

Something Like Sam

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First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2016 Young Writers' Contest

Montgomery Blair High School—Silver Spring, MD

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There's always one.

That one kid, sitting alone, reading a book, mechanically chewing on his PB&J, with the crusts cut off. I bet his mom made him that PB&J. I bet she homeschooled him too, for a while, but stopped when he turned 11 or 12 because, out of nowhere, she decided she was depriving him of a social life or some other stupid mom shit. So she slapped him on the back and sent him off to a new school where no one knew him, and he knew no one. And because he's been homeschooled, he's really shy and doesn't know how to act around other kids, and never ends up making any friends. And here he is today. Surrounded by hundreds of kids and completely alone. I hate those kinds of parents.

I try not to look at the kid, but every now and then I can't help but stare. I mean come on. Here is a teenager, and not like a 14 year old, this kid is 17 at least, so an experienced teenager, sitting totally alone on the floor of a high school hallway. I'm not even kidding, this dude looked like a picturesque geek that got dragged straight out of a Weezer music video.

He's like a really bad car accident, or a homeless person. You try not to look, but some things are too sad or too awesome to avoid. The harder you try not to look, the more you want to. Unfortunately, today's the day he catches me looking. But I don't let him know I'm ashamed. You see, most people look away when they get caught staring. Not me. Because once someone notices you looking at them, they start looking at you to see if you kept looking at them, so you keep looking at them to see if they're still looking at you; it's a vicious cycle of awkwardness. Ever make eye contact with someone at the gym? Oh my god, it's the fucking worst. There's this fat Asian dude that goes to my gym. He caught me glancing at him once. Once! But now, whenever we're working out at the same time, his eyes are glued on me. I can feel it. I've started working out earlier just to avoid him.

So here's what I do. If I get caught staring, I just keep on staring. I let the kid know, "Yeah, I was staring. I'm not embarrassed. You're a junior in high school, and you're sitting completely alone on the floor of the hallway eating a PB&J with the crust cut off. I find that odd, and if you're upset that people keep looking at you, then maybe you should just go eat lunch in the math office. Or better yet, take the initiative and make some goddamn friends."

I keep staring until he looks away. It's important to treat people like people.

My best friend, Jonah, is an idiot. It's not like I blame him or anything. He's still a really nice guy. My favorite thing about Jonah is that he's not one of those in-your-face idiots. He's more of a chill; every-now-and-then-slip-something-homophobic-by-accident sort of idiot. I don't really mind it when he makes those kinds of slips, because my second best friend, Andy, is gay, and he's cool with it.

So I'm still staring at this kid who is weirdly still staring at me. And I think his name was something like Sam. So obviously I can't look away, because then he would win, but I really want to because Andy is telling this sort of awesome story about his brother, Michael, who apparently got arrested or something, but I could only really half pay attention because I was busy staring at something like Sam. So Jonah interrupts Andy, because Jonah can be sort of a dick like that sometimes, and says "Lucas, why are you staring at Simon? Is he your boyfriend?"

And Andy says, "For real, dude? I was in the middle of a story."

So Jonah says, "My bad. Go ahead."

And Andy says, "Anyway, so Mitchell is totally flipping out right now, because he's hanging on the side of the fence, and his pants are like totally stuck, right? ... And Chase is screaming his ass off, and shouts 'DUDE!' ... So Chase is in the back of this police car, and Mitchell is just running, literally in nothing but his boxers

... Are you fucking serious?"

Both Jonah and I had stopped listening. Jonah seems to think there's something really awesome in something like Sam's direction, I guess by the way I've been staring at him, so now Jonah's staring at the kid with so much concentration that I think he's gonna vomit.

"Jonah, I'm in the middle of something! What's so goddamn interesting about Seamus?"

"I don't know, ask Lucas."

"Lucas!"

"Huh?"

"What are you staring at?"

"Sam."

"Who?"

"He means Simon," Jonah chimes in. Andy looks where he's pointing.

"You mean Seamus?" Andy chimes back.

"Who?" I ask.

Now the three of us have joined forces, and we are staring at something like Sam with more conviction than we would ever devote to something as trivial and meaningless as homework.

"Whatchastaringat?" Carrie asks. She gives Jonah a kiss on his cheek and the three of us a concerned look. Jonah's face is now so red he looked like an angry tomato. I assume. I can't tell or anything, my attention was sort of elsewhere, but I've seen Jonah trying to play chess, so I'm familiar with the look. It's kind of hilarious.

"Jonahyoulookconstipated" Carrie said, putting her arm around his neck and sitting on his lap. Carrie loves sitting on laps. We went out a few months ago, and she would sit on my lap all the time, which was sort of cute I guess, but also pretty annoying and kind of strippery. I heard something about Carrie's parents splitting up when she was a kid, which makes sense to me because she seems to have issues with boundaries. My sister had the same problems when our parents divorced, but my dad was super strict and made sure Kate, that's my sister, never got in any trouble and learned how to respect people's personal space. I feel bad that Carrie never got to have that.

So Carrie is snuggled into Jonah's lap.

"WhyreyoustaringatStanley?"

"Babe, you gotta learn how to enunciate."

"Why – are – you – stare – ing – at – Stan – Ley?"

"Ask Lucas."

"Luke – ass."

"Yeah"

"Why – are – you – stare – ing – at – that – kid."

"Because he's staring at me."

"Why – is – he – stare – ing – at – you?"

"Because I'm staring at him."

The questions ceased.

So the something like Sam is still staring at me. It's been about 20 minutes. There are about 10 minutes left in lunch. I obviously can't look away now. It would be way too awkward. There is now small group of people surrounding me. Out of the corner of my eye, I would guesstimate about 20 or so students. And a couple of teachers. Each of them would tell the same story: they were walking down the hall, saw me and Jonah and Andy and Carrie and whoever else staring at something like Sam, and decided that there must be something to it. So more and more people showed up, and more and more people started staring at something like Sam, who was still staring at me, and who, for the record, had finished his PB&J a while ago.

Ring Ring Ring Ring

Finally. The bell. It's over. It's finally. Fucking. Over. I reach for my backpack, letting something like Sam know that I'm finished. Without breaking eye contact, of course. But the kid just sits there. I can't quite tell if he's bored or amused. I know he's being pretty rude, and I'm pretty sure he knows he's being pretty rude, and I'm pretty sure he knows I know he's being pretty rude. And I'm pretty pissed off, to be completely honest, because I was looking forward to Gym. But I guess I'm sitting this one out.

"What the hell are y'all doing here?" our spunky black principal exclaims.

Not a soul has stirred since the bell rang. Everyone was staring at something like Sam, except for something like Sam, who was staring at me, and our dear principal, who was not looking at anyone in particular. Oh, and she was kind of pissed.

"What is going on? Why aren't y'all in class?!"

Someone, I think it was Andy, made a vague gesture towards something like Sam.

"What're y'all staring at Stephen for?"

Someone else, I think it was this cute girl named Audrey, made a vague gesture towards me.

"Lucas. What is the meaning of this?" I made a vague gesture towards something like Sam.

"Has everyone here completely lost the use of language? I asked a question. I expect on answer. Lucas, why are y'all starin' at Stephen, and why is Stephen staring at you?"

I shrugged.

She paused.

I stared.

She stared.

Everybody stared.

“Enough staring, it’s time to go to class,” she said finally.

“I can’t. I’m sorry, but I can’t. I want to. I really do. But I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

Because it would be too awkward, that’s why. I’m not ashamed, and something like Sam needs to know that.

So it’s been three hours of nonstop staring. Staring. I’ve said it so many times that it’s starting to sound weird on my tongue. Staring. Staring. Staring? STARING. Staring. Why does that happen? I think it’s because when your mouth forms the same sounds for too long, your brain starts to focus on the sounds of word more than the meaning. Staring. That’s so weird.

Anyway, like I said, it’s been about three hours, and like half the school, about 700 kids, are crowded around me and something like Sam. I assume all the other students, and probably most of the other teachers, have just taken the day off and went home. Figures. To my left sits Andy, Jonah, and Carrie. To my right, Mrs. Jackson. The sight of something like Sam positively transfixes each and every person standing in that hallway. I guess everyone here assumed that if everyone else there was gonna stare at something like Sam like Sam, then there must be something to it.

It’s been an entire day, about 25 hours, since I started STARING? at something like Sam. No one has left, though a lot more people have shown up. There are so many people that the school can’t even fit them all. People are crowded in the streets, not even close to being able to see either something like Sam or me. I bet there are close to 5,000 people here. Jonah has already passed out from the stress or whatever, and he took Carrie along with him. On my right, I can hear Mrs. Jackson mumbling something about “gonna be late for class” under her breath. This whole thing is sort of getting outa hand.

By now, everyone must just think there must be something to it.

It’s been three days now. 72 hours. No food. No water. No sleep. No break in eye contact. I fear that starvation may soon set in. It’s been a while since I’ve eaten. This one time I heard this story on NPR, because I listen to NPR, about a dude who survived 27 days without eating anything. I mean he had water and everything,

but I mean still. That’s pretty impressive. So I figure I have at least a couple more days in me. And Sam’s a small dude. I’m not a linebacker or anything, but I know I can last longer than Sam, who’s a solid five inches shorter than me and like 20 pounds lighter, if I just keep focused.

Most of the people around me have passed out from hunger, dehydration, exhaustion, or the crippling pain at fixating on a single point for such a long time. Andy’s one of them. I’m pretty sure Jonah is dead, and there’s a good chance that Mrs. Jackson, who sits beside me, speaking in tongues, has totally lost her shit. And I’m getting there. I’m trying to focus. Right now I’m switching back and forth between something like Sam’s right and left eye. I’m losing it. And there he is. Something like Sam, confident as ever, sitting on the floor of the hallway of our school, without breaking a sweat.

It’s been a week and a half and I’m done. I actually think I’m going to die. In fact, I know I am. There’s no going back. And the worst part is that something like Sam can see it. He knows I’m finished, and he’s smiling. Rubbing it in. I hate people like that. So, after eleven days, sixteen hours, thirty-three minutes and twenty-two seconds of torture, I’ve had enough.

I scream.

“What do you want?! An apology? I’m sorry, OK? I’m sorry I was staring at you. I’m sorry I was judging you! I’m sorry I was an asshole. You’re real, OK? You’re a real human being. Maybe you don’t have any friends. Or maybe you’re just a goddamn introvert, and you like being alone. Or maybe I’m insecure, and I’m taking it out on you, because I don’t feel like my friends like me. Cuz you know what? I am kind of an asshole. Or maybe, I’m just making shit up, because it’s been a while since I ate, and this whole thing feels like a bad acid trip. And you don’t know what’s going on inside my head. No one does. Maybe my life sucks. You don’t know. Maybe your life sucks. I don’t know. But I’m fucking sorry. And hi, my name is Lucas.”

I look away, crying, ashamed. I don’t know how much time passes. I don’t even know if something like Sam or anyone else heard my climactic speech, but when I look up, I see that something like Sam hasn’t stopped staring at me. And he’s still smiling. With whatever strength he has managed to preserve, something like Sam brings himself to his feet and stumbles over to me, never looking away. Finally, he collapses to his knees in front of me and sticks out his hand.

“What’s up, Lucas? Name’s Tobin.”

Noah Berry

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Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2016 Young Writers' Contest

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

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The state began to administer the elixir via food factories and products such as lotion—any way to have it be consumed by citizens. It was mixed into state-produced drinks, state-produced condiments, state-produced frozen and baked goods, and into women's body creams. The elixir was named simply "140," the number being the amount of experiments it had taken to produce such a chemical. It was also determined that naming the elixir by its chemical formula would not be easily pronounceable by the general public. It wasn't long before every woman from coast to coast was rubbing 140-infused cream into their legs and serving 140-infused cheese pizzas to their families.

Advertisements called 140 the "major psychological breakthrough of the 39th century." Human trials had been conducted; All of the test subjects, of course, claimed that it "heightened and beautified the daily mortal experience." This was the topic of discussion on The Donald Shaw Show on a sunny May morning in the kitchen of the Berrys.

Mrs. Berry huddled over a steaming pan of eggs and bacon while Mr. Berry read the paper at the table. Mr. Berry lifted his head from the paper and tuned in to Donald Shaw. "140 is already being implemented into factories," Shaw was saying. "We have collected information from a recent study at The New University which predicts that, in just a few months, 97 percent of all food and beauty companies nationwide will be utilizing this revolutionary chemical in their own factories."

"Did you hear that Margaret?" Mr. Berry asked, glancing over at his wife quickly before turning back to the television. "Did you hear what he said about this 140 business?"

"In the past month, it has been certified as safe and healthy to consume," Shaw continued. "140 will be injected into different foods, makeup, body creams, and other products in the coming months with the goal being increased market saturation. Coming up next we have Jerry Tyler, whose—"

Mr. Berry immediately turned down the television. "Did you hear that?" Mrs. Berry looked up from the skillet with a soft expression on her face.

"Yes, I did," she said. "140 is all the rage nowadays—the company that created it, The Ordo Company I think it's called, gave out free samples of their lotion just the other day."

"Where?" Mr. Berry asked sharply. He'd had no idea that it was already so close to home.

"Down at the market. All of my friends use 140 cream, Noah."

"Well I can't say that I want you to," Mr. Berry said.

"And why not?"

"The whole thing—" he said, taking a quick sip of coffee most definitely steeped in 140. "—the whole thing rubs me the wrong way. And I don't like it." He flipped a page of his newspaper. "I don't like it," he repeated.

"Well, darling..." she said, turning an egg over. The hot oil popped and made a human-like whine. "... you know it's in practically everything already. You heard what Donald Shaw said, didn't you? I think it's something like 62 percent of the food we eat has 140 in it." A minute later, she set down a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast in front of Mr. Berry, who looked down at it in disgust, took one last sip of coffee, and refused his breakfast. The next day, Mr. Berry restricted himself to non-factory foods.

Mr. and Mrs. Berry were both retired and lived in Pleasant Grove, a small suburban community a couple hours away from the capital. Over the past several years, the neighborhood patrol had become more and more rigorous. The streets were always kept clean, the green lawns freshly trimmed, and the houses impeccably maintained. The wives pruned the garden tulips every morning, the husbands took out the lawnmower every Saturday, and all of the children played respectfully in the yards of their homes every Sunday. Prune, trim, play. Prune, trim, play. Prune, trim, play. It was the natural rhythm of Pleasant Grove.

The Ordo Company's "140," which was released into the factories in April, became a household word by May. Donald Shaw's segments describing 140 and its influence on world peace were the talk of the town. Soon, his face was on every billboard, with the slogan, "Heighten and beautify your life!" in joyful, bright blue font.

"140? What's that?" the children inquired at the dinner tables when they overheard Donald Shaw mention it on his talk show. Mothers began to feed their children 140 candy, put on 140 lipstick, and give their husbands 140 shaving cream.

"It's the major psychological breakthrough of the 39th century!" the teenagers gushed cheerfully on their way to school.

"It heightens and beautifies the daily mortal experience," fathers insisted. "Once you have a nice, healthy dose of the stuff, you can never go back."

"Noah? Did you hear? It's in as much as 71 percent of the food we eat! How lovely," Mrs. Berry said as she stood in front of the bathroom mirror calling to her husband through the open door. She applied some 140 cream under her eyes for puffiness and began to brush her teeth.

In the bedroom, Mr. Berry sat upright against the headboard with the duvet enveloping his small form. He laid down the book he was reading. How lovely? How lovely? How terrible, how disgusting. Preposterous, even. And how strange his wife was becoming. All she spoke of was 140—the lotion, the lipstick, and the repulsive shaving cream she tried to have him use! She hadn't argued with him in months, she went through the same routine everyday (cooking and pruning), all the same with a smile on her face. Her smile—a deceptively cheerful, sugary smile. He occasionally studied the framed photo of him and his wife from several years ago. Her old, natural smile bore no resemblance to the smile she had today. Absolutely not.

"Dear, what are you reading?" Mrs. Berry asked as she came in from the bathroom.

"Nothing," he answered bitterly, for he kept their conversations short these days.

"Why read when you can watch the television? There's a new Donald Shaw on tonight—some feature on The Ordo Company." And with that, she pointed the remote towards the TV. She turned off the lamp and tucked herself into the covers next to her husband.

Pleasant Grove, with its beautiful wives in their pastel dresses, with its handsome husbands in their suits, and its polite children in their play clothes. Every person their place and every place its person. Prune, trim, play. Prune, trim, play. Prune, trim, play. It was the natural rhythm of Pleasant Grove, with its tulips and lawns and weekend barbecues. But the word got out about old Noah Berry, the strange man from Pleasant Grove who would not trim. Old Noah Berry, who would not consume 140. Not consume 140? How utterly bizarre, how laughable and inhuman!

"Don't you want to enjoy life at all? Heighten it, beautify it?" Mrs. Berry asked him once.

"No. No, I do not," he said tightly, avoiding further discussion.

I really ought to make an appointment with the local physician. I'm sure the physician has dealt with cases like Noah's, Mrs. Berry thought as she placed some bread into the toaster oven. The toaster gleamed with the insignia, The Ordo Company. Serving up smiles since 3801.

"He won't eat 140?" Flora Bates, the next-door neighbor asked. Mrs. Bates was hunched over her tulips with gardening gloves, dutifully making sure that they were secured in the ground. She had her shiny brown hair tied back in a ponytail. Mrs. Berry spoke to her urgently over the wooden fence that stood in-between their two homes.

"No, he won't. He thinks it's wrong," she said.

"What's so wrong about being happy and content? It's a miracle, really! Just imagine, the psychological breakthrough of the 39th century!"

"That's what I tell him, Flora. He doesn't believe me," Mrs. Berry insisted.

"Do you think he might believe John?" Mrs. Bates asked, glancing up from her tulips—her tulips were the creamiest, reddest, and brightest much to the envy of all of the other wives.

Benevolent, mild-tempered John Bates, thought Mrs. Berry. He may convince poor old Noah after all! "Yes, yes he might, Flora! What a splendid idea. And, Flora, how extraordinary your tulips are. I can never get them as nice as yours."

Mr. and Mrs. Bates were invited to dine with them the following Friday evening, so naturally Mrs. Berry spent all day cooking a large feast. Mr. Berry came into the kitchen, his face a distorted grimace, as he surveyed his wife in her apron surrounded by an array of food. "What's all of this?" he asked, pouring himself a glass of filtered water. Safe water.

"John and Flora Bates are spending the evening with us," she said joyfully, placing a vase of raspberry-red tulips onto the table.

"Must they?" Mr. Berry asked. He could already sense the artificial aura of a cheery dinner party and smell the vile 140 in the very air he breathed. It choked him.

"They're coming, Noah, and that's that," she said, her smile never fading. "Now go upstairs and change into a nice suit, the one I bought you." Mr. Berry did as he was told.

John and Flora Bates arrived an hour later, him in a crisply-ironed suit, her in a navy blue dress that reached her knees. They were welcomed into the home of the Berrys and walked into the living room, where they sat down for tomato bruschetta and wine. Mr. Berry situated himself in the leather armchair nearest the window and farthest from the sitting area.

"Now," John Bates said as he got comfortable on the couch. He took a small sip of wine before he spoke. "What's this I hear, Noah? About you and 140?"

"What is it you hear, John?" Mr. Berry said, disliking his ambiguity.

"Well, simply that you've shown no interest in it," he responded casually, then smiled. "You know, it's the psych—"

"Yes, I realize it's the psychological breakthrough of the 39th century," Mr. Berry snapped. John Bates was taken aback, but regained his composure and continued.

"You know, it only makes you happier. Just sort of... well, heightens and beautifies the mortal experience. Do you see what I mean?"

"No," Mr. Berry said, then looked out the window. "No, I don't. John, don't you remember the glory of the old days? When every choice was the choice of each individual person, not so much the state. Not this Ordo Company or this 140 thing. What about genuine feeling? What if I want to be upset?"

"Want to be upset?" Mr. Bates asked, then chuckled. "I can't imagine the feeling."

"Forget it, then," Mr. Berry said, realizing at once who he was speaking to. Then he added sharply, "I'd be happy if I never saw or heard anything about 140 again—Ever." He looked over at Mrs. Berry, then Mrs. Bates, and then Mr. Bates. All of them looked at him with the same, mutual expression—a soft, somewhat false smile that didn't touch their eyes. A smile that wasn't joy, so much as it was habit.

"It's all right, dear, it's all right," Mrs. Berry said in an effort to soothe him.

"It's okay. Really, Noah," Mrs. Bates said. "Some people simply dislike the whole idea of 140."

"Absolutely, it's nothing you have to worry about," Mr. Bates said, chewing his bruschetta happily.

"Nothing I have to worry about? Why on earth would I be worried?" Mr. Berry said.

"That's right," Mr. Bates answered, grinning. "Now, how does dinner sound, everyone?"

Pleasant Grove, with its beautiful wives in their pastel dresses, with its handsome husbands in their suits, and its polite children in their play clothes. Every person their place and every place its person. Prune, trim, play. Prune, trim, play. Prune, trim, play. It was the natural rhythm, the natural beat of an ordinary Saturday. The women sipped lemonade, the men grilled burgers, the children played hopscotch on the sidewalk. The neighborhood patrol kept the streets spotless. The air was alive with the thickness of bees buzzing and grills smoking and the world humming.

"Noah, did you hear?" Mrs. Berry said, as she and her husband took a stroll around the neighborhood. A child jumped rope in a nearby yard and a man exited his house, clad in an Ordo suit. The Berrys strolled past Ruby Larson's property, with its sprawling garden of tulips, thyme, rosemary, and tomatoes. How wonderful the world was! How lush and inspirational! "It's in as much as 94 percent of the food we eat! How lovely," Mrs. Berry said, then turned her head towards her husband and flashed a dimpled smile. She was wearing her lemon yellow dress today. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Absolutely, dear. Did you hear," he added with fervor, "that it's the psychological breakthrough of the 39th century?" He smiled—a deceptively cheerful, sugary smile—and waved at Mr. Newman across the street.

"Yes, I did," Mrs. Berry answered, taking his hand in hers. "I believe I heard it on the Donald Shaw segment from last night..."

The Dryad's Love

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Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2016 Young Writers' Contest

Home Schooled—New Market, MD

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Once, in a land long forgotten, there was a forest—a lush forest with beautiful, tall trees, plush, mossy floors, and a plethora of living things. One of the many creatures that resided there was a dryad named Veirra. Veirra was very beautiful, with light blue hair, fair, alabaster skin, a long, dragging green dress of leaves, and bright hazel eyes. Adorning her head were sprigs of baby's breath and zigzagging across her skin were thin green vines.

Veirra, beautiful though she was, was very lonely. The tree with which her being was connected, to which she must stay near, was at the very edge of the wood, largely isolating her from the other dryads and forest peoples deeper within.

Down a little path running by her tree was a lush little meadow with a small, clear, blue pool of water at its center. In spots, the sunlight would cascade down through the veil of leaves, casting an emerald glow upon the area. This round meadow was surrounded on all sides with ferns and bushes, bounding its perfection from the rest of the forest.

It was here that she spent much of her time, tending to a little garden she kept, caring for the birds, and staring into the reflective surface of the still pool.

One day, while she was gazing at her image in the waters, she heard the sound of voices coming from the direction of her tree. Curious and concerned, she silently crept near to investigate. Resting under the overhanging branches of her tree were two humans, a man and a pregnant woman. Veirra knew how dangerous humans could be, so she was wary.

She soon saw that there were more humans a little farther out. She observed that they were setting up a camp near the brook that flowed from her forest to the plain beyond. After a few weeks, a little village was born on the spot. The man and the woman built their cottage nearest the overhanging branches of her tree, at the edge of the settlement.

Not long afterwards, a baby boy was born to them. When Veirra first saw him, she was immediately taken by his beauty and perfection. Veirra went down to her meadow, and stared into the pool, thinking about the babe as she looked at her reflection.

One afternoon, a couple of months later, while she was tending to her garden, she heard something coming down the path. Hastily, she concealed herself behind a tree to see what was approaching. It was the man and the woman, with the babe they called Dergis in her arms. When they found the meadow, they stared with amazement at the beauty that surrounded them.

Over the next few years, the family returned there frequently. The mother would occasionally bathe the little boy in the sparkling pool, and they would run along with glee, barefoot on the soft moss floor. Every day, Veirra fell more in love with the little boy. He was so beautiful, sweet and full of life. When he was about four years old, a sister was born to him. Veirra adored how much he cared about her, how gentle he was.

By the time he was five years of age, he would often come to the meadow by himself, smelling the flowers from the garden, rolling around in the grass, chasing the butterflies, feeding the birds, and sticking his feet into the cool waters of the pool.

Veirra decided that she would leave gifts for him when he came. She collected berries, beautiful stones, flowers, and other things, and placed them all before the water's edge. The boy was delighted to receive these gifts. Even when she could tell he was upset, the gifts would gladden him unwaveringly. He would thank the Great Spirit of the Forest for providing them to him.

Veirra noticed that the boy was growing up fast. It only seemed like a season's time had passed since they had come to her tree. Veirra (young for a dryad though she was) had lived about 700 years. It dawned on her that the life of a human was short. She had become so attached to the boy that she grew worried about losing

him. She contemplated taking the boy away, and using the magic of her people to keep him young—and with her—forever. She would never lose the human she loved so dearly!

One night, after a few more years, as she was contemplating all of this in her meadow, the moonlight shining through the treetops, casting a cold blue iridescence over its entirety, she noticed a bright red glow coming from the direction of the boy's house. Hearing shouts and the neighing of horses, followed by footfalls and the sound of hooves coming down the path, she quickly hid behind a tree to observe the scene. She saw the whole family, mother, father (girl in arms) and the little boy burst into the meadow coughing and out of breath. Then, with shouts and whooping, six men on horseback came rushing in and circled the family, trying to capture them with ropes. All were soon caught, except the boy. He found a gap between two of the giant horses and dashed right through. The father called out, "Run, Dergis! Run as fast as you can!" Dergis ran for the edge of the meadow and leapt out into the surrounding forest.

One of the men, clad with the antlers of a buck on his head, ordered another, "You! Fetch me the boy—alive! He'll grow to be a strong worker in the fields." The man replied, "Of course, master. Consider it done," and pulled back on the reins hard, causing the horse to rear up and then turn into the surrounding bushes in pursuit of Dergis.

Veirra saw this as her chance to take the boy as her own, and immediately proceeded to follow after the man, still keeping cover among the flora. She was incredibly quick and able to glide over her domain with ease, always able to keep the man within her sight.

Dergis raced around trees, jumped over logs, ran through bushes, and dashed across streams, but spry, young boy though he was, he was no match for the speed of the horse. The man shouted out, "There ain't no use running, boy! Come along nice and easy now, and I won't kill ya." A well-cast rope caught the boy by his legs, causing him to trip.

While Dergis was struggling to free himself from the rope, the man dismounted and approached saying, "Now, that wasn't too bad, was it? After all this work to get ya, I think I ought to make you my personal slave. If you be good, maybe I'll—AAGGGGHHHH!" Dergis had thrown a stone, striking the man's left eye. As the man screamed in pain, his hand to his bloody eye-socket, Dergis pulled free of the rope. He was barely on his feet, when the man ran up to him and grabbed him by the back of his collar roaring, "COME HERE!"

He drew a large dagger that was scabbarded on his right side. "Alright, you little brat!" he said. "I gave you a chance!" He grabbed Dergis by the throat with his left hand and lifted him so they were face to face. "I guess you didn't want to live. I'll just tell the master you had a little... accident." As he spoke, Dergis noticed a vine creeping down from the branches of the tree above them, slowly slithering onto the man's left shoulder. It wrapped loosely and slowing around his neck. The man pulled the dagger back, and said, "You'll never see th— EAAAAGGHH!" In the blink of an eye, the vine tightened with incredible strength around the man's neck, causing him to drop Dergis and the dagger, and yanked the man up into the darkness.

When Dergis got up from the ground, he saw Veirra standing near to where the man had been. She began to approach him. Dergis immediately sensed this was his rescuer, and said, "Oh, Great Lady of the Forest! I plead with you to please save my family! It must have been you who granted me those wonderful gifts over the years, and I ask of you to please bestow this last one!"

Without saying a word, Veirra came right up to the little boy and stared at him. She knew that this was her chance, with the rest of his family gone, to take this boy as her own and keep him with her, ageless, forever. She would never feel lonely again.

She looked into the boy's eyes, and noticed tears forming there, pleading with her. She loved the boy greatly and didn't want to lose him, but... could she take away the happiness that she had admired so greatly in him? He would be lost to her forever, even if she had him right there beside her. If she truly loved him... she had to let him go.

She knelt down in front of him and stretched out her hand. She then stroked him on the cheek and said with a sweet voice, "I'm going to miss you, my dear human." As she said this, a single tear fell from her face onto the ground. Immediately, a plant started to grow where the tear had fallen, blooming to reveal a beautiful lily.

Taking the boy's hand, Veirra got up, raised her head and whistled a beautiful song. As she did, a chill wind blew, and the trees swayed as if in answer.

The other five raiders rode carefully through the forest, calling for their lost comrade. Three of them each had one of the boy's family members on his horse, bound and gagged. One of the men was nervous and said, "Master, aren't you worried about the haunts of this forest? I've heard many a tale of men being taken away by forest demons, never to be heard of again." The master replied, "Ha! Let them try! We'll burn any woodland spirit that dares to show its face!" He waved the torch he was carrying in defiance.

As they continued on their way, one said, "Master, have you noticed that everything has gone silent? Not even the frogs croak." He laughed in reply, "The forest is scared speechless by our presence!"

Suddenly, behind them, the deep, primal bellow of a horn sounded, sending a deep chill down all their spines.

All the men came to a stop, and looked about them. The man at the back spoke up saying, "That's not one of ours... AAAAAHHHH!" A cluster of vines had burst out of a clump of bushes to his left and dragged him right off of his horse, into the surrounding undergrowth.

"RIDE!" said the master, and they all started off as quickly as they could. The forest had come alive with the sound of the wind rushing through the leaves, and various hoots and primal calls.

"YAAAGGGHH!" The master looked back just in time to see a giant cat tackle the man off the horse carrying the woman. He faced front and two giant trees stretched their branches downward, barring the raiders from the path. They all turned to find another way and beheld the terrifying sight of a gigantic tree man stepping out of the forest before them. The two henchman turned to run, but they couldn't escape the great reach of its titanic claws. The tree man plucked them off of their horses and tossed them high over the treetops. The master tried to ride off the path into the forest, but saw that he was surrounded on all sides by the creatures that inhabited these lands.

Suddenly, all the creatures moved aside creating a path, and Veirra and Dergis strode forward, the boy atop the back of a great bear. The master raised his torch into the air, shouting, "I will burn this land to the ground, if it's the last thing I do!"

Veirra raised her hand to the sky, and a great wind gushed forth, extinguishing the torch. Swift as lightning, she was at him and grabbed him by his throat. She then threw him on his knees at the feet of the bear.

The master looked up at Dergis, Veirra, and all the other creatures and said, "You disgusting, unhuman filth! You savages! My people will raze your lands! We will..." The bear lifted its giant paw and smashed the man across his face, breaking his neck, his lifeless body slumping onto the forest floor.

All of the creatures let out a great howl of victory. Then they silently departed, leaving only Veirra, Dergis, and his family. They all embraced each other, and the father said, "Great Lady! I cannot thank you enough for this aid you have given my family! You will always be known as our savior, and we will praise the gods for you! Our village is destroyed, and we have to move on, but we will always remember you. Again, Great Lady, thank you."

Veirra replied, "I will stay with you, to guide and protect you, until you reach the end of this forest." Dergis looked up at her and said, "Oh, but won't you come with us? You would be our guardian and friend, and I'd miss you so if you didn't."

Veirra knelt down so they were face to face and said, "My dear child, I cannot. My domain is here, and will have to remain so for as long as my tree shall live." Stroking his cheek delicately, she said, "Don't forget me little one. I shall never forget you." After she said this, she walked with them till they had reached the end of the forest. With tears in his eyes, Dergis wrapped his arms around her legs, and they said their final goodbyes.

When they were out of her sight, Veirra let out a deep sigh and returned to her meadow, to stare into the pool.

Years later, after a span of time which should have felt fleeting to Veirra, but did not, she was tending her garden when she heard something coming down the path. She hid, and watched in silence. What she saw was a young man, a woman, and a little boy of about three. The man looked around with delight, and immediately went to the well-tended garden, and bent to smell the flowers. Veirra saw something familiar about this man, so she leaned out to get a closer look. The man looked in her direction, so she ducked behind the tree again. Slowly peeking out, she saw the man's face clearly. As she stared into his eyes, she suddenly let out a gasp. Without hesitation she walked right out into the clearing. When he saw her, a great smile came to his face and to hers. She knew this man. It was her little boy.