

A Creek Kid's Gift

Grass crackles beneath her feet, tiny girl's, saddle shoes, no strings, no socks. Bare feet. January. Brutal winter—brutal life.

Dry white frost lavishes each blade of grass with cold—and beauty—a source of intrigue to the child. Wading through the clumps of mysterious grass, she growls back at the howling wintry wind, “Dog wind. I know how to handle you.”

I know how to handle you. She doesn't know fear. What's scarier than gnawing hunger, the pains in her belly at lunch, when the other kids gallop to the cafeteria—all but her—and she stays in the classroom alone? What's scarier than running with Mommy, while Daddy chases them with the axe and yells, “I'm gonna chop you into pieces!”

Nope. No room in her life for fear. The wind, in particular, cold but ubiquitous, flies at her side, yapping like an invisible dog. She pets it, embraces its chill in her girlish bones, licking a stray snowflake, testing the air with her tongue. No fear here. Like a field mouse caught out in the open by a hawk, she shifts her attention with lightning speed. Eyes blinking, head down, she darts off. Down the creek bank she flies, crushing clumps of grass, feeling the snow but not the cold needling her feet. A wispy thing, more bone than meat, she runs, feet snapping heads from the cringing grass, her feet leaving slushy snow churning in her wake.

She's a Creek kid, one of those *Creeks*. It's an apt name for a family that lives on the bank of the creek that snakes between the hill and Route 772 and runs behind their house. Daddy drinks up the Creeks' check, sells their food stamps for Bugler. Mama don't work. This kid belongs to *that family* up the road—if family's what you can call them. “Fearless,” some say of the girl. “Idiot,” say others. “Poor as a church mouse,”

lament her teachers, who've bought her more than one pair of socks, which she refuses to wear. "In need of education, *assistance*," say the social workers. If they'd ask, she'd straighten them out. "*Leave me alone.*" Proud. The girl is proud—albeit a Creek.

She squints into the thieving milk-white sun, casting its weak winter glare, cheating her of her shadow. No fair! Wind-dog beside her, panting, the girl ignores the sun and drops her gaze to the raging creek bed. A recent flood, unusual for December, brings the water slamming down the valley, raging through the narrow creek bed wedged between the Appalachian hills. Tinged with a yellow muddy froth, it fumes past, water the color of shit, frothing angry water, shoving rocks the size of skulls ahead, clearing its outraged path. The child delights in its rumbling. It's nature's ruthless fray, no stranger to a Creek kid, whose house is mostly slats propped up, tin roof, but all occupants inside as exposed to the wind and rain and cold as cattle in a barn. Between sounds from the roiling water and the tumbling boulders, if she listens carefully, she hears their conversation.

"Look out! Look out!" the fierce tumbling boulders warn. The water's like the girl's mother, a continuous stream of fear and worry rushing by on a cold sharp current. Fearful for her child's safety, but irate with the child who's never home on time, the enraged creek calls her daughter with fevered roaring breath: "Come. Come home, my child, and be safe, safe, safe." *Rumble, rumble, rumble. Safe, safe, safe.*

The girl stares at the violent churning water and listens to the warning that is a lie and stares. What to do? If she tries, she could drown . . .

Up the creek bank she paces. Then down. Up. Down. Up. Down.

And finally back down stream, mind made up. "You are no enemy of mine," she

tells the dizzying swirling water. “I’m a Creek. I know how to handle you.”

The water has beaten man-sized holes into the bank, pummeling the breast of the creek bank into an inlet. —*Come, child. No need to worry.* That’s the talk she’s hearing, not the noisy, rumbling water, nor the terror that is shrieking—*Be careful! Be careful! Be careful!*—within her own intrepid breast.

Yes. Here. This is it, a spot made perfect by a clump of stones, forced by the crashing water to a halt between thick boulders that tremble like two exhausted birthing thighs. In she wades, up to her knees, the icy water shocking her system, stealing her breath. Along the creek bank, swallowed in the wind, a girl’s tiny squeal can be heard—
“Eeeeeee!”

Any other time, she’d not dare the rapid swirling water, but the inlet looks safe, a beckoning harbor of rock and beaten mud like the earth’s arms reaching for her. She’s practiced braving the creek’s rapids each day after school—Christmas break—and now feels up to speed, capable. Bold. “I’m a Creek kid. I’m not afraid.”

Her tongue presses between her lips. Deep concentration. Her forehead curls into a tight frown. Determination. “I will cross the creek. I will make it to the other side.”

What’s so important over there?

Easy to figure. It’s a dump. Creek kids haunt the dumps, pawing through others’ garbage, looking for aluminum, copper, steel, or anything they can sell to buy food. *That* family up the road, those poor bastards, are always starving. They eat spotted apples from frost-bitten trees, or last year’s walnuts that have fallen to ground. One winter, they ate mice from their woodbox and turnips frozen beneath the ground. When snow flies and blizzard winds whip like maverick devils through the eaves of their tarpaper shanty,

they huddle beneath scratchy army surplus blankets, like cattle squeezed together in a single room. The resolute whack of their hammer crushing walnuts can be heard by passersby. The shells, pulverized and then picked empty of meat with bobby pins, blanket the ground. They spread upon snow like black bones from crushed baby devils.

Today's expedition is different. No scavenging for junk to sell for food. The child comes to the creek on a private mission, independent of her family's usual foraging. Eyes wide, calculating—can I make it?—she leverages her gaze against the opposite creek bank, lifting its belly above the water, and gauges her chances. Over and over, she calculates. *If I jump, will I make it?*

She stands just so, ready to spring. The inlet's icy waves drench her bare ankles, but there's that spot on the opposite bank. She must jump.

She fills her lungs with air, but keeps her eyes open. Life is to be faced—squarely on—and with no fear. It's the Creek kids' way.

She leaps.

Landing on the opposite bank, she whoops with breathless glee. "Safe!"

Behind her, the cold boiling rapids bite her ankles. Angry froth gnashes, trying to suck her into the creek's icy maw. Slowly, careful not to slip, she stands, jams her hands inside the pockets of her corduroy jacket, beaten to a fine mesh by daily wear. Too thin this winter's day, it's all she owns. She knows no warmth of down, nor security of wool. She doesn't miss these comforts. How miss what you've never known? It's like fear, or the wind. Why call it enemy if you must live with it every day?

Trudging forward, gaze locked on a point a few feet ahead, she stops, frozen gloveless hands slapping tight to her head. "Ah!"

Despair.

The Dump. The dump she's risked all to plunder is flooded. Brown water the color of runny shit stirs the brew, the diarrhea mishmash of tossed off coffee grounds, eggshells, paper plates, junk mail. It's not a familiar term. *Junk mail*. She believes as she wishes to that these odd sized, brightly colored letters, all unopened, are letters left for Santa. What neglectful boy or girl would leave them forgotten? *Not* open these?

And so *many*.

Her eyes shine. This is *the* mystery. Christmas. She's heard other kids talk about it. She's seen the warm glow on their faces, the gleam in their eyes. She's dreamed of having one of her own—someday.

The garbage heap is a Creek kid's bittersweet brew, the leftovers from Christmas day, mixed with the frozen putrefaction of the dumped table scraps of those who live up and down the creek. The garbage of families who *eat*. The blessed—not Creeks. There is, however, a pleasing array of valuable aluminum pie pans. They could be sold for junk. If only her intent today was to come dumping, searching for metals to sell, it'd be a gold mine. Sudden images cloud her brain. These leftovers from someone's Christmas feast make her belly ache in unexpected ways, in ways it ached when she smelled food cooking down the hall in the school cafeteria, but never made it there once to eat. Stayed instead in the classroom, alone, and gazed at the perfect lines on the board. A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H. I. J. K. L. M. N. O. P. Q. R. S. T. U. V. W. X. Y. Z. This Creek kid knows her ABC's. She'd stared at that board too long.

She smacks her lips, imagining food, her gut reminding her that school isn't the only place she never eats. At home there is boiled turnips, fried apples her mother stores

under the bed to keep them from rotting, walnuts she must crack and pick clean with bobby pins.

What . . . would it be like . . . to wake up Christmas morning and eat eggs? Oh, and bacon? Christmas turkey? Pie baked in a store-bought aluminum pan? Lordy!

The dog-wind grabs her with its hard teeth, shakes her back from such imaginings. It sneaks bone-hard canines inside her jacket and nips her grinning ribs, tiny neck, fragile shoulders. Its howl magnifies the ache, the indistinct voice whispering, *What would it be like to have a Christmas tree?*

Up-ended, its fat bottom resting atop the heap of coffee grounds and trash, a white pine quakes in the wind. Spell bound, breathless, adoring, the girl caresses the tree with wide loving eyes, watches the tree, a lone green beacon, Christmas candle atop the dump, a cake made of the garbage of others and a small girl's dreams. It's a lovely living thing, the dog-wind rattling the bare pine's trembling limbs, silvery icicles shivering like cold palsied fingers, so that it looks to be breathing. Lifelike. A few cracked ornaments list idly along its spine, grayed by winter but straight and proud, regardless. If Mama were here, she'd jerk those suckers off that tree and separate out the steel hooks from the busted ornaments. They'd bring money at the junkyard. She tries to ignore the tree, the ache in her belly seizing her with a cramp. Why miss something you've never had?

That's easy. Any kid loves to imagine how it will be when her fantasy becomes real. She needs a dream, however small. Even a Creek kid, *especially* a Creek kid, needs a dream. So she turns her attention to the prize. All she's dared hope for, the reason she's braved the raging creek, it beckons. She picks her way over the top of brush, washed beneath the dump by the water, and claws a path toward it, struggling for a

foothold on piles of begrimed empty gift boxes, vacated recently by their former tenants: dolls, toy cars, checker games, puzzles. What lucky girl might receive so many gifts? Boy oh boy, those kids, *not* the Creeks, have it made, don't they? This inequity, a fluke of the stupid universe, fuels her enthusiasm for the task at hand. She's not lucky. Never was. She's a Creek—and Creeks ain't got no damn luck. So repeating what she's learned from her brothers, she whispers under her breath, "Fuckit!"

Her gaze travels the empty gift boxes, their residents now claimed by kids in loving homes of the lucky girls who are not—for sure—anyone named Creek. With the expert gaze of a Creek kid for anything useful, recyclable, she assesses wrappings torn off in a mad rush by the lucky kids whose parents foresaw Christmas. Wrappings look crumpled, attacked perhaps too savagely by the joyful kids who opened those gifts. No matter. It's all pretty, *really* pretty. One piece of wrapping catches her eye. Smiling Santa with a fluffy white beard and rosy cheeks ho-ho-hos his way in neat rows across the red paper. The girl shushes her squeal of delight. "Don't let people know," her mother chided, when they'd first gone dumping. "They'll want to steal your dump."

The girl knows better. She hears kids at school whispering, snickering. Dumping is a shameful act—shameful and disgusting. It's a nasty Creek family habit. The girl can't figure this out, but knows her classmates must be right. They're the ones lucky enough to get Christmas presents.

A white bow, skinny ribbons tied in a flowery poof, tears the echo of classmates' snickers from her mind, banishes worries over the social intricacies, the shame of dumping, the Creeks' chief source of income and, often, of food. She dives for the bow, barely misses tumbling back into the roiling water flooding the creek bed behind her.

“Dammit!”

The Creeks also curse, a lot. The boys pick their noses and don’t wear coats. It’s another reason they’re shunned from dinners at church. Biting her lip, she pulls and tugs. Damn bow! Fuckit! It’s stuck tight to a piece of wrapping paper. Not the one with the smiling Santa with the old man’s beard, but another piece. This one’s blue and sports pictures of fat snowmen wearing bright red scarves and black hats. She hates snowmen. They’re not real, like Santa. Their black eyes and cold stares scare her. That carrot stuck in Mr. Snowman’s eyes is just one big goddamned fucking waste of food.

“Unh!” The bow comes off. The girl grabs the sheet of wrapping paper with the red smiling Santa and rips it from the gift box, former home to a tanned Barbie doll, shown on the box wearing a frothy pink sparkly dress. What a dream to befriend such a doll. She’d not pull off Barbie’s head or cut her spun gold hair, like she’d seen some girls do—monsters! No, she’d cut out the inside pocket of her corduroy jacket to make Barbie a little coat just like hers. Come spring, she’d even teach Barbie how to forage for dandelion greens. Or, oh boy, the two might even go dumping. Oh, what fun they’d have, wearing matching coats and sloshing around in dumps up and down the creek.

If only—

Bow. Wrapping paper. She’s got them collected. Now all she needs is the gift. There must be a gift. *Must* be. But what can it be?

She climbs off the dump, leaping pits and holes filled with last fall’s frozen garbage, and then lands smack on the creek bank. So nimble, this Creek kid, but this is not a good spot. People driving by can see her. They’ll know she’s been dumping. “Shame on you. Shame, shame, shame.” She’s not afraid of the dog-wind that numbs

her fingers and flays her cheeks, the icy water, or even drowning. But those frowning faces . . . the *judgment*. It's to be avoided.

She hides the bow and wrapping paper inside her jacket. She can't stand here worrying about the only thing she can't find. Hurry! Get out of the open. People will see and they will *know*. She's been dumping. Stumbling back down the bank, she picks an oblong stone from the inlet cut in against the creek bed. It's tinged with red stripes, and pretty. She wipes it dry on her sleeves. *The gift*. This is it.

Toes feeling icy, wind biting her cheeks, she soars. Every little girl dreams of waking up Christmas morning and discovering she's friends with Barbie. Even better, though, than taking Barbie dumping when winter's icy grip finally relents, and watching her take her first steps in those tiny high heels, is being the first Creek kid to find Mama a Christmas present.

She tucks her gift into her jacket pocket, feeling the stone's grainy surface breathe as her own warmth and vigor enliven it. Outside her home, where the ugly black bones of crushed baby devils litter the snow—the Creek boys have been eating walnuts!—she squats in the slush and swathes the rock—Mama's gift—in the crumpled wrapping. Beaming, she pats on the white bow with a dab of spit. Barely able to wait, she's inside the shanty in a heartbeat and offering her gift to Mama, small hand palm up, eyes smiling. “For you. Merry Christmas.”

Mama's weary frown says she neither expects—nor gives—gifts. She grasps it, wrapped in the torn ragged paper, topped with a straggly white bow soiled with coffee grounds, Santa's nice white beard a little splotchy, too. “What's this, child?”

The girl bites her lip, frowns. “Don't you like it, Mama?”

Other families smile and hug when they exchange gifts. Why not the Creeks?

Mama drops her hands to her sides, a familiar gesture of defeat. Weariness.

“Child, goddammit. Christmas was last week. It’s not Christmas anymore. . . .”

“I know, Mama, but I didn’t have you a gift . . .”

Her feet tingle from the snow and water and cold she’s braved to make this Christmas good for Mama. Hands jet inside the girl’s jacket, along with the gift, which Mama returns: “Here, go toss this back in the creek.”

She pulls her hands from their safe little sockets underneath her arms. They follow her disappointed frown, retreating to her sides where, like Mama’s, they hang in limp defeat. She runs back outside into the comforting dog wind. Its licks her face and barks and runs beside her and leaves noiseless tracks in the snow, where she stomps the pile of crushed baby-devil walnut shells. “Fuckit!” Chest thumping, she takes off running. Running, running, running.

Back at the dump, she stops, gazes into the mocking, shit-colored water. *See? Told ya. I toss rocks about all day long. They’re stupid.*

The creek is right. Rocks suddenly seem stupid, hateful. They hunker all clumpy and wet in the creek bed—and do nothing. Stupid rocks. Why would Mama be happy getting a stupid rock for a Christmas gift? Why do all those other kids think Christmas is such a big deal? They’re stupider than the stupid rock she’d given Mama, stupider even than a Creek kid. She pauses to wipe tears, the ones the dog wind can’t lick dry. They do one thing right, though, those other kids—*not* Creeks—who think Christmas is a big deal. They throw away enough garbage to keep the Creeks fed. Just not enough to make them have a happy Christmas. Not enough garbage in the world to do *that*.