

## RED BERRY STEW

*Mary Grimm*

Essie was looking for a place to hide. She didn't want to put her clothes away in the dresser in her new room. The inside of the drawers smelled, even though her mother had scrubbed them with bleach. She jumped down the steps of the back porch, something they hadn't had before. She liked the back porch, but she tried not to, out of loyalty to their old house.

This yard was small, with a big garage, and the next-door house was close, with a narrow weedy space between, dim and green. Green grass, green bushes, green vines. Essie saw something move out of the corner of her eye in the green, a wriggling movement, like a fish swimming in water.

It was a girl wearing a faded red dress. She had on dirty white socks and no shoes, and her yellow hair was braided on one side and hanging loose on the other. She stopped moving when she saw Essie, her fingers working on the

braid, pulling it apart. When she finished with her hair, she pushed it back, hooking it behind her ear. “Was that your truck yesterday?” she asked.

“Yes,” Essie said. Their furniture had come in a moving truck, and all yesterday afternoon men had gone back and forth between the truck and the new house carrying chairs and lamps and beds. It had been strange to watch the familiar things of her life being handled by men who spat on the ground and said words she wasn’t supposed to hear, groaning under the weight of the refrigerator and the big sofa. Today all the things were in the new house, and her mother was doing what she called arranging—hanging curtains and blinds, taking dishes out of boxes and putting them on the shelves.

“What’s your name?”

“Essie.”

“Essie isn’t a real name.”

“It’s short for Eliska.”

The girl turned away, stooping to duck into the space between a scratchy-looking bush and the yellow boards of her house. She scooted in so that she was invisible, except for the dirty soles of her socks. “Come on,” she said. “What are you waiting for?”

Essie ducked and scooted behind her and found herself in a little space, a leafy cave with room for her to crouch next to the girl, who was sitting on four bricks stacked together. There were vines growing among the branches of the bush with round berries hanging from them, some red and some green. "This place is a secret," she said to Essie, "and if you tell anyone about it, I'll kill you." She made a very fierce face when she said this, and Essie wanted to laugh.

Essie sat down on the dirt. "I won't tell."

They played a game about mermaids. The girl had a wooden box with plastic shells and pull-apart beads, which were their treasure. They sat with their legs curled to the side, like tails. Their mermaid names were Wavy and Sea Glass. Essie had to pull her hair out of its pony tail because mermaids liked to have their hair down, the girl explained to her. She was drawing a picture in the dirt to show Essie what their underwater cave was like when just above them a window opened. "Little! Where are you?"

The girl made a face. "Just so you know, that's not my name."

"What's your name?" Essie said.

The girl scooted over to the opening in the bushes. "I'll tell you next time." She wriggled out and then stuck her head back in. "Put the treasure away," she ordered, and then disappeared.

Essie put the shells back in the box. It was full of a jumble of things, tiny plastic dolls, some ragged feathers, bitten pencils, some cards like the ones that Essie's mother used at her bridge club. There was a glass jar with marbles inside and Essie took it out to look at. The marbles were blue and green. Mermaid marbles, she thought. She put it back and crawled out.

Her grandfather was out in the back yard, prodding his cat with his cane. Muzi was shy and liked to roam. "Where were you?" he asked her in Slovak.

Essie answered him in English: "Taking a walk."

"Up to no good," her grandfather said to the cat. "Go, go into the house. The dinner is going to be ready. Good girls help their mother with the dinner."

Essie stuck her tongue out at his back. It was a new house, but all the things of her old life had come along with them, except her father.

Dinner was hot dogs and pizza, with cut-up apples and popsicles for dessert. Her grandfather mumbled over his plate, examining the pizza as if it had been poisoned. He took the hot dog out of its bun, instead cutting it up and eating it with a fork. Essie didn't understand what he had against pizza. Pizza lunch had been her favorite day at her old school.

"There's a little girl next door," her mother said. "She's younger than you, though, I think. That's what Mrs. Pellazack said."

Mrs. Pellazack was the owner of their new house and lived in the other half of it. She was a friend of Essie's Aunt Nada, and she was undercharging them because of it.

"Mrs. Pellazack said there are some other girls your age up the street." Her mother looked at Essie. "That will be nice for you, Essie, won't it?"

Essie nodded. She should tell her mother she'd already met the girl next door. It would make her mother happy. But she didn't want to yet.

"It would be nice to know some friends for when you start to school," her mother went on. She poured more milk in Essie's glass and her grandfather's, who took it, thanking her in Slovak.

"I saw some girls," he said suddenly in English. "They were playing in the street, where cars go. What a place you have brought us to."

Essie hurriedly drank the rest of her milk. "Can I take my popsicle outside?"

Her mother nodded, looking tired.

Out on the back porch, Essie ate her popsicle as slowly as she could, keeping her eyes on the next-door yard. There were trees and bushes all along the edge of it, but she could see between them. When she finished the last lick, she stuck the stick in her pocket and went over to stand beside the biggest

bush. The yard was bigger than hers, although their garage was smaller. There was a hose lying in the grass, humped and curved like a snake, and some toys in a wagon by the garage door. Essie wanted to go over and look at the toys, but she was afraid to.

She walked along the line of scratchy bushes between the two yards until she got to a chain-link fence at the back. Their back neighbors had a garden with neat squares marked off with sticks. Their house was barely visible between the trees and plants. There was a building at the side of the garden, too small to be a garage. Essie pressed forward, trying to see more. A low rustling sound came from the building, and she jumped back, but when she didn't hear anything else, she thought she must have imagined it.

She turned around. From here she could see the back of the new house. The light was on in the kitchen, and she heard the clinking sounds that meant her mother was doing the dishes. Little's house was mostly hidden from her by the branches of a tree, but she could see one window in the back, on the first floor, which she decided might be Little's bedroom. It was almost dark out now, and she thought she could go right up to that window and look inside if she was tall enough.

Essie pretended that she was a cat, like her grandfather's Muzi, quiet and sneaky. It was getting dark, but she could see a little under the tree. There were things scattered about—cardboard boxes, a tricycle, a shovel leaning against the house. A face in the tree scared her for a minute, but it was only a doll propped between two branches, its face dirty and hair wild.

Any minute her mother would be calling her, but just for now, she was on her own. No one knew where she was, no one in the world. With this powerful feeling beating in her chest, she pulled the tricycle over to the window and got up on the seat, which brought her nose just up to the frame. She worked her fingers into the little gap between the frame and the screen. Her foot found the handlebars of the tricycle, and she pulled herself up, balancing, her other foot banging against the house.

And then she could see: a room with two beds, lit by light coming from beyond its door. She could hear voices—a woman, maybe Little's mother. Her voice rose and fell as if she was telling a story. Essie strained forward, pressing her nose to the screen to hear better. She could see the hall beyond the bedroom, and an open door, the source of the light. The woman's voice stopped, and there was a rush of footsteps. Little appeared in the door. Her hair was braided again, both sides. "I hate you," she said. "And I hate daddy."

Her mother (or whoever it was) said something Essie couldn't make out. Essie felt the handlebars start to slip out from under her foot, and she gripped the window frame more tightly. Little turned toward the window, and Essie thought she had been found out. But Little didn't see her. She fell down on the floor and began to scream, kicking her feet against the wall and the bed frame.

Essie let go and got off the tricycle, almost falling. It made a noise, banging against the house, but Little was screaming so loud that it didn't matter. Essie could hear the screaming all the way to the back porch of the new house.

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When Essie woke up the next morning, the light was wrong. Her bed faced the wrong way. The sheets were the same, and there was her green and blue blanket, familiar under her fingers. It was Sunday, and they would go to church, which was what they always did, but it would be a different church. She lay in bed, feeling stubborn, but when her mother called, she got up and went downstairs. The new kitchen was skinny, and their table took up too much room. She had asked last night why all the rooms were so small, and her mother had said that it was because the house was a side-by-side. There was another house just like it on the other side of the wall where Mrs. Pellaczak



lived. Her grandfather had wanted to know if their landlady was a good Catholic because this was something you needed to know if you were living under the same roof. Her mother had started to cry, and Essie had had to go to bed early.

So, she didn't say anything about the table. She ate her cereal and drank her milk, even though it tasted a little funny, in a new-house kind of way, and she didn't say anything later when the new church was ugly and bare, with plain glass windows and almost no statues. When they got home, her mother said she should go and play, so she did. She took one of her dolls and went out, still wearing her church dress, looking for Little, who was easy to find, since she was sitting on the back steps of the new house.

Little was barefoot, wearing shorts and a blouse that was too big for her. On the one hand, Essie felt proud of her church dress, which was pink and yellow striped with lace on the collar. On the other, she felt a little ridiculous. Her shoes seemed too shiny. Little did not look impressed by the dress. She scowled at Essie and said, "Where were you?"

"Church," Essie said. "Don't you go to church?"

"Sometimes," Little scratched at a scab on her knee. "You want to see the chickens?"

Essie looked around, puzzled. "What chickens?" Since she had snooped around Little's back yard, she knew there was no place for chickens.

Little didn't answer this, but set off toward the fence by the garage, Essie following. She pointed through the fence at the shed Essie had noticed last night.

"I don't see any chickens."

"We have to go in there, stupid."

"I can't climb that," Essie said. Maybe she could have, if she wasn't wearing the dress.

Little ran to the end of the fence, and with a twist of her body, was on the other side. "It's easy," she said. "I'll hold it open for you."

The fence had a hole in it, barely big enough. Essie held her dress close around her and squeezed through.

Little was opening a door in the back of the shed, barely big enough for them to enter without banging their heads. Inside it was dim and smelly, filled with a rustling, settling sound.

Essie turned to say something to Little and found that there was a chicken inches away from her nose, sitting on a shelf. The walls of the building were

lined with shelves, and the shelves were filled with chickens. “What are they doing in here?” she whispered.

“They live here,” Little said solemnly. “There are fourteen of them. There was another one, but she’s gone because Mr. and Mrs. Knapik ate her for dinner. One of them is a rooster, but he only crows when there’s a thunderstorm.”

“I thought chickens lived on farms.”

Little nodded as if she’d said something smart. “They’re illegal chickens.” She pronounced illegal carefully.

Essie tried to look as if she knew what this meant.

“I gave them names,” Little said, “but I can’t remember all of them now. You want to play dolls?” She pointed to Annabelle, Essie’s doll, which she was still carrying.

They went back through the fence, and Little led the way to her front porch, where she must have been playing before Essie came out. Five dolls were propped up against the porch railings, each of them with a dish set in front of it. Some of the dishes looked like real dishes, and some were doll dishes. “You can put her there,” Little said, pointing to where Annabelle could go. “They’re having a party.”

Essie nodded. The chickens had thrown her, but she knew how to play dolls. "They can have cake. And tea." She didn't see any cups, but Little nodded, and they began to play, doling out imaginary cake, with leaves torn from the bush by the porch for napkins.

"It's more fun with real cake," Little said, "but my mom wouldn't give me any."

Essie was pretending to clean Annabelle's face with the leaf napkin. She could hear music playing inside Little's house, and someone singing along. "Is that your mother?"

Little made a face and nodded.

A car came down the street and stopped in front of the new house. "That's my aunt," Essie said, and Little came over to peer through the bushes with her.

"She's really fat," Little said. "And she's too tall."

Essie's Aunt Nada and her Uncle Stefa were getting out of the car. Looking at them from Little's porch made them seem strange, as if she were seeing them from far away. Together they went up the porch steps and disappeared into the new house.

Little was sitting on the porch swing, pushing herself with her bare foot. "Men should be taller than women," she said.

“That’s stupid,” Essie said. She wanted to get on the swing, but she felt that this should be settled first.

“It’s in the Bible, so it can’t be stupid.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Your father is taller than your mother, right?”

Essie gritted her teeth against each other. “Yes,” she said. Her father was taller. Her father was not here though, so his tallness seemed beside the point. Quickly, so Little wouldn’t ask about him, she said, “What’s your real name?”

Little looked pleased. She hopped off the porch swing and sat down among the tea-partying dolls. “I’m not going to tell you.”

“You said you would.”

“I didn’t say when.”

Essie picked up Annabelle and smoothed down her skirt. “I could go in your house and ask your mother.”

Little jumped up, her face shocked and furious. “If you do that, we’ll never, never be friends. I’ll hate you until the end of the world.”

With relief, Essie heard her mother calling. “I have to go.”

“You can’t go until you promise you won’t ask,” Little said. She got up and stood in Essie’s way, and although Essie knew that she could get past her, she didn’t try. “Promise right now.”

“Essie, Essie!” her mother called, and she felt pulled, the sound of her mother’s voice stretching her out like a piece of taffy when they made it at Christmas, one sticky end of her held on the porch with Little while her mother’s voice was at the other end, her voice getting more insistent.

“I promise.”

Little smiled at her. “OK then.” Her face was close, and Essie could see that she had almost invisible freckles on her nose and cheeks. One of her front teeth was a little longer than the other. “Maybe I’ll tell you next time.”

In the new house, her aunt and uncle were sitting in the front room, both still wearing their hats. “Where were you?” her mother asked, but someone knocked on the door, and Essie didn’t have to answer.

Mrs. Pellaczak came in. “Isn’t this nice?” she said. “I always like a social gathering on a Sunday. And this must be Eliska. Isn’t that a pretty name?”

“It means God’s oath,” her grandfather said.

“What did you do to your dress, Essie?” her aunt asked.

Essie looked down at the smears of dirt on the skirt of her Sunday dress, probably from when she'd sat on Little's front porch. The lace at the hem had a tear in it. "I don't know."

"Oh, Essie," her mother said. "You'd better go and change."

She didn't sound angry. She hardly ever sounded angry lately. Instead, her voice was sad, as if the dirt on Essie's dress was part of everything that had happened with Essie's father, everything that was still happening.

"I hope it will come out," her mother said as Essie went up the stairs to her room, but her voice didn't sound hopeful.

"Just a good soak with a few drops of bleach," Aunt Nada said.

"I don't know, with the colors? I'd try lemon juice first," Mrs. Pellaczak put in.

Her mother said something, but Essie couldn't make it out. She went into her room and closed the door. Most of her clothes were still in boxes, which gave her a peculiar feeling. She opened one to see what was inside. Some blouses were on top, folded carefully, and a box of handkerchiefs, and under them, a loose bunch of underpants and undershirts. Under those, a pile of dish towels—why were those in here? Essie lifted them out and put them on her bed. She had been wiping the dishes with the one on top, white with a green

stripe, listening to her parents argue. Her mother had been crying. Her father had called Essie's name. "Essie," he said. "You tell me. Should I stay here with all this?"

She didn't know what to say. She didn't know what all this was. She had stood by the sink, afraid to look at either of them.

"Don't do this," her mother had said, and her father said again, "Tell me, Essie. Should I stay or should I go? I'm leaving it up to you."

Essie took the green-striped dish towel and pushed it under the mattress of her bed. She found a pair of shorts and a blouse with a ruffled collar and put them on. She was supposed to go downstairs now, she guessed, but instead, she sat on her bed and looked out the window. She could see into a window in Little's house from here. As she watched, she thought she saw something move there, as if the window looked out from a long hall, the movement at the end of it. Maybe it was an animal. A magic animal. Little's house had a tower on the front, which made it like a castle, which was the kind of place a magic animal might live.

"Essie," her mother called. "Come down and have a snack."



So she went. Her mother was pouring Kool-Aid into the metal glasses that made everything seem colder. Essie's was red, as red as the berries by the side of the house.

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That night, Essie's mother went out with her aunt and uncle and Mrs. Pellaczak to a meeting at church. Essie stayed home with her grandfather. He silently heated up their supper—leftover macaroni and cheese and peas from a can—and they sat in the kitchen which still felt strange to Essie. Every time she looked out the window, she felt a little shock to see the yellow wall of Little's house.

“Can I have fruit cocktail?” Essie asked. She loved fruit cocktail, the little chopped pieces of fruit that might be one thing or might be another. You wouldn't know until you put them in your mouth.

“Your mother is not thinking right,” her grandfather said. “She should not to be going with Nada and Stefa.” He shook his head. “Nada is always thinking of fun.” He said “fun” as if it was something doubtful and poisonous.

“I like to have fun,” Essie said. It was easier to talk with her grandfather when her mother wasn't there for some reason, even though she often didn't understand him.

“And your father.” Her grandfather had left most of his macaroni on his plate. “He is not right in his head. In the old country,” he said, but he didn’t go on.

Essie knew what he was thinking, that in the old country things were done in the proper way, for he often said this. In the old country, her father would not have left. She and her mother would not be living in this new house, split down the middle, their furniture awkward and misplaced in its dark rooms.

“Where is Daddy?” she asked.

“Ai-yai-yai,” he said. “Where he is, only God knows.”

That night Essie tried to stay awake in her bed until her mother came back, but she fell asleep. She dreamed about her father and Little. They knew each other in her dream, but they wouldn’t tell her how. Her father was wearing his new suit, and his hair was too long, over his collar in the back. He sat on the porch with her and Little, and the three of them had tea with the dolls under the porch swing until Essie heard her name being called, and it was morning again.

After breakfast on Monday, Essie and her mother set her room to rights. They took her clothes out of the boxes and put them in the drawers of the bureau which was not Essie's old bureau. This one was in the room already, left behind, her mother said, because the old renters decided it was too heavy to move. Essie's grandfather had put in a closet pole that was the right height for Essie to reach, and she hung her dresses on it. She had six: two for Sunday and four for school. Her mother showed her how to clean under the bed with a dust mop. She already knew how to dust furniture with an old cloth. These would be part of her chores in the new house.

Her mother made lunch and said that they would eat it on the porch, for a treat. Her grandfather refused to join them. He said that eating out in the air would make his stomach trouble worse. "This is nice," her mother said. "Just the two of us."

Essie nodded, her mouth full. She couldn't see Little's front porch because of the bushes that grew tall around it, their branches waving in the breeze.

"How do you like it here?" her mother said. "I think your room is sweet, don't you think?"

"It's OK," Essie said. She pulled her peanut butter and jelly sandwich apart. She liked to see if the jelly went all the way to the edge.

“It’s bigger than your old room, I’m pretty sure.”

Essie licked the jelly from her fingers. “Does Daddy know where we live now?”

Her mother didn’t answer. She was looking out at the street as if she expected or hoped that someone would be arriving any minute. “Oh, Essie,” she said.

When her mother had gone inside with their dishes, Essie went out to the front yard and stood in the square of grass by the porch steps. She inched her way closer to Little’s house until she could see through the bushes. No one was on the front porch, although Little’s dolls were there, some still sitting up and others fallen backward, their skirts over their heads. She was wondering if Little would mind if she went up there and waited for her, when there was a noise and the screen door of Little’s house banged open.

“I see you,” Little screeched. “If we were playing hide and seek, I’d be winning right now.”

“Do you want to play hide and seek?”

Little hopped up on the porch railing and twisted her legs over. She jumped down next to Essie. Today she was wearing overalls with only an undershirt underneath. Her dirty feet were bare. Her hair was in braids again, tied at the ends with rubber bands.

“Come on,” she said. “We’re going to make some stew.”

Essie followed her into the snarl of bushes along the side of the house, but she said, “I already had lunch.”

“I saw you eating with your mother. What did you have?”

“Peanut butter sandwiches.”

Little made a face. “Too sticky. She’s pretty. Your mother,” she added, almost shy. “But my mother says that pretty is as pretty does.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. And anyway, this stew takes a long time to make. A long, long time,” Little said. “Go get your dolls and meet me inside the mermaid cave. “Only two of them. If you bring any more, I’ll kick them out on their keisters.”

When Essie got back with her dolls, Little had already gathered a number of the green berries.

“What about the red ones?” Essie asked. They were prettier, she thought.

“We need the green ones.” Little had put the berries in a dirty plastic bowl. She handed Essie a broken piece of brick. “Go on. Mash them.” She sat with her back against the house.

The berries were hard to mash. They slid out from under the brick. After a minute, Essie showed the bowl to Little. “Now we spit in it.” Little spat into the bowl. “You, too. Go on.”

“Are we going to eat it?”

Little shook her head. “It’s only for if you’re sick, silly. This is a medicine stew. We can have a hospital for the dolls and make them better.”

“Why can’t we use the red berries?” Essie asked. She squashed one between her fingers. “They’re softer.”

“We’re not supposed to, stupid. My mom said.”

They spent the afternoon diagnosing the dolls, laying them out on beds of leaves and dosing them with the medicine stew, smearing it on the hard plastic lips of the lady dolls and stuffing it in the hole of the baby dolls’ mouths where their bottles were supposed to go.

When all the dolls were cured, they sat eating some cookies that Little had in the pouch of her overalls. Their fingers were greenish. “How many dolls do you have?” Essie asked.

“Eleven,” Little said. “I get one for every birthday and one for Christmas. Pretty soon I’ll get another one, when I’m seven.”

Essie considered this. She had five dolls. She had a teddy bear and a stuffed duck. Did they count? Also, there were her mother’s Little Women dolls, which were hers now, but she couldn’t play with them. “I have eleven, too.”

Little nodded, as if everyone must have eleven dolls. “Do you want to see my playroom?”

Essie did want to. She had never had a playroom and wasn’t sure just what that was. But when her grandfather called her, she was glad. For some reason, playing with Little made her tired. “I have to go.”

“Who is that old man?”

“He’s my grandfather.”

“He talks funny. And his hat is funny, too.”

Essie started backing out of the bushes. “He’s from somewhere else.”

“From where?”

“The old country,” Essie said.

“What old country?” Little called after her, but Essie was already running up the back steps of the new house.

That night she woke up in the middle of the night, something that had never happened to her before. The new house was quiet, except for the ticking of the clock in the dining room. The streetlight in front of their house shone into Essie's room. Outside, a single car rumbled quietly down their street. Her room looked like a room in a house where there were ghosts, gray and silvery. She had the feeling that things were not in their right place, as if someone had moved them after she had fallen asleep.

She knew she was too big to be scared of the dark. If only she had a sister who would be sleeping in another bed, next to her. If she had a sister, she wouldn't be afraid, she thought. Somehow, she thought, her mind working in a dreamy, middle of the night way, if she had a sister, her father wouldn't have gone wherever he'd gone. That made sense, right? She stared into the dark where her sister's bed would be, if she had one.

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"It's nice that you have a friend," Essie's mother said at breakfast.

"She's six," Essie said, remembering the conversation about the dolls.

"Don't order her around too much, darling, just because you're a year older. I suppose I ought to go and introduce myself to her mother."



“You don’t have to.” Essie looked down at the remains of her cornmeal mush.

“We don’t want her to think her daughter is playing with a hooligan, do we? I can’t do it this morning, though. I have to go out.” She made a strange face, drawing her eyebrows together as she did when she was worried. “My job starts today.”

Essie nodded. Her mother would have a job now, instead of her father. Not instead, though, because he still had his job. Her mother was going to work in the office of someone Uncle Stefa knew.

“Your grandfather is going to watch you.”

Essie’s grandfather was sitting in front of his own bowl of mush, of which he’d only eaten a few spoonfuls. “It is not something a man should be doing, watching babies.”

“I’m not a baby.” Essie’s spoon clattered in her bowl.

Her mother stood, holding a dish towel in her hand. She looked as if she might cry, and Essie’s grandfather hurried to speak. “But I do it. I am watching Eliska.”

“You don’t have to watch me,” Essie said.

For a minute the three of them were still, not saying anything. Essie felt again how the new kitchen wasn't big enough. The walls closed them in and pressed them closer to each other until she could hardly breathe.

Soon after that, her mother put on her hat and got out her purse. She was wearing one of her good dresses and high-heeled shoes. "Be good for your grandfather. And come home at lunch time. We don't want to impose on the neighbors."

Essie stood at the front door with her grandfather and watched her mother walk quickly down the street toward the corner.

"It is not right," he said. He went upstairs, and she heard the door of his bedroom close.

It was strange to think of her mother going to work. When Essie started school next month, who would be there when Essie came home? Her grandfather, she realized. Her grandfather hadn't lived with them before they moved to the new house. He had lived in a room in a house two blocks away that belonged to a woman they knew from church. Essie had liked it better that way. Now it was as if her grandfather was supposed to be her father, except that her father would never have been there when she came home from

school. Her father had a job at the mill. Essie wished he was here, but also, she was mad at him. Maybe she hated him.

When she went outside, Little was nowhere to be seen. Essie crawled into the bush and sat on Little's brick seat. They had left their sick dolls out last night, and they were still lying on their leaf beds. Essie sat them up and smoothed their hair with her fingers. They weren't sick any longer, she decided, and she put them in a broken basket and made a game where they were traveling to a faraway land to find some treasure.

She was so engrossed in this that she didn't hear Little coming, and she almost fell over when Little stuck her head in from the tunnel of branches. She was afraid that Little would be mad that she'd taken the hospital apart, but she only said, "What are you doing?"

"It's a boat," Essie said, pointing to the basket. "They're on a trip."

Little crawled the rest of the way in. "I saw your mother going to the bus," she said.

"She has a job."

"So where's your father?"

Essie pushed the boat basket over the dusty sea. "Where's yours?"

“He’s sleeping,” Little said. “I look just like him, if he was a girl. Do you want to see my playroom?” Without waiting for Essie’s answer, she crawled out of the bushes. She took Essie around to the side door of her house.

Essie followed her into the kitchen. The faucet was dripping, and the sink was full of dishes. Little put her finger up to her lips, and Essie nodded, although she didn’t know why they had to be quiet.

There were two bedrooms at the back of the house, their doors open. The one on the right was Little’s room, bright with sun, the floor scattered with clothes and toys. Essie could see the window she’d looked through when she was spying. Little pointed to the other, which was dark. The blinds were pulled down. There were two beds, one of them neatly made up with a bedspread that rolled the pillow into a sausage shape. A man was lying on the other. Little’s father, Essie thought. He had all his clothes on, except for his shoes. He wasn’t under the blankets, but he had a jacket over his shoulders. One of its empty arms hung off the side of the bed.

They stood there for what seemed like a long time, and Essie began to be afraid that Little’s father would wake up and see them, or that something else bad would happen.

Little's father made a noise and turned over so that he was facing toward them. Essie couldn't move. When she dared to look at Little's father, she saw that his eyes were still closed. Little's cold hand touched her shoulder and they went back the way they came.

Little led her to a room on the other side of the kitchen. "Here it is," she said, pointing. The room was full of toys and books, some of them on shelves and some spilling out of a trunk onto the floor.

"Why is he sleeping in the daytime?"

"You can sleep any time you want to if you're grown up. Don't you know that?" Little went to the chest and pulled out a plastic doll that was almost as tall as she was. It had short, tightly curled hair and was naked except for a scarf tied around her waist. "This is Harriet Diane," Little said. "My father won her for me at the fair."

Essie came farther in. On one side of the room there were bulky garment bags hanging from a rod that sagged in the middle. Little kicked the one on the end and then unzipped it halfway. She pulled out something white. "It's my mother's marriage gown. It's like a princess dress. Does your mother have a marriage gown?"

Essie didn't know. "I have to go home for lunch."

“Look,” Little said. She crossed the room to a door in the outside wall. She opened it up and pointed. “You can go out here.”

Essie went to the door. There was nothing there, just air. She got the tight feeling in her throat that meant she was going to cry. “There’s no steps.”

“You could climb down,” Little said. “I can help you. Or I can find a rope.”

“No,” Essie said.

“You can’t go out the same way,” Little said, as if this was obvious. “Why do you think there are two doors?” She pulled on her unraveling braid. “I could push you.”

Essie backed up, although Little hadn’t come any nearer. She struggled with the crying feeling, trying to swallow around the lump in her throat.

Little had opened another of the garment bags, poking at a brown dress with buttons like black shiny berries. “She wore this when they went to a big party where my daddy used to work.” She turned back to Essie, holding the skirt up against her. “Someday I’ll be big enough, and I can wear all her clothes.” She stuffed it back in, not bothering to zip the bag up.

“I have to go.” Essie took a step toward the door into the kitchen, and when Little didn’t say anything, she ran out to the hall and down the steps to the side door.

## §

Later, after lunch, when she was lying on her bed, she made her doll Anabelle lie down beside her. She turned over and lay on her stomach like Little's father. Maybe he was very tired, she thought. She closed her eyes. She didn't take a nap anymore, but she had to lie down on her bed for an hour. Maybe he was sick.

When Essie woke up, she could hear her mother talking downstairs to her grandfather, not the words, just her voice, going up and down, up and down, along with the clatter of pans and the clink of silverware against china.

"Did you have a good nap?" her mother said when she went into the kitchen.

Essie didn't answer. She was embarrassed that she'd fallen asleep.

"Were you good for your grandfather? What did you do all day?"

"I played at Little's house."

"Did her mother make you a snack?"

Essie shook her head, thinking of Little's father lying on the bed under the jacket.

## §

The next morning her mother went out again, dressed up in one of Aunt Nada's suits, which she had taken in, because she didn't have enough office clothes of her own yet, she said. Essie was to do her chores in the morning, and after her grandfather gave her lunch, her mother said, she was to go out and play to give him a rest. "It's a good thing there's a little girl for you next door," her mother said. "I don't have to worry about you being lonely."

At lunch, Essie ate very slowly. When she was done, her grandfather was drowsing, his chin drooping down to his chest and then jerking up. "Go," he said when she hesitated. "Children in America must play. It's the new world now. Go and play."

Essie went out to the front porch. There was a red wagon on the sidewalk in front of Little's house with some dolls sitting in it, but Little was not in sight. She called, "Little?" It felt stupid to be calling her that, so she stopped.

The bushes at the side of the house rustled and shook, but when she ran down there, it was only Muzi. Essie tried to catch him, but he ran away toward the fence where Little had showed her the chicken house. Essie followed him, and he led her into a space behind the little Christmas trees next to the garage. It was bigger than Little's cave in the bushes, and she thought that it could be her own secret place, secret and quiet except for the clucking, ruffling noises



of the chickens. Muzi was trying to stick his face through the fence, and Essie saw that there was an egg lying in the grass on the other side, only a little cracked. She stuck her hand through to get it. Like shopping, she thought.

This could be her house. She wouldn't show it to Little unless she told her her real name. The Christmas trees were prickly, except on the soft tips of their branches, which Essie pinched off with her fingers to be vegetables for dinner. She found a stick so she could draw the rooms of her house in the dirt. A bedroom for her dolls and a kitchen. She went back into the house to get a cup and found a little packing box that could be the stove. She went into Little's bush cave and picked the red berries, afraid that Little would come and catch her. But she didn't come out, and Essie took them back and made her own stew while Muzi watched her, smashing the berries together with the insides of the egg into a lumpy pink and yellow paste. Muzi stuck his nose into the cup, but when Essie pushed him away, he went back to looking through the fence at the chicken house.

## §

That night, Essie lay in bed, listening to her mother cry. Her grandfather was already asleep, and Essie was supposed to be. Her mother was trying to be quiet, but Essie could hear her sniffing. If it was Essie crying, her mother

would come in and sit on the bed and put her arms around Essie and ask her what was wrong. Essie lay there stiff, holding Annabelle, who was hard and comfortless. She pushed her out of bed, and she fell on the floor.

Her mother came to the door of her room. Essie couldn't see her face, just her dark figure against the light in the hall. "What's wrong, Essie? What was that noise?"

"I dropped Annabelle."

Her mother came into the room, but she didn't sit down on the bed. "You shouldn't be sleeping with Annabelle. You're too old for that now. And you'll ruin her hair, you know." She picked up Annabelle and put her with the other dolls on top of Essie's dollhouse.

"She doesn't go there."

"She'll be fine until morning."

"She doesn't—"

"It's fine," her mother said sharply. "Go to sleep, Essie."

In the morning, her mother was gone already when Essie got up. Her grandfather made eggs, which she hated because they were squashy and smelled weird. He burned the toast and scraped the black away, but she could still taste where it had been, and the butter had little black specks in it. He fell

asleep in his chair while she was eating, and she crept out of the house. It was raining very softly. She could see a bit of color under the bushes, and she crawled in to find Little there. It was mostly dry except for at the end of the bush cave where rain was dripping from the eaves of Little's house.

"What kind of a job did your mother get?" Little asked. She had opened the treasure box. All the contents were laid out on the ground.

"It's in an office."

"My father says people who work in offices are lazy."

"She's not lazy."

"Come on. I can show you how to climb the tree."

They went in the back yard of Little's house and stood under the tree. Little was halfway up the trunk, which slanted. "Come on," she said.

Slowly, Essie followed her, crawling up the trunk. When she got up to where Little was, the leaves were wet from the rain. The branch they were sitting on curved away from the tree, and it wiggled under their weight. "I'll tell you my real name if you jump down to the ground." She wound a piece of her hair around her finger. "I do it all the time."

Essie looked down. She could see their footprints in the dirt under the tree. "I don't care if you tell me."

“You do, too. You said you did.”

“I don’t anymore.”

“I won’t play with you,” Little said. “I won’t let you in my yard.”

“I don’t care.” Essie started sliding backward down the tree trunk. Halfway down she started to go too fast, and her blouse rode up so that the bark scraped her stomach.

Little was standing on the branch, holding on to the trunk. “I hate you,” she screamed. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!”

As Essie ran into the back yard of the new house, she heard a window sliding up. “Stop screaming,” Little’s mother said. “You’ll wake your father. Stop screaming, Lena, and come into the house this minute.”

“I won’t,” Little said. “I won’t come in.”

Essie’s grandfather was out in the yard, calling for his cat, and she ran by him into the house. Inside everything was the wrong size or in the wrong place or the wrong color. The clock that had sat on the piano at their old house was on a shelf in the kitchen. The little round rug that she used to sit on in front of the fireplace was in the front hall. The telephone was on the dining room table instead of the window seat. Nothing was right.

Essie got down and crawled under the dining room table as she used to when she was a baby. Here, with the tablecloth reaching almost to the floor, it was as if she were in her real house. She took off her shoes and socks and rubbed her feet against the rug, which had the same scratchy softness, even though it was on a different floor. She lay down and put her cheek against it. Muzi was in the corner, she saw. She crawled over to pet him. He made a strange cracked sound. When she touched him, his legs were stiff, and there was something foamy on his tongue. “Muzi,” she said, “what’s wrong?” He made the noise again, and she got out from under the table, calling for her grandfather.

“He has eaten something,” her grandfather said. He had Muzi up on the kitchen table with a newspaper under him. “Something bad for you, Muzi, you have eaten. You don’t know this yard, stupid cat,” he said in a crooning voice. “You think you know everything, Muzika, but you do not.”

In the bright light from the window, Essie could see that the stuff smeared on Muzi’s mouth was pink. “Is Muzi going to be all right?”

“He will die, or he will live—it is for God to say, not for us.”

She began to cry, and her grandfather turned to look at her.

“What is this?” he said. “It’s Muzi who is sick, not you.”

“It was me,” she said. “I made him sick.” She told him about the berries and about the stew she’d made for her dolls.

“Bud’ ticho, shush now. We will give him medicine and see what we see.” He directed her to get a brown glass bottle from under the sink and then forced Muzi’s jaws open with his fingers so that she could tip a large spoonful from the bottle into him. He rubbed Muzi’s throat with his fingers to make it go down.

Her grandfather picked Muzi up and put him in his cat basket with a blanket over him. “Show me now these berries.”

Essie took him out to the side of the house to the cave in the bushes. She crawled in and brought back a vine with red and green berries. He looked at them, touching the the purple flowers, squashing one of the berries to a pulp between his fingers. “Did you eat?” he asked.

Essie shook her head.

He took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his fingers. “Not everything on this earth is good, Eliska. Do you know this?” He put his hand on her head and smoothed it down over her hair, once and again.

Essie nodded. Her lip was trembling so that she couldn’t speak. She pushed her head against her grandfather’s smelly old coat. She knew it now.

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**Mary Grimm** has had two books published, *Left to Themselves* (novel) and *Stealing Time* (story collection) - both by Random House, as well as stories in a number of places, most recently *The New Yorker*. Currently, she is working on a dystopian novel about oldsters. She teaches fiction writing at Case Western Reserve University.