

A PARTING GLASS

A NOVEL

BY TESS BANION



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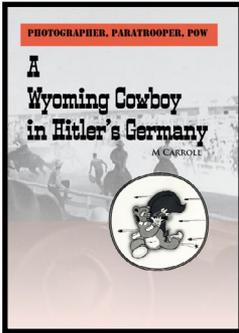
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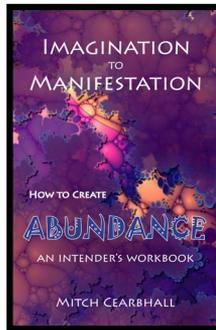
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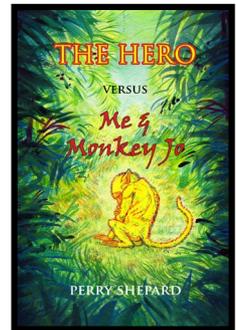
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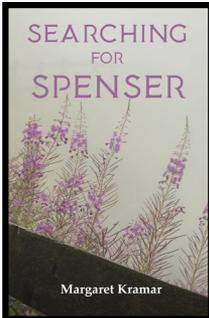
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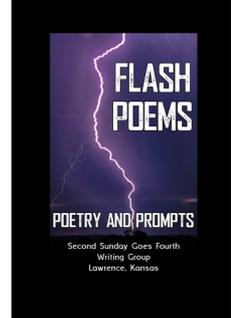
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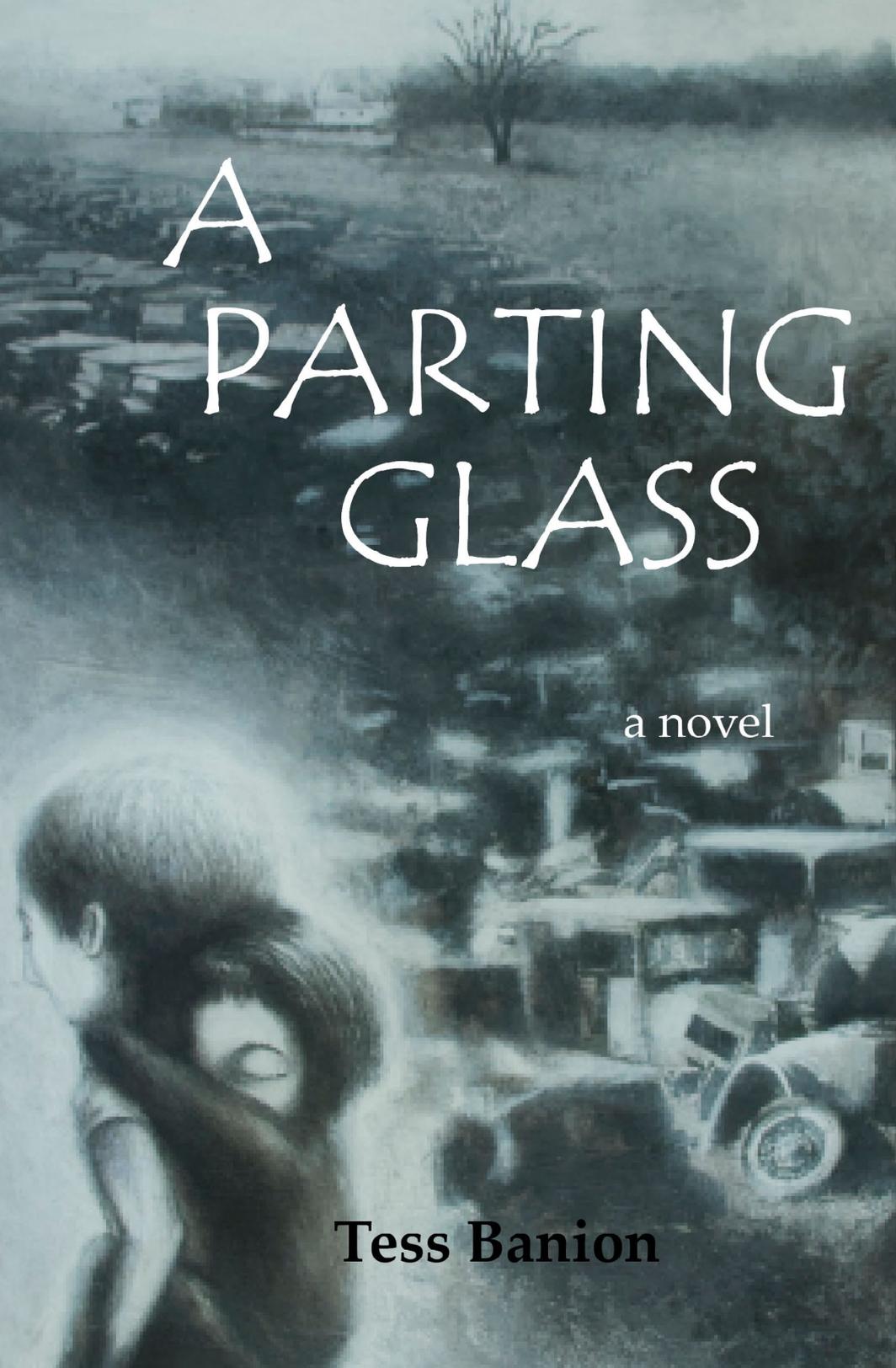
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A PARTING GLASS

a novel

Tess Banion

“It was beginning again. Elizabeth looked around the room from face to face. She saw rage, fear, tears. She saw the monster; his face covered with hair and his nostrils flaring. His feet were heavy and thick, but he looked weak. She needed to run, get to her safe place. She moved back toward the closet and quickly disappeared.”



Chapter 6

Elizabeth joined her siblings as they marched in a silent but not orchestrated cadence—each with thoughts of their own, each one a different character from a distant place and a different time. The neighborhood changed and slowly the woods unfolded with James in front, (he was always in the front), Patrick and Katherine fighting for second, (a common occurrence since birth), and Elizabeth bringing up the rear.

Once inside the maze of trees and undergrowth, the children ran straight toward a large oak tree. At the foot of the tree, a large female squirrel lay dead as a door knob. The sun peeked through and cast a glow on the four children as they solemnly looked at the dead animal. Patrick got as close as he could without touching the squirrel with his nose.

“Yep, she’s dead. Looks like her neck is broken,” he reported.

Disgusted, Katherine stepped away and pulled Elizabeth back with her, but Elizabeth resisted and got closer to the squirrel. As she and Patrick pondered the carcass, James stared at a nest high in the tree and began to circle around. He made his assessment. “I bet she has a baby squirrel in the nest,” James offered.

With that, Elizabeth dashed to a nearby tree, not as large or foreboding as the oak, and climbed it with ease—she could master most trees. There was only one that caused her injury, the small apricot in their back yard. Last summer she fell and landed squarely on her rear-end. She could still remember the pain and the instant shock; it took weeks

before it healed. Susanne said there was no way to fix a tail bone, and it was in those moments that Elizabeth resented her mother. She wanted to be comforted, she wanted her mother's smile, but her mother had none to give.

"Well, we have to do it," James said.

Katherine knew exactly what James was going to say. She jumped in and launched her verbal assault. "What are you going to do with a squirrel? What are you going to put it in? You can't make a squirrel a pet. Besides, how do you share a squirrel?"

James had seen her do this before and he knew this was his territory, not hers. She was the emotional center of the family; she cared for the clan when things got rough. Patrick kept the monster at bay, a big job. James' part was the physical world. He was the oldest and when he made a decision, it was settled.

"We will each take a turn with the baby squirrel," James declared.

Katherine was disturbed. She would do what he wanted, but she didn't have to like it. They didn't need another baby; they had John. Besides, she knew who would worry about the baby squirrel the most...she would.

Elizabeth surveyed the activities on the ground, and she interrupted the discussion. "I think that is a grand idea."

Oh great! Katherine thought. There were times she wanted to shake her sister-child.

"Come down and we will say a prayer," offered Katherine, confident that Elizabeth would do one of her imitations, and pronounce that she was Saint something or other. But Elizabeth didn't budge from her perch this time instead putting her hands together as if praying, slipping and catching herself.

"I'll be a saint in Heaven," Elizabeth said, looking down at the small cabal assembled below.

Perfect! Katherine shook her head, but her frustration went unnoticed. Elizabeth was in Heaven, being up a tree—her perfect place.

James took some leaves and put them over the dead squirrel. Katherine, James, and Patrick bowed their heads.

“Our father in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven, give us our daily bread as we forgive those that trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, Amen.”

The children crossed themselves, in a robotic action, with little or no feeling. Elizabeth on the other hand crossed herself as if she were using sign language, an embellished dramatic gesture.

Katherine, nervous, paced, “Mom told us not to be late. Dad is gone tonight.”

Patrick, hearing a challenge in Katherine’s voice, kicked rocks off into the creek, “I didn’t hear her say that.”

Elizabeth chimed in because she hated to be left out of the conversation. “Patrick, you don’t have to sit next to him,” (meaning the monster, her father).

“I’m not afraid of him” Patrick said with pride.

True, Elizabeth thought to herself; Patrick wasn’t afraid of their father. He was the smartest person in her family, and he knew that, Elizabeth knew that, everybody knew that. However, Elizabeth thought he should still be afraid. She knew that Katherine was afraid, and James too.

James circled the tree. “If we’re gonna get it, we had better do it quick.”

“I sure hope we don’t have sugar beets again,” Elizabeth offered. “I don’t know why they call them sugar beets, nothing sugar about them.” No comments. They had heard this tirade before.

Katherine was done arguing. She turned and made her way through the trees with Patrick close behind. She wanted no part of his stupid decision. Patrick was bored; animals bored him. Oh, he liked them, but he did not trust a wild animal like a squirrel. He wouldn’t mind having a dog, maybe, if they were well-trained, but he didn’t really know any dogs that were well-trained. They had a dog once, but that was before the animal was sent away for biting any brown person who walked by their house, in a town of multiple

generations of Mexican railroad workers, that happened several times a day and required a fee to get the dog out of jail. There were no pets allowed in the O'Sullivan household now. "One more mouth to feed," his father would say. Maybe if they lived on a farm and had cattle to herd it might be okay, but just having a pet was not part of the landscape.

As far as Patrick was concerned, James was on his own with this project; he had no interest. He decided instead to challenge Katherine to a race home. Elizabeth watched as the two siblings disappeared. It had been a long day and her legs hurt as a reminder of Mary Paul's stick, but she would quickly forget again. Today she was an acrobat walking a tight rope.

She looked down and saw James. He could do in the physical world what Elizabeth was forced to do in her mind. One day he would escape this place, this home, because he knew how to do things and make things. He was quiet most of the time, but Elizabeth knew he was always thinking. He wasn't a great reader, or writer for that matter. Books didn't interest him much, but pamphlets did, especially if they showed him how to construct something. Today he would scale the tallest tree, with ease, and rescue the baby squirrel. She would watch with amazement and wonder at his confidence.

Elizabeth, mesmerized by the brilliant sunlight, dangled from a branch by her knees, her uniform over her head. It was then James noticed the back of her knees and calves. Clearly, someone had taken a switch to her legs—a switch that had a shard, a tear in the wood that cut her leg. She swung and flipped to the ground. James rushed to her as she landed somewhat unsteadily, and then bounced up.

"Elizabeth, are you nuts? You could get hurt."

Elizabeth assumed her pretend role, "James, you need not worry for I am a trapeze artist." She curtsied, never losing her character.



Patrick burst through the living room door, out of breath with sweat bubbles forming on his upper lip and holding his side. He crossed the finish line just a step or two ahead of Katherine who was winded and collapsed on the couch.

Soon after, Katherine paused to give John a kiss on the top of his crewcut hair as she strode into the kitchen. John, content with a green plastic dinosaur adorned with *Texaco* written on the side, didn't notice.

Big Band music filled the house. No rock and roll, no Elvis. The only music was from men named Dorsey, Ellington, and Miller, all from Susanne's past. The children liked the music; it made their mother happy. Katherine knew where her mother would be—at the stove. She liked the image of her mother cooking, a moment held for all time.

Most evenings Katherine assisted, but Elizabeth was the clean-up girl. It wasn't a position that Elizabeth liked, but one she understood. This was Katherine's and her mother's time together—the minutes when the roles were clear, unfettered, just mother and daughter. Katherine was mentored and taught, and treated like a daughter, like a kid.

Elizabeth never felt shortchanged. She had two mothers and felt good that she did. The old tin measuring cup, the one Susanne always held close because it was her mother's, would pass to Elizabeth's sister. Elizabeth had no illusion she would be the one who would cook or sew. That place was reserved for Katherine. Elizabeth's dreams never resembled the life her mother had.

The smell was familiar; it was fudge for sure. Susanne stirred and stirred the hot concoction of cocoa, butter, milk, nuts, and then poured the mixture out on wax paper to cool. When completely firm, the fudge would be cut. It was a treat beyond measure, but dinner came before the fudge.

Quickly, Katherine began to gather all the utensils, plates, and condiments needed to set the table; her turn tonight. She missed the preparation time just to see that stupid squirrel, but she knew there would be a million more opportunities to help her mother in the kitchen. Everyone took a turn setting the table except John; he was too little. Elizabeth

doubted he would ever be required to do any house work, the perk of being the youngest.

Tonight's menu was macaroni and cheese with chunks of ham left over from another meal, and hot rolls, a simple dinner that made Elizabeth feel good and full. And thankfully, no beets.

Susanne glanced over her shoulder and smiled. She guarded the pan, careful not to let the children see its contents. It was too late; they knew the moment they entered the small house. She turned, displaying the contents of the pan as Elizabeth came into the room. "Heaven," Elizabeth pronounced sliding into her seat at the table with her hair a mess and in her eyes. Susanne smiled and returned the fudge to the stove as James sauntered into the room with the squirrel.

"Look what I found," he said. Susanne, aware of the joy in James voice, turned and came over to see the squirrel.

Katherine stopped suddenly and automatically recited her prepared, deadpanned speech loaded with sarcasm, "She was all alone. She needed a family."

James shot Katherine an annoyed look. He knew she disapproved, but it was not her place to voice an opinion. He was the leader of the pack. His word, like their father's, was the last and Katherine knew this. It was the way they got along. There had to be discipline and order in their pack, and loyalty was paramount. They could argue in the quiet of their bedroom or in the forest, but never in front of anyone not a part of this clique, and that included their mother. They could play and tease, but never were they to share the conversations that made them endure.

Susanne reached over to pet the baby squirrel and smiled. She was always proud of her children, but it was the unexpected, silly things that brought her the most joy. James was certain she was pleased, and that pleased him. Without thinking, he announced, "We need a cage for her."

At that moment, Susanne recoiled. The word, like a sharp knife, punctured her. Cage, a place she knew very well. She stepped back looking past the children into the living room and spied the gift, the gift that was intended to heal the

wounds— the music box perched on the side table. A daily reminder of her confinement.

Katherine watched her mother's eyes and saw the pain that the words caused. Something bigger than a sword had just pierced the armor that protected her mother. What Susanne could never say was always found in her eyes. Katherine knew that, and she also knew she must do something. "Well, we better make her a great home," Katherine said as she smiled at her mother. Susanne, recovered and went back to the stove; the pain was diverted. Very quickly, Susanne again checked on the hot fudge which was now a brown, golden treasure.

"Mother, do we have time before dinner to go to the shed and get what we need to make our pet a home?" James asked. Susanne nodded as James started out the back door with Katherine at his heels.

"I can go it alone, Katherine," he said a little sarcastically. Katherine knew what James meant and what he would say if he could. She ignored him and stood her ground. Actually, she had something to talk with him about. There were too many things popping up, and it was never a good omen when things began to pop up, or unravel. First, the incident at school, and now the squirrel that will require her time and the time of her always tired mother. They needed a plan. The two, sister and brother, continued down the porch steps with James walking briskly as if to say, "You are not welcome," to which Katherine's gate seemed to say, "I don't care."

The shed was filled with boxes, old furniture, a metal shelf and a workbench covered with carpenter tools that made it look like a regular maze. A small light hung from the rafters. There was barely enough room to walk. James pulled on the cord lighting his way through the cramped storage.

"There has got to be something we can use in here," James said.

"What are we going to...?" Katherine began, then became distracted as James pulled a box full of odds and ends off a

small metal shelf spilling the contents onto the already cluttered floor.

"Name her?" James asked.

"No. What are we going to do about Elizabeth?" There was frustration in Katherine's voice.

James was focused; he didn't look up. "Yeah, I know, I saw her legs," he replied nonchalantly.

"What...are...we...going...to... do?" Katherine's voice raised.

"Nothing. We are doing nothing." James answered as he completed his evaluation of the clutter that surrounded him. Finally, he announced, "This should do nicely."

"What if...?" Katherine started to say as James finally stood up with a collection of wire, half of a bird cage, and string. "What if he finds out?" Katherine forced herself to finish.

James knew he needed to pay attention because she would not stop until he offered something plausible. Her nagging was a curse and a blessing. She kept him on his toes, made him a better brother-father.

"We'll just keep her out of his way for a few days. It will all fade," he said confidently.

Katherine was having no part of this apathetic kind of thinking. It was another one of James' stupid plans of denial—don't think about it and it goes away, and that never quite worked out. *Fade! As if anything in this crazy world they inhabited would ever fade.* Her anger exploded, "She has more than welts; there are scratches and bruises."

James was uncertain; he didn't know what to say. He had to pretend he was not just older, but wiser and willing to compromise. He must be an adult, although in his heart, he didn't really want to be one. He wanted Katherine to take care of it, he wanted Elizabeth to stop getting in trouble, he wanted to have fun, build a cage for a squirrel, and forget about a damaged mother and a father who knew how to hurt.

He knew that Katherine was right about what would happen if their father found out about Elizabeth's injuries. There would be an explosion, an event, and everyone in his path would feel his "justified" wrath. No one could touch his children, not even a nun. After it was over, James and Katherine, aching with embarrassment would go back to school and feel the shame that occupied those kinds of events. Patrick could move through those moments and know he was not in any way responsible. He also knew he would never be his father. As for Elizabeth, she would retreat, let the rain wash over her, and recover.

"Well, what do you want to do? Well...?" Katherine, sat down on a box of junk, and pondered.

"I don't know."

James, with his arms full, reached down and offered her his hand, gently pulling Katherine to her feet. They were a team. He pulled the cord and the light went off, ending their conversation. The evening sun cast a bright orange hue across the backyard as the two silhouettes made their way back into the house.

James later fashioned a cage out of wood that the squirrel, although fond of the children and their gifts of oranges and nuts, would quickly chew through and disappear.



Patrick, busy setting the table, didn't notice James and Katherine. He didn't seem to care and kept at his task. One by one, they all took their seats, but the dinner table was especially quiet. Even Elizabeth, the talker, was silent and she seemed distracted. Normally, they laughed and made jokes — the cornier the joke, the better. It didn't matter who told the joke, or if it was as old as Methuselah. That's why the quiet now was alarming, almost like a weather alert.

After dinner, Susanne retreated to the piano, an old upright wooden box of magic. It was another gift salvaged and brought home after an event by an again remorseful father.

The music lifted the mood, a welcome addition to the night. Susanne's fingers flew across the worn keys of the piano causing a carnival-like atmosphere rushing through the house. The girls cleared off the table and the boys washed the dishes. Each one had a duty, just as each one had their place at the table.

James had been eyeing Patrick. After the meal routine was complete he made his move. A quick look and the game was on.

James handed Patrick the last dish in the sink and let out the water. He turned and grabbed a wet dish towel, twisted it and flipped it at Patrick, pellets of water spraying the room. James wound the towel again, ready to deliver another pop, when Patrick grabbed the towel. The match was on, and they tussled.

Patrick yanked the damp towel from James' hand, but James knew what was coming and dashed into the living room, stopping just inches from Susanne who was now playing the piano with great enthusiasm and abandon. He turned and avoided Patrick's snap of the towel. Quickly, Patrick rewound the towel for a second pop at his brother, but lost control with the towel flinging out of his hand and onto the floor. Out of nowhere, Elizabeth picked up the towel, danced around the room, and taunted the boys. She suddenly stopped, and with a grin, popped the towel. Elizabeth was back to her old self, and the boys were glad.

Their sister was an annoyance, but she added a fun dimension to the struggle. Thrilled, she did it again—pop and pop again. The boys ran for the front door with Elizabeth in pursuit. Accidentally catching her foot on the end of the sofa and slamming into the side table, all in the room watched in horror. The music box sitting on top of the table wobbled, and in slow motion, crashed to the floor. The figurine on the top of the music box broke loose and rolled under the sofa.

The music stopped. The shock of the moment engulfed the room and no one moved. Susanne looked at Elizabeth, and in the smallest of voices, uttered, "Oh, no."

Pandemonium erupted while Susanne darted from the piano straight to the sofa. She lifted an edge slightly, and

Elizabeth slipped her small hand under to retrieve the figurine. Out of nowhere, James quickly grabbed the pieces and disappeared as Elizabeth slumped to the floor. Within minutes, James was back with a small tube of glue and began to mend the broken piece. Elizabeth closed her eyes, and felt a darkness.



Later, small mounds of children outlined by the shadow of a full moon, lay in their beds. Their thoughts raced in competition with the quiet of the room. Katherine lay in a small twin bed that she shared with Elizabeth who was struggling in her sleep. James and Patrick, close by in the narrow room, hugged the edges of their double bed; while John, deep in slumber, took up most of the space in a very worn baby's crib.

"She's really done it this time," James pronounced in a low and cautious voice out into the darkness.

Katherine sprung up in bed and wanted to scream, but her whisper was as thick and hard as her feelings, "You should never have been fighting." She knew that the pieces were falling into place: the incident at school, the squirrel, and now the broken figurine. There would be an event.

This whole incident was just one more reason James couldn't wait until the day he could build a boat, take it to the river, and sail away. For now, he just reasoned, "She shouldn't have gotten in the middle." He wanted to be right.

"Then you could have been the ones to break the music box instead, all by yourselves with no help from Elizabeth." Score one for Katherine.

There was no way to control Elizabeth. They all knew that. Her realities were softened by the moments where she left the present and watched from another place. In contrast, their realities were grounded in the hard cement of life and they knew how much danger was lurking around the damaged music box.



James, clad in underwear and a tee shirt, and already sporting a physique that telegraphed potential to future football coaches, went to the bedroom window and looked up at the moon.

"It will hold," James said, referring to the glued figurine on the music box. His declaration was mixed with hope and confidence, and a need to make a petition. Katherine, in her outgrown nightgown, got up and joined James at the window.

"For Elizabeth's sake ...for all our sakes, it better," she said.

Patrick sat up on his elbows, looked over to his siblings, his friends. He knew he was needed; his keen sense of purpose would never let them down.

"It only needs to hold until we can buy another one," Patrick stated without emotion or fear.

"How are we going to do that? We don't have any money," Katherine lamented.

Getting money was never a problem for Patrick. It wasn't as if he had a lot, but he always had some.

"I have an idea. I know this kid at school," he offered.

Elizabeth rolled off the bed onto the floor causing a heavy thud for such a little person. Katherine quickly turned from the window and tiptoed over to her. She attempted to pick Elizabeth up, but it was a heavy load for a bean pole like herself.

Quietly, Katherine told her brothers, "Help me."

James stepped away from the window and reached over and lifted Elizabeth up with ease. He gently lay Elizabeth, half asleep, onto the bed. He pulled her nightgown, large for her, down to cover her legs, then the coverlet over her small frame. All the movement finally awakened Elizabeth. "Where am I?" she asked.

Katherine got into bed with Elizabeth and smoothed her hair. "Go back to sleep," she said. Elizabeth snuggled with Katherine, and within moments, she closed her eyes and

returned to her slumber. Patrick, in pajamas, another contrast in tastes to his older brother, got out of bed and joined James. Katherine noticed and slipped out of bed again, leaving Elizabeth alone. She knelt down between Patrick and James, her normal spot. The three hung out the large window looking into the darkness. Their features were clear and easy to read; they were handsome children.

The whistle of an approaching train, the music and life blood of a railroad town, sounded. They didn't jump or move; it was a familiar and welcomed announcement. They stared, listened, and felt comfort while Elizabeth rolled over and felt for Katherine. She sat up and looked at the three older siblings silhouetted at the window.



Later, Elizabeth quietly slipped out of bed into her awaiting sanctuary. She pushed the door panel and entered the darkness. Her hand searched and found a heavy and substantial treasure—a flashlight taken from the shed. She knew her father would not be happy to know she stole one of his flashlights. His anger was the price she would pay if he found out, but she needed it in moments like this. It didn't take much to make him mad, so what difference did it make? Every chance she got to take what was his, and everything was his, she would. This was her way to replace the lost eyelashes she pulled out in despair. It was her style of deliberation and justice, handed out in her small world.

She first acquired an old cigarette lighter left on a table. There wasn't any lighter fluid in it so it didn't work, but she loved the mechanics of the tool, particularly the sound it made when the top was popped open to reveal the flint, fire starter. Then came tobacco and rolling papers, and a partially used jar of hair cream. She especially loved the day her father prepared for an evening out playing cards. She remembered him standing in front of the bathroom mirror combing his hair and looking for his jar of hair cream. He was sure he had more. He needed it because his hair was heavy and

thick, and never stood on its own without help; it fell down onto his face.

Watching her father from behind a crack in the bedroom door was a thrill. He looked and looked in the bedroom, in the bathroom, upstairs, downstairs. It could have turned into an event until he remembered that James had a jar. James was summoned and a replacement was found. It was the uncertainty on her father's face that she liked the most. Had he used it up? What could have happened? Who would take his hair cream? The confusion and desperation made him seem weak, and she loved that. She knew it was wrong to take things, but it was one of those sins she would never confess.

The moment was broken when sounds from the next room came through an air vent on the wall. A door opened, creaked, and Elizabeth had to be very quiet. She could hear the halting footsteps of her father. Intoxicated, Junior stumbled, but regained his stride. Elizabeth didn't need eyes in the room to know what he looked like.

Susanne lay still, but awake in the bed with just a thin sheet covering her body. The windows were open with a small breeze lifting the curtains as Junior undressed, revealing a thin almost gaunt body as he slid under the sheet. Susanne closed her eyes, continuing to make no movement. Junior came close, his face next to hers while she held her breath. The moon deployed a small fragment of light through the window.

"I know you're awake," he said. Susanne didn't move.

"You think you are so smart, too good for me, but you're not. You are a nobody...I try...I work hard." There it was; Junior drew his fist to Susanne's face.

"Say something so I can hit you." The words pierced the quiet, but Susanne simply opened her eyes and stared at him. He slumped down on the bed as he turned away from her. He had done it again. The rage he felt inside, he pushed out onto Susanne.

For Elizabeth, with her ear up against the wall, it began again—her father's tears and words of regret.

"I am so sorry, Susanne, so sorry... I didn't mean....please forgive me."

The shuttering sobs soon engulfed him and his body heaved with emotion. His cries were deep like a wounded animal. Susanne wiped away the tears that streamed down her own face, and reached over to stroke Junior's arm. It was a protective move learned and cultivated throughout the years. Slowly she moved closer and pulled him near her. The crying lessened as Junior's breathing became deeper and deeper until he fell asleep. Susanne did not.

Elizabeth grimaced knowing what her mother was doing and it disgusted her, but it also taught her. In the part of her that allowed such thoughts, she catalogued the capacity to conceal and manipulate. She knew that was how her mother survived. She felt the back of her legs, the scabs left as a reminder that evil comes in all shapes and sounds, and realized her own transgressions were simply like her mother's.

Elizabeth was sad for her mother. The remnant of childhood, a wish, delivered a single tear that rolled down her cheek. She brought her knees up to her chest and rocked. The rocking always helped and soon the sadness faded, and she didn't feel the need to tug at her eyelashes.

There was a light coming from the corner of the space, but it was not her flashlight. A smile slowly crossed her face. Joan of Arc, dressed in her military armor, jostled with her sword, lunging in and back out again. The clanking was clear and loud in Elizabeth's head.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tess Banion became a storyteller at the age of two. It took her many more years to test her writing skills for real. She grew up in a nice size Catholic family with three brothers and a sister. Her first novel is based on truths, half-truths, and flat-out lies.

She raised two children and helped sustain a marriage of 37 years. She's gone to school (got a couple of Masters), worked in politics, changed careers and found her calling. This is her first novel, but not her last. She lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

Contact the author at: www.tessbanion.com.

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