

Ligonier Valley Writers' Flash Fiction Contest 2022

Second Prize

A Two-Minute Tale

by Elizabeth Spragins of Fredericksburg, VA

"Time's up." Rosemary McCay tapped the bathroom door.

"Don't come in," Dillon shrieked.

Shaking her head, his new foster mother trotted down the hall to answer the call of the teakettle.

A tuneless whistle on the porch announced her husband's arrival. After wiping his boots on the mat, Miles strode in and washed his hands at the kitchen sink. "I was listening to the radio in the barn, and the forecast isn't good. The Patawasket Dam is at capacity, and the river's expected to crest this afternoon."

Rosemary shoveled scrambled eggs onto a chipped stoneware platter. "Will we have to evacuate?" When the toaster popped, she snatched two pieces of whole wheat and added them to a growing stack.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Breakfast first." He grinned, circled an arm around her waist, and dipped her back for a long kiss. Rosemary tapped his shoulder when Dillon appeared in the doorway. Her partner released her with a blush that matched the boy's.

Miles slid into the nearest ladderback chair and Dillon followed suit.

"The tractor will never make it through the mire, so I thought I'd spend the day cleaning tools. Dillon, I'd welcome your help."

The child stopped nibbling the crust from his toast and tucked his chin. "Sure," he mumbled. When Rosemary parked the bacon on the table, his nose wrinkled. "Excuse me. Forgot my watch. Be right back."

Miles snared two strips and attacked his plate with the determination of a starving man.

"I'm worried about Dillon," Rosemary whispered. "We've fostered lots of kids who had issues, but he takes anxiety to a whole new level. Maybe he's afraid we can't afford to keep him. He won't shower unless I set a timer for two minutes. And what nine-year-old kid turns down an offer of cookies and milk at bedtime?"

"We've only had him a week. He's just skittish. Give him time." Miles squeezed her hand and nibbled her ear. "Nobody can resist the charms of Rosemary McCay for long."

A door slammed in the back of the house. "Shh. He's coming."

As the child trudged into the kitchen, he glanced out the window and turned as pale as the ivory sheers. "The river's flooded," he whimpered. "It's covered the boxwoods."

Miles leaped to his feet and yanked the curtains back. "Looks like we're surrounded." The two adults exchanged glances.

When the air conditioner clunked into silence, Rosemary's calm voice filled the void. "Dillon, please stuff this towel under the door to the porch. Miles, could you kill the electricity from the circuit-breaker panel box?"

By the time Dillon wedged the towel under the door, water was flowing over the threshold. The sodden cloth slipped through his fingers and lodged against a table leg. He jumped onto a chair and stared at the incoming tide.

Grim-faced, Miles slogged out of the utility room. “Rosemary, hold the stepladder for me, would you?” Hooking a hammer into his belt, he scrambled up. “I’m going to knock out the skylight so we can climb onto the roof. Everybody look down and close your eyes.” Six hard blows brought the morning mist within reach. Rosemary tossed him her apron, and he draped it over the frame as protection from shards.

“Rosemary, you first so you can pull Dillon up.”

His wife’s ballet flats danced up the rungs and disappeared. “Ready.”

“Dillon, it’ll be easier if you take off your flip-flops.”

Wide-eyed, the boy shook his head. “I can’t get my feet wet.”

Miles took a deep breath and gritted his teeth. “Right. Up you go.” Rosemary reached down and tugged the child’s thin body through the opening.

“Coming aboard.” The ladder wobbled, and Miles fought for balance as he heaved himself over the edge. Plopping down with a grunt, he wiped a bloody hand on his shirt. “Good thing this old house has eight-foot ceilings. Any higher and we wouldn’t have made it.”

He surveyed the lake that covered the farm. “I think we can take the apple harvest off the calendar.” The arms of submerged trees waved in agreement.

Dillon stood up and shuffled toward the chimney.

“Careful, son. It’s slick,” his foster father warned.

When the boy hesitated, his flip-flops lost purchase on the tiles. Miles’s wounded hand shot out and clutched nothing but air. The child tumbled over the edge and disappeared in the murky water.

The McCays locked eyes across the hole in their home. Rosemary spoke with the cool demeanor of a general. “I’ve got this.”

“I know you do. Wish I could swim.” He forced a smile.

Rosemary kicked off her shoes and executed a back roll into the flood.

Riding the current downstream, she scanned for Dillon’s crimson T-shirt. A minute passed, then two. Rosemary’s sense of smell sharpened as she reclaimed her home in the water. She homed in on the scents of fear, despair, and . . . seaweed. *Ah, child, why didn’t you tell me?*

Whipping past the hedgerow that bordered the orchard, she spotted the boy beneath her. The shrubbery had slowed the waters here.

Rosemary swam into a tree’s embrace and perched on one of its branches. Cupping her hands around her mouth, she called down. “Dillon, can you hear me?”

He didn’t raise his head. “You have some sort of underwater megaphone?”

“Nope. Don’t need one.”

“Well, now that you know what I am, you can go away and leave me alone.”

Rosemary’s eyes caressed his hair, drifted down his torso, and settled on his tail. “You’re a member of our family. That’s who you are. Look up, Dillon.”

When he did so, his jaw dropped. “You’re a mermaid!”

She wagged her tail. “We merpeople have to stick together. Let’s go back. Miles will be worried.”

“But he’ll see this!” Dillon thrashed the aqua appendage below his waist.

Rosemary grinned. “Nothing fazes Miles. He changed our daughters’ diapers. Their tails were turquoise striped. Time to go home, little merman.”

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