down and paid for my things at the counter. The silence that accompanied my actions convinced me that they thought I was babblin' crazy talk.

I stepped outside the store with my head high, but my heart was achin' for Mae. I stopped my walkin' once I was out of sight, my thoughts turning to her sweet golden hair and blue eyes.

Mae...

"Excuse me. Ma'am?" said a voice behind me.

I turned to find the painter-man, his eyes shinin' down from a whole foot above mine. In his hands he held a canvas. "I thought you should have this," he said. "Not sure 'zactly what you meant about your sister, but I could see it meant a lot to yeh."

He held the paintin' out to me. I shifted my grip on my basket and took the paintin', admiring it with every achin' bone in my body. "Thank you," I whispered. Then I cleared my throat. "They were my sister—my baby sister's—favourite. She loved...and she..."

He held up a hand. "No need to 'splain, Ma'am. Why don't you get that there picture home to your Momma." He tipped his hat, "Ma'am," and turned back in the direction of the store.

My Momma. How did he know? I looked up to ask, but he was gone. Nowhere in sight. To this day, I still have no idea how he got away so quickly.

I carried the unicorn painting home, and it brought a smile to my Momma's face like I hadn't seen since before the war. Three weeks later, her illness remarkably improved, and she carried on strong for five more years. When she finally did pass, Little Jim and I were old enough that we could manage on our own. The achin' in my heart this time was accompanied by a quiet peace, knowing Mae's unicorn came for her, too.

The unicorn paintin' still hangs over the fireplace where Little Jim and I have still been havin' our Sunday night fires. Only now it's not just the unicorn that watches over us, but all the people whose time has already come, Daddy and Mae and Momma. I know that one day, when I'm standin' on this side of the field, bein' beckoned to come, it'll be three souls standin' with the unicorn, ready to take me away, to take me back to them.