

Ligonier Valley Writers' Flash Fiction Contest 2022

Honorable Mention Unassigned

by Sharon A. Pruchnik of Windber, PA

When Cora arrived home from school, her mother was lying on the concrete beside the pool. The boys got home first and were already making waves, but Cora climbed the stairs to her room and unloaded her backpack onto the bed. Homework was to be completed asap in Cora's world. Besides, this week's assignment resurrected a curiosity she'd kept undercover for too long.

She started in the attic, opening the flaps of dusty boxes and pulling at things that caused the world around them to buckle and crash. Silverware and old plates, crystal baubles and sacks filled with coins.

When Cora saw the wooden trunk strapped in black leather with a tiny hole shaped like a secret, she hurried to her father's shaving kit, where she'd seen a brass key tucked beneath the stubby brush. A perfect fit.

There was only one item inside, as still as if it'd been tucked away in a hurry. Cora wasn't sure, but it appeared to be a coat. Not like her mother's leathers and furs, colorful wraps that complemented her eyes, but dark and rustic, stiff under Cora's fingertips. It seemed to tingle and zap, and it smelled of something ancient.

The shadows grew along the floorboards before Cora found her way back down the stairs. From her bedroom window she could see that her mother had taken on a golden glow in the falling sunlight. She shoved the coat into her backpack, skipped down the stairs, and landed in a beach chair beside her mother.

"What are you up to now, Cora?" Jamesina rolled onto her side and waited.

"I'm working on a school assignment, about ancestry."

Jamesina sighed and pulled her legs close under her. "Mr. Whittaker again?"

"Yes, but he only wants a paper this time. No special projects." Cora hadn't told her mother about the saliva sample she'd sent through the mail last time, lying to say she was eighteen.

Jamesina sighed again. "Your father has his grandmother's china in the attic, and ..."

"It's all Daddy's family's stuff. Nothing ..." Cora waited for a moment. "Nothing about you."

"I told you last time, my family was poor. There's nothing." Jamesina looked toward the setting sun. "You can tell him that."

"But I have to write it down!" Cora stomped her golden Nike and crossed her arms. She waited for the response; it could go either way.

Jamesina wrapped herself in a soft towel and gathered her hair into a diamond-studded knot. She gripped Cora's shoulders with determined hands. Cora stood steady until her mother's eyes went soft.

"Tomorrow, before the men awake," her mother said. "Wear your heavy jacket."

The car had traveled so far north the trees were crisp with ice. Every road sign they followed pointed north; every hour Cora huddled deeper into her coat and wrapped her arms tighter around her school notebook.

Before the sun rose over the horizon but when the air had begun to turn light, the green hills and mountains gave way to rocks and sand. Cora knew the smell of the sea before she saw it. She wrote the word “salty” in her book before hugging it again.

Jamesina gazed out the window as she drove. She’d been as icy as the ride, but now something seemed to thaw. Cora tried to see the changing colors of the sky through her mother’s eyes. “Soon?” Cora asked.

A sound came from her mother’s throat, so odd that Cora thought it might be a burp. But then Jamesina pulled to the side of the road and turned to her daughter. “My family didn’t live like you’re used to,” she said. “No microwaves or frilly clothes.”

Cora nodded but didn’t dare write. She shivered as she thought about the word “unassigned” from the ancestry report—over 50%. They’d refunded her money, no questions asked.

“Your father is a good man, but he stole me from my family.” Cora’s mother smiled, her dark eyes getting a little darker. “Which brought me you, of course. And the boys.”

“They’re not so special,” Cora said, even though her heart beat strongly in her chest.

“I thought I’d never return,” Jamesina said. “It hurts me just to look.” She stepped out of the car and headed toward the shoreline, which moved and called to the growing light as if it were alive. Near the water was a gathering of seals.

Cora retrieved her backpack from the floor of the backseat. She gathered the rough coat in her arms and carried it as quickly as she was able to where her mother crouched low in the rocky sand, her bare arm resting on the back of a mottled-looking seal. Her mother’s lips trembled. “Where did you—”

“The attic, in a trunk with Father’s initials.”

“You shouldn’t,” her mother said, but her words drifted far away when Cora laid the coat along Jamesina’s back. Once again it tingled and zapped—this time desperately—as it clung to the wearying flesh.

Jamesina’s eyes filled as she allowed the rough pelt to cover her bare arms. “Selkie folk. Your ancestry.” Her voice was awkward, hesitant. “This is . . . me.” Her mother transformed before Cora’s eyes, sloughing off the clothes and flesh of a human to become one of the seals. Her eyes softened and grew as she wrapped her flippers around the roly-poly body beside her. “Your grandmother.”

“Hello,” Cora said.

Jamesina’s mouth pouted into a kiss. “Thank you.” It was Cora who held her breath when they splashed into the sea.

Icy water seeped through the golden Nikes to Cora’s toes. When she breathed again her mother was gone. All that was left was ocean and sky, a car by the side of the road. Plus whatever was within her, no longer unassigned. Cora thought about her mother’s face, light glinting from her eyes. Selkie folk, but then what? Cora didn’t have a word for it. She’d write it down, but she didn’t have the words.

Sharon A. Pruchnik's short stories have appeared in Atticus Review and The Feathertale Review and have received recognition from the Westmoreland Arts and Heritage Festival and Ligonier Valley Writers. She lives the small-town life in Windber, PA, with her always-supportive husband and one peculiar cat.