



Dry Souls

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Dedication TK

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By Denise Getson

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*So let man consider of what he was created;
he was created of gushing water
issuing between the loins and the breast-bones.*

— Qur'an, "The Night-Star," 86:5-7





I glance at the sky, but there are no clouds. There are never clouds. I know what clouds look like only because of the digital images in our lessons at school. I know someone who has been north, to the mountains, and swears she saw clouds. Perhaps she's telling the truth, but I doubt it.

I take my book to a spot I like, a quiet corner behind the shed. There's shade here. The ground is hard and cracked, separated into rough-edged shards that can pierce the skin, but I bring a cushion with me.

I'm reading a book about flowers. I don't have much personal experience with flowers. It's against the law to have unauthorized vegetation on private property. Plants require so much water, you see, that every kind of gardening or agriculture must be approved by the proper agencies.

Naturally, we don't have much in the way of plant life here at the orphanage. We have cactus, the tall and the short kind, creating an obstacle course of pincushions throughout the property, and a tomato patch was approved after proper petitioning by Matron. When

the fruit's ripe, we have fresh tomatoes with every meal, which is a treat.

But flowers are considered a frivolous use of water. Flowers—the purely ornamental kind—are non-essential. However, I've discovered a flower tucked into a small patch of earth behind the shed. No one ever comes here but me, and I don't think it's been discovered. It should have died by now since summer is full upon us and the heat is fierce, but I've been watering it in secret.

Every night, instead of drinking my last ration of water, I save a swallow in my mouth. Discreetly, I slip out of the dining room. I go to our sleeping quarters and spit the water into a small, covered dish I keep beneath my bed. Every few days, when I have a break from my studies and my chores, I take the water to the shed and pour it out onto the ground.

The flower's beautiful. The blossoms are small and pink and clustered together like tiny bells. The petals are softer than anything I've ever felt in my life. I touch one now, for the pure pleasure of it, before getting comfortable on the cushion and opening my book.

I want to find out what kind of flower I have. The book hints it might be a variety of bluebell, except that my flower is not blue, or even purple, as most bluebells were. It is clearly pink.

“What are you doing back here?”

I freeze, my breath catching at the back of my throat. Carefully, I lean back until I'm sure no part of the flower can be seen. Placing one finger on the page to hold my

spot, I glance up.

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

I’m not in the habit of making nice with Mary Castle, but neither am I in the habit of being deliberately difficult. I try for casual disinterest and gaze at my intruder with what I hope is just the right mixture of impatience and preoccupation. Looking at Mary always makes me feel impatient, anyway. She’s too perfect, too put-together. Whenever I see her, I want to rumple her up.

Mary studies the book in my lap then raises one snooty eyebrow. “You’re wasting your time studying flowers,” she snorts. “You might as well be studying Latin or some other useless thing.”

“It’s my personal time. I’ll read whatever I want.”

“Matron wants you inside. Visitors are coming tomorrow. You and Sheila have floors.”

I hide my dismay. No one wants floors. Matron insists we get on our hands and knees, running a cloth over every hard square inch. I know I’ll be aching from it tomorrow. Still, I won’t let Mary see that I care one way or the other. She’s probably the one who suggested me for the stupid job in the first place.

“What are you waiting for?” she snaps. “Let’s go.”

I hold my position, keeping my gaze on hers. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Matron doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Beat it.”

Mary narrows her eyes, looks as though she’s going to say something then shrugs. With a wrinkle of her

delicate nose, she heads back to the house, leaving me alone in the shadow of the outbuilding.

I exhale as tension seeps from my body. Slowly, I close my book, listening for any sound that indicates someone else might be nearby. I pick up the dish lying on the ground beside me and stand, peering around the corner. All's clear.

"Aha!"

I turn, startled, as Mary steps around the opposite corner. Darn that girl for a sneak! My mind's racing, trying to think of a way to divert her attention.

"I told you to beat it!" I growl, getting in her face, my free hand fisted and ready to swing. I honestly don't know if Mary can take a punch, but we're about to find out.

"Why are you always hiding back here?"

"I'm not hiding. It's just...I like it. It's private." I stare at her pointedly. "Most of the time that is."

"What's that?"

"What?"

"In your hand."

I glance at the dish in my hand, then down at the lid lying on the ground next to my flower.

"What've you got in there?" She reaches, grabbing the small bowl from my grasp. I swing my arm to take it back, but she holds it just out of reach. She tips the container up and catches the lone, last drop onto her face. "It's water." She turns accusing eyes to mine. "Where did you get this? You've been stealing!"

"I have not! I mean," I struggle to keep my voice

even, “that water was *my* water, part of my ration. I’ve just been saving a bit to...uh...so I could have a sip when I’m out here reading, that’s all. It gets hot.” I hold out my hand. “Now, give it back.”

She looks at me suspiciously, but slowly, her arm comes down and with it my bowl. I step forward to take it from her and at that moment, something happens. Mary’s eyes shift from mine to a space just beyond where I was standing.

The dish falls into my hand, but Mary’s already pushed past me, her eyes wide on the ground by the shed. My heart sinks. I turn around, silent.

“Is that a real flower?” She lifts her face to mine, her features stark with amazement.

I watch as Mary turns astonished eyes back to the ground. She bends down and puts out a finger to gently tap one of the soft bells. I want to shout and grab her arm. It’s my flower! But, I wait. I watch as she strokes the delicate pink, then looks at me with damp eyes. Ah, geez. Is she crying?

“I won’t tell a soul, Kira. I swear.”

My jaw drops open in disbelief and I close it with a snap. Does she mean it? After a minute, I nod slowly. She gives me a hesitant look.

“Do you think it would be alright if I come out here sometimes? I mean, I know this is your special place, but...when you’re not using it, you know. I could maybe save some of my water, too.”

My first instinct is to tell her to get lost. This is my spot. But, I can’t undo her knowing about the flower.

Clearly, I have to get her on my side. Besides, with two of us watering it, there might be a chance to save it. Who knows? Maybe next spring, we'll have two flowers.

"I guess that would be alright," I say finally, rocking back on my heels. I try for just the right touch of non-chalance. "But don't be obvious about it. I don't want Matron getting suspicious."

"I promise." She gives me a watery smile, glances at the flower, then leaves.

As soon as she's gone, I sink down onto my cushion with a trembling breath. I can't believe it. Mary's going to help me take care of the flower. That's a surprise. Still, I have to be careful. One of the other girls might wander back here and not be as good about it as Mary was. I shake my head, still trying to wrap my mind around what's happened. She seemed honestly moved by the flower.

Of course, water's going to be a problem. Even with Mary and me saving our spit, the hottest weather's still to come.

I bend over the tiny blossoms. "I wish I could make it easier," I whisper. "I wish I could make water for you, right here; right now."

Then, it happens.

I don't see it at first. I'm concentrating on the flower, placing a finger against the arc of the stem to test its strength. My eye is caught by a small patch of dirt that's suddenly darker than the rest. I put my finger to the ground and feel. It's damp. As I watch, a small puddle appears. Water trickles up out of the ground. The

puddle spreads to the base of the flower then stops.

I blink slowly, pressing my hand to my head. I'm not sure what just happened. I stand up, still staring at the ground. The sun's hot today and I've been out for awhile. I don't think I applied my sun block as thoroughly as I should have. Mental confusion and hallucinations are common sunstroke symptoms. Every school child knows that. Sunstroke. That must be it. I need to get out of the heat and hydrate. Leaving my cushion and dish, I head back to the house in a daze, shielding my face from the sun.



“Hey, Kira, is it true your mother was a freak?”

I stop in my tracks, glad the girl behind me can’t see my skin flush. I don’t have to turn around to know who’s taunting me. Casually, I relax my body into a fighting stance.

“Hey, Crystal,” I respond softly. “I heard your mother’s still alive. You’re here because she didn’t *want* you.”

The hiss behind me has my hands clenching. I twirl, just in time to meet Crystal’s right hook. I’m momentarily stunned, my eyes filling with unwanted tears, my head snapping from the impact. I should have been prepared. Crystal always goes for the right hook. A red film drops across my vision, and then I’m barreling into the other girl, my punches aimed at the soft targets I know will hurt her more and me less. Immediately, there are a half dozen girls joining in the fray. I feel my fist connect with bone—I’m not sure whose—and hear the sudden “oomph” of air being expelled when I lower my head and ram into someone’s gut.

I’m not unhurt. In a vague, distant sort of way, I’m aware of the taste of blood in my mouth and something’s

not right with my left leg. Has it been kicked or twisted? It doesn't matter. I know the pain will come later.

My lungs are empty of air, and it feels like I've been fighting forever, but it's probably only minutes before Matron strides over, grabbing ears and arms and peeling bodies apart.

I never get the chance to tell my side of the story. Six sets of fingers point at me along with a chorus of "Kira started it." Matron puts a tight grip on my shoulder and propels me into her office. I turn and rake Crystal with one last scorching glance. "My mother was *not* a freak," I whisper for her ears only. Then I shrug off Matron's hand and march inside.

Matron's office gives me the creeps. Well, it's not her office so much. It's the painting hanging behind her desk. The Garner Home for Girls is just that—a home for girls. Even the staff is all female. So, the portrait of the large mustached man that dominates Matron's office seems out of place.

"Do you want to explain yourself?"

Matron's voice has me pulling my eyes away from the painting to the woman behind the desk. There's nothing matronly about her, certainly nothing maternal. She is stiff and stern, and her voice is gravelly when she speaks.

"No ma'am."

Her fingers drum on the tabletop, creating a matching rhythm inside me. I want to grab her hand and smash it flat, but I force myself to sit quietly.

"I'm running out of punishments, Kira, and I'm

running out of patience. You know, there are other places for people like you—places which would treat you a lot less kindly than we do at the Garner Home.”

My fingers twitch on the arms of my chair. “What do you mean ‘people like me?’”

She looks momentarily at a loss, but recovers. “You’re touchy, Kira. You take things too personally.”

“I do not!”

Matron gazes at me mildly.

I blow my bangs in frustration. “I just take things personally when they’re meant personally, that’s all.”

“Kira, you have to learn to get along with others. I’m giving you one more chance to improve your behavior. If you can’t shape up, I’m going to suggest you for a transfer to one of the vocational homes.”

I stay silent, refusing to cave in to her intimidation. I know I’m not like the other girls, and I don’t care. I don’t like to do the things they do. I don’t care about the same things. But, I’m not a troublemaker. At least, not intentionally. I keep my face blank.

“Fine,” Matron mutters, becoming businesslike. “For the next two weeks, you can help Cook in the kitchen. You’ll be responsible for breakfast and dinner.”

“Geez Louise! Breakfast *and* dinner!”

“I can still add lunch, if you like,” she says calmly.

I cross my arms, biting my tongue so hard, I’m sure to have permanent teeth marks. Immediately, I begin plotting how I can sprinkle ash on Crystal’s seaweed, in place of pepper. The image of Crystal gagging on her first bite has me feeling better.

“I don’t know what you’re smiling about, young lady, but whatever it is, I’d rethink it if I were you.”

Matron’s eyes are narrowed on my face. Quickly, I compose my features into an expression of meekness. She raises one disbelieving brow and, with a tired wave of her hand, motions me out of the room. I jump up, eager to get back to my own quarters.

The girls at the Garner Home live in long sleeping rooms according to our age group. At sixteen, I’ve recently graduated to the upperclassmen’s quarters. In a year, I’ll have to decide whether to apply to one of the technical schools or get a work assignment, but I’m in no hurry. It can be foolish to think too much about a future that’s uncertain. Better to take things one day at a time.

The sleeping quarters are silent. At this time of the day, everyone’s in the main building, doing homework or doing chores. I slip my hand beneath my pillow and pull out a small photograph. Stepping over to a mirror on the wall, I hold the picture beside my face. The familiar image stares back at me through the glass. There’s a resemblance. Round grey eyes stare into round grey eyes. But where my hair is cropped and smooth and red in the light, my mother’s is dark and wavy, capturing the light and holding it.

I don’t know where the rumor about my mother started, but it’s been floating around as long as I can remember. Maybe Matron knew her before she died, but she’s never said, and I refuse to ask. My own memories are thin and wispy, hard to hold onto except in that

moment just before waking.

I stick out my tongue at my reflection, then turn and slip the photo back beneath my pillow. I have a meal to prepare. I smile briefly in anticipation before leaving the room.



Mary's true to her word. I'm skeptical at first, but soon I realize this flower is a small miracle, and it's made a miracle in our lives. She and I make peace, working together to create a schedule of times when we'll water the flower.

We take turns carrying our small containers of water out back. Although there're now two of us watering the flower, it's getting harder to keep it alive. The sun creates tiny heat explosions in my head every time I walk outside. One hundred and fifteen degree days are not uncommon. Even with a lavish layer of sun protection, I wilt in the summer heat. I don't know how my flower bears it.

I understand why the flowers disappeared. After the Devastation, a lot of things disappeared, or they changed into something unrecognizable from what they'd been. People saved some things: vines that flowered and turned into squash or beans or melons. They were saved. Agricultural production became limited to Biospheres only, where soil and air conditions could be closely monitored.

Of course, everyone has a mail order algae tank, complete with rotors and evaporation shields and solar panels, algae being one life form that has no problem growing in the harshest of environments. The harvesting cycle for algae is less than ten days, so we never run out. I don't know if we could survive without a constant supply of the stuff.

Flowers, however, are another matter. Flowers that were just flowers—flowers that didn't turn into food—gradually vanished. It's as if they sensed they were no longer appreciated and collectively decided to disappear from the earth.

I hear stories. Travelers come through and tell us about places where things still grow, even without human intervention. One old man said he'd seen roses. They hadn't smelled like much, he said, not like you'd expect a rose to smell, but they were roses all the same. I'd like to see roses.

Of course, wanting to see roses is impractical. I know that. And above all, the Garner Home for Girls is a very practical place. The staff are real nuts-and-bolts types, determined to teach us the lessons we need to get by in a dying world.

In the upper classes, sometimes the computers teach us and sometimes Matron does. She pulls down maps showing all the places I've never seen, the territories around Xeta and the Biospheres, where most of our food is grown and our clothes manufactured.

History class is my favorite. Last week I learned that before the Devastation, before the chemicals got

deep inside us and the planet heated up, people used to worry because they were fat. Isn't that funny? For all the problems the Devastation brought, it solved that one. From the youngest child to the oldest citizen—and there are few among us who are truly old—everyone is lean and dry and weathered to a dusty brown, just like the landscape.

“What’s with you two?”

“What?”

I frown at the group of girls standing in front of me and Mary. The noise level in the common room tapers off as heads turn our way.

“What’s with you two sitting over here being all chummy all of a sudden?” Crystal glares at us, her eyes moving from Mary to me.

I suppose it was only a question of time until we were confronted. Until Mary and I started sharing responsibility for the flower, no one talked to me much. It wasn't like I cared, I told myself. I preferred my own company to the senseless chatter of the other girls. But, well, things are different now. “We’re just...” my mind scrambling, I glance at Mary.

“We’ve found a common interest,” she says quickly. “That’s all.”

Thank goodness Mary’s got her wits about her, “It turns out, we’re both fascinated by...um...” I grab a book from a pile on the table. “Xeta history.”

Mary shoots me an incredulous look then nods vigorously. “That’s it,” she says, “Xeta history.”

Crystal and her friends look disbelieving. I don’t

blame them. From the time we were children, Mary and I have had as little to do with each other as possible. We were resentful of each other's qualities. I have admitted to her my resentment toward her appearance. Her skin is a little too clear, her hair too fine and glossy; her manner too vain. She has admitted that she resented my marks in class, my solitary nature; my tendency to punch first and ask questions later. We're over it now.

The girls stand there, staring at us. We stare back, our eyes wide and innocent. When Matron pokes her head into the room, they grumble and wander off, but I can tell they're suspicious. This is the last thing we need.

With the prospect of confrontation removed, the other girls resume their conversations. Mary bends her head close to mine. "Do you think they'll leave us alone?" she whispers.

"It's probably a good idea to be on our guard." I warn. "Don't trust anybody."

"Right."

She gets up and heads for the kitchen, and I sit there, staring at the wall. I haven't told Mary about that moment behind the shed. Why would I? Surely, I imagined the whole thing. I haven't tried to wish for water again either, but suddenly it's urgent that I do. Was it really a hallucination? Or maybe I'm coming down with something, something toxic and deadly. I shudder, remembering the girl last year who fainted one day in the middle of science class and never woke up.

Cautiously, I glance around the room. Everyone's occupied, wrapped in their activities. Crystal and her

crowd have gone to their quarters. I slip out of the room unnoticed and head out back.

Xeta is a landscape with a subtle palette. The out-building stands stark against a large sky. The colors of brown and beige and tan and every variation in-between fill my eyes. When everything is always brown, brown, brown, a splash of pink can be a wondrous thing.

I take a furtive look around, then turn the corner and drop to the ground to check the flower. The leaves have curled up and the green edges are starting to crisp. It's heartbreaking. I can almost feel its struggle.

I quell the butterflies in my stomach. Okay. Here goes. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. "I wish for water," I whisper. I open my eyes and glance at the ground. Nothing. Nothing moves. Nothing appears. All is as it should be, brown and dry. I relax, sitting back on my heels in relief and give a soft laugh. It's nothing after all. Then suddenly, it's there, a dark stain growing against the dirt, soaking up the top layer of soil, working its way around the base of my flower's green stem.

I collapse against the wall, my eyes fixed on the small puddle. What is wrong with me?



The next couple of days I spend in a vacuum, numbly going about my daily routine. I don't notice what I eat or who I'm speaking to or who speaks to me.

I stop saving my spit. The container beneath my bed stands empty. There no longer seems a reason to hack

up my saliva when I can water the flower at will.

But where does the water come from?

I have no idea, and it worries me. Water can't be conjured out of thin air. It has to come from somewhere. I draw it up out of...what? Some deep reservoir, perhaps? That doesn't make sense. Every hidden spring and aquifer has long since been uncovered by technology.

Do I draw it from the sky? I stare upward, but the sky's cloudless as always. Maybe the Garner Home for Girls rests on a bridge between our world and a parallel universe, and I'm drawing water from the other side. I laugh weakly. Yeah, right.

Mary watches me with worried eyes. I see her holding her swallow of water at the end of each day, then slipping out of the room to spit into her jar.



I'm still in a worried funk when a traveler shows up at the door of the Garner Home, requesting a meal and water in exchange for repairs to our outbuildings. Travelers are a rare and resilient breed, men and women who walk from one outpost to the next, driven by something inside them that won't let them sit still. Travelers are especially short-lived, constantly exposed to toxic areas and to the threat of dehydration. I think they prefer it that way, living life on the edge.

As discreetly as I can, I watch him throughout the day: repairing a screen, reattaching loose molding, cleaning the rotors in the algae pond. His features are tired and weathered, but kind. Once, I bring him a glass of water from Matron, and he thanks me. I heave a huge sigh of relief when none of his repairs take him behind the shed. At the end of the day, he joins us at the table for dinner. He eats with relish, his attention concentrated on his food, before leaning back in his chair to tell us about the places he's been; the boundaries he's crossed. Crystal is openly disbelieving.

"It's impossible to get through Delta Territory on

foot,” she says, her tone filled with scorn. “Everyone knows that territory is completely toxic.”

The leathery man laughs.

“It’s hard,” he concedes dryly. “But not impossible.”

Delta Territory is where I was born. I know that much. My mom died there. Somewhere. And Crystal is right. Everyone knows it’s completely toxic.

All evening, I listen avidly to his stories about crisscrossing the ‘Big Dry’, the travelers’ term for the draught-stricken lands of the unified territories. His tales are full of unyielding landscapes and resilient peoples.

“Why do you travel?” I ask, staring into his eyes, trying to make sense of the strange light there that, even in this small room, seems to look beyond concrete walls to some greater spaciousness beyond.

“I travel to find the place where the Earth remembers.”

“Remembers what?”

“Remembers what it used to be,” he says softly, his eyes calm.

Crystal snorts. “I’ve heard this garbage before. It’s a fairytale for children. There’s no such place.”

“Where is it?” I ask the man.

He scans the faces in the room, his eyes moving slowly from one girl to the next. My skin is tingling and I’m holding my breath. I resist the urge to stamp my foot, impatient for his answer.

“No one knows,” he says finally, his words sending a wave of desolation through me. He swings his eyes back to mine. Perhaps he senses my feelings of hopelessness. His gaze bores into mine with grave intensity, as though

he were trying to convince me of this place through the sheer force of his will. “It’s not a place on any map, but it exists. I believe it. I *know* it.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Think about your own mind inside you,” he says, reaching over to tap gently on my forehead. “What’s there? Grey matter, right? Just like the land around us. But there are also memories, bright and poignant places that live inside you. You feel them, you can relive the experiences in vibrant, sensory detail, but you can’t map them on your brain. You just know they’re in there. It’s like that.”

“But the earth isn’t alive.”

“It’s dying, yes, but it’s not gone yet. And neither are we. We’re all constructed of the same stuff, you know. Atoms and molecules and invisible subatomic particles that animate us, that animate the world. We’re all vibrating pieces of the universe. Even the iron in your blood comes from supernovas, those brilliant blasts of elements that formed the basis for all life. That’s real. And it binds us together in ways that are invisible to the human eye. The earth and the people on it, we’re all connected.”

His words leave me confused. I have no reason to believe in any of this. It’s foolish and fanciful and, these days, a girl needs to keep her wits about her. But just for a moment, I suspend my disbelief and let myself imagine that such a thing is possible. Because it makes sense to me. Everything I know evolved from this earth and on it. And a tiny cell can’t see the whole body, can’t see how

it all works together. And maybe the earth does have a sort of consciousness, and memories, good memories somewhere that survive.

The traveler wipes his mouth and stands. “Now ladies, the sun is going down and I need to hit the road. This is the best time for walking. I greatly appreciate the meal and the company.”

He shakes hands with each one of us, even Crystal, and says a polite good-bye. His grip feels warm and solid and, even though I don’t know this man, I’m sorry to see him leave. As soon as he’s gone, I slip out of the room. Mary corners me in the hallway. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing. What’re you talking about?”

“You’ve been acting weird.”

“I might be coming down with something,” I say, giving a small cough for added effect.

A cough isn’t something to be taken lightly, and she backs away slightly, just in case. But she continues to pester. “I know why we’ve had so many visitors lately.” Her voice is smug and I can tell she’s bursting to share her secret.

“Okay. Why?”

“We’re being tagged.”

“What?”

She nods her head sagely. “All the girls in the orphanage. It’s a new policy for population management. We’re having microchips embedded. So the Territory Council can keep track, I guess.”

I can’t believe it. Chips are for prisoners, the

occasional captured felon who at some point hacked into a Council computer or tried to steal more than his ration of water. Chips aren't for kids.

"Orphans don't get chips," I whisper.

"They do now. I overheard Matron talking." She tugs on my sleeve, breaking through my growing unease.

"What?" My voice is impatient, I know, but I want to be alone with my thoughts. I want to think about what the traveler said, and now there's this crazy microchip business. What does it mean?

"There's no water in your dish," says Mary. "I checked under your bed. Did you water the flower today?"

I glance around, grabbing her arm to pull her closer. "Hush, Mary. Someone will hear you."

"No one's listening."

"Does the flower look like it needs water?"

"Well," her face registers momentary confusion. "No."

"Fine. Then I'm doing my part. Stop bothering me."

She yanks her arm back, her face flushed. "I was asking to be thoughtful, Kira. In the future, I won't waste my time." She stomps off, leaving me with a vague feeling of shame. For the first time in my life, I have someone who's being nice to me and, even though I'm inexperienced at this friendship business, I know I'm not keeping up my end of things.

Quickly, I gather my cushion and head out to the shed. Even in the fading light of dusk, I can tell the flower looks great. If possible, it looks fresher than when it was a new bloom. Whatever's happening, it must be a

good thing, I decide. Otherwise, why would the flower be doing so well? I'm being a worrywart.

I lean forward, resting my arms on the pillow. I'm tired and confused, and I hate this feeling that things are going on around me I can't control. I need to think things through and this is my best spot for thinking. First, however, I need to take care of something.

"I wish for water," I say softly, keeping my eyes on the flower, waiting for the familiar dark stain to make its way across the dirt.

Hearing the rattle of pebbles followed by a quiet gasp, I snap my head up and see Mary. She's gazing at the ground in horror, her eyes round as she watches the water now forming a puddle around the slender green stem.

"Mary, let me explain," I stammer, hopping up. Of course, there's no explanation for this, and we both know it.

She backs away, her eyes darting between me and the damp ground. Abruptly, she turns and runs to the house.

I'm frozen in place, dismayed that I've been caught and embarrassed to have my ability—or freakish disability—known by anyone. Then I remember the flower. Mary's going to give it away. Shoot! Shoot! Shoot! I have to catch her. I have to get her back on my side before she ruins everything.

I move now, dashing after Mary. But my pause cost me. Halfway back to the house, I encounter Matron, followed by Mary and the other girls. Matron's face is

purple, her expression one of unqualified rage. Panic-stricken at this turn of events, I pivot, ready to dart away, but Matron grabs hold of my shoulder and pushes me toward the back of the shed.

I hear Mary's sniffles behind me and shoot her a dark look. That crybaby. Why did I ever think she was my friend? She cowers behind Matron, gawking at me as if I were something evil.

When Matron reaches the back of the shed, she lets out a low growl, her grip on me tightening. What is it about a flower that would make a person so angry, I wonder.

Pinning me with a furious gaze, she points toward the flower. "Yank it," she says tersely.

My jaw drops and I shake my head slowly. "I will not," I whisper, horrified

"It's illegal. It doesn't belong here. Either you remove it, or I will."

I continue to shake my head, blinking back tears. I'm vaguely aware that I'm trembling, but it's like something outside myself, totally unconnected to me. Vainly, I press my hands against my stomach and the anguish beginning to seize there.

Matron moves forward and grabs the flower by the base of the stem. With one savage tug, she rips it out of the ground, damp soil clinging to the roots. A small squeak behind me has her turning a heated gaze to Mary. "Brace up, girl," she barks. "It's only a flower."

"It's only a flower," I repeat softly, dully, but I can feel my mind rebelling. It was more. It was beauty and it was

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life and for me, for a short while, it had been a thing of joy and purpose.



Grounded!

I hurl my book at the closed door, followed by a shoe and a hairbrush. No one responds to my fury. I'm alone in the room, forbidden to step outside the door.

Of course, Mary blabbed everything. Matron focused on the criminal presence of the flower, attributing the rest of Mary's hysteria to adolescent melodrama and stress brought on by my bad influence. After all, Matron said, the truth of my transgression was bad enough without Mary adding a bunch of hogwash about me being able to conjure water. And yet...and yet, Matron had sent me the strangest look. For just a moment, it felt like she was afraid of me.

Nah.

Throwing myself back onto the bed, I plot how to get even with Mary Castle. I begin with simple tortures, a lizard in her underwear drawer or a well-timed rumor to discredit her among the other girls. I should never have let her near me or my flower. My flower. Gone now. My breath hitches and I can feel the anger slipping away. I reel it back. I need my anger. I need it to keep

away the other stuff.

Slowly, a new worry grabs hold of me. Matron had promised that after one more infraction, she'd send me away. Would she? My stomach churns and I press my hand against my belly, willing what's there to stay there. I force myself to breathe slowly, and it passes. So what if she does send me away? I give the bed a good kick. It's not like the Garner Home for Girls has been doing me any favors lately.

Suddenly, an idea pops into my head. It's so outrageous that at first I can't get my mind around it. It's too huge. But what if—I feel a shiver of anticipation—what if I left on my own? That would show them. Matron would learn that she doesn't have power over me. I don't need them. I don't need anybody.

I stand and start to pace. The traveler who'd shared his stories, he'd traveled everywhere. It wasn't impossible. But, where would I go? How would I survive?

I can make my own water, of course. That's something. Whoa! I halt mid-step, suddenly light-headed. *I can make my own water.* The ramifications of this slowly sink into place. I can *do* something. I can do something huge, something that will impress everybody. Watering my flower, that mattered, but it mattered only to me. What if I did something that mattered to others, to a lot of others, in fact? What if I could make more than just a puddle?

Desperate to reassure myself I can do this thing, I run to a cupboard and pull out a cup. I pull it close and wish for water. Nothing happens. I drop the cup with a

clatter and kneel on the floor.

“I want water,” I whisper. Nothing happens. “I wish for it,” I say, my voice breaking. “I wish for water.” Not a drop appears on the hard floor.

“Okay” I try to calm myself. “This doesn’t mean a thing. So what if I can’t make water fill a cup? And why in the world would water appear on the bedroom floor? That’s ridiculous. It’s illogical. Clearly, I have to wish for water with a purpose, or I have to wish for water in its natural environment. That’s all.”

I’m not reassured.



I don’t give myself time to back out. I know myself well enough to understand that if I think about my plan for too long, I’ll find a way to talk myself out of it.

When the other girls come into the room, I feel their glances and ignore their soft whispers. I curl in bed, my eyes closed tightly. I’ve used the time alone to pack my backpack with the essentials: a small bedroll, a change of clothes and a hat, my nutritionals, a first aid kit, a flashlight and enough sun block to get me through, I think. My backpack will hold my entire life inside it. From this point on, I can’t let it out of my sight.

Hopefully, I don’t need to worry about water, but food’s a concern. Of course, bugs will be plentiful. Aside from algae, bugs make up our primary source of protein at the orphanage. Thinking of Cook’s famous stir-fry of white beetles with rock salt and sage, I salivate. Cook

has a gift in the kitchen. Whether it's grubs or crickets, she knows how to turn out a tasty meal. Feeling a pang in my stomach, I push the thought away. I can't think of that now. I have to learn to rough it and eat my meal-worms raw.

After the other girls are asleep, I tiptoe to the kitchen. Very gently, I pull a step ladder over to the wall. Climbing to the highest cabinet, I take a small hammer stolen from the tool box and break the lock on one of the doors. Inside is a lithium ion global positioning device, one of Matron's most cherished possessions. I can't resist a smile at the thought of her expression when she realizes it's gone. I close the cabinet and return the step ladder to its proper place. Finally, I fill my backpack with trail mix and algae bars. I am quiet. It is dark. No one hears me leave.

I walk quickly, not looking back. This instant in time feels momentous, weighted with importance, and I know I'll remember it for the rest of my life. I'm scared, trembling so hard it's a wonder I can stand, but I force myself to take step after step. If I only take one step at a time, I can do this thing. As long as I don't think too much about tomorrow or next week or the week after, I can make myself move forward. With conscious thought, I remind myself to breathe.

I'm afraid to be out in the dark. I'm afraid to be alone. But I'm more afraid to stop moving or to glance back, to lose the momentum of my outrageous idea. I'll walk until I find a place to hide during the hottest part of the day. That's when I'll sleep.

There's just enough moon to light my way, but with my vision diminished by darkness, my other senses reach out, searching around me. There are odors in the dark—thick and musky, but tinged with something bitter and metallic I can taste on my tongue.

My mother's photo is in my pocket, and I press my hand against it for comfort. Delta Territory is far, but it's where I'm determined to go, to make water and, maybe, to find answers.

Glancing at the illuminated GPS, I change direction slightly and continue heading north. At first, I notice everything: the air, the stars; the hum of generators when I pass some habitation. After awhile, however, I grow bored with my surroundings, the flat, dark plainness of it. I play mental games to keep myself awake and moving. I try to think of all the wet words in the English language, words that disappeared from use along with the water. You can still find the wet words in old books, words like *drenched*, *saturated*, *soaking*, *soggy*, *sodden* and *swamped*. Great, thick, rich words.

By midnight, my word games have ended, and I'm nearly in tears. My feet hurt. The muscles in my legs ache and pull with every step. If I had to get some crazy ability, why couldn't it be the ability to fly? I wonder, briefly, if there's someone, somewhere, who has that ability. If there is, I wonder if she's stumbled upon her strange talent. Perhaps, mid-fall, she suddenly spread her arms and took flight. Or maybe she'll never spread her arms and the ability will lie quiet, undiscovered, her entire life.

Suddenly, I stop. What if *I* can fly? What if there are other things I can wish for that I haven't thought to try? What if my wish for water was just the first of three wishes, or six or ten? I think for a minute then hold out my hands, palms up. "I wish for food to fill my hands."

Nothing happens.

Maybe I need to be more specific. "I wish for a handful of nuts," I say loudly. "I wish for roasted hemp nuts." I lift my hands into the air, ready to have them filled.

Nothing happens.

I drop my hands and glance up into the night sky.

"I wish it would rain."

Nothing.

"I wish I could fly."

I give a small hop into the air, arms outstretched, and when I land, my right calf cramps, sending a wave of pain shooting up my leg.

"Drat!" Feeling foolish, I massage my leg until the muscle relaxes. Evidently, I've got one wish that works. I guess that's more than most. Taking a deep breath, I force myself forward. Soon, I can rest.

I eat a handful of trail mix just before morning, then sneak into a shed behind a wind farm to hide out. It's too dangerous to be out in the sunlight mid-day. Boxes and tools line the wall of the shed, and I sneak into a crowded corner, drop my backpack onto the floor, and lay my head against the cool nylon. The wind turbines make a swishing noise I find soothing, and I sleep.

I spend day after day like this, walking north with the moonlight, then finding a place to hide before the

sun comes out. Sore legs and swollen feet give way to firm calves and a steady heart. I'm the fittest that I've ever been in my life.

I'm also the loneliest.