

Salvaged

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By Bea Fouch

I don't remember my old name. I do know I was an astronaut on his second to last mission when something went wrong with my rocket. Maybe my crew mates had already died, or maybe no one had been with me on that trip. All I know is I was alone as I hurtled through the sky toward earth. I only recall the few brief seconds before my rocketship took a nosedive and was curb-stomped by gravity, crushing the skull of the ship, and me with it.

When I woke up, all I could feel was pain. My body was shattered into a million little pieces. I was peering through the window of the ship, the glass blown out in indiscriminate bits, just like my body. Where was I? I could feel parts of me at the back of the ship. Was that a part of my leg? My lungs seemed to be located somewhere above me. My vision was split. One of my eyes must have come out of its socket. I felt intense pain, the pain felt by a scraped knee filled with gravel, but instead of just my knee, it was my whole body. I would've cried in agony, but I had no face and no tears.

I rolled my eyes around to survey the damage. Garbage. I was surrounded and filled with garbage. Every bit of my body was crumpled and mixed with metal, bottles, plastic utensils, dirt, waste bags, and decomposed food. My nose was gone, so, mercifully, I didn't have to endure the stench. Just the hurt. Thankfully, the pain was transitioning from sharp and stabbing to a deep, aching throb that, while overwhelming, was more bearable. Eventually, I decided I'd try to move. I used all of my energy to pull my particles together, to summon my body as I did every morning when getting out of bed, but it was exhausting, and I knew that parts of myself would never return to me. I felt voices. I couldn't hear them exactly—I don't know if I had any ears to speak of at this point—but I could sense them. I knew there were other souls in the junkyard with me. I spoke back to them as best I could, but it was more of a telekinetic moan.

"We'll help you!" twin voices responded, very quiet and innocent and eager. That was my first clue that they were children. I felt a tiny something reach for one of my eyes. Everything went dark for a moment and then I could see clearly. I looked around anxiously. Hands. I saw tiny little hands quietly moving pieces of me together. I was so startled, I almost cried out. The hands were tinier than an infant's, so small and disconnected from anybody. There didn't seem to be any other parts of them that were visibly human. I couldn't see the rest of their bodies. It seemed that they were comprised of some human fragments and the rest of them I couldn't quite see, as if they were covered up by garbage, or perhaps sentient garbage.

"Here, let's hold this piece like this..." said a girl's voice.

"Ok, let me get this part of his leg," responded another voice, which sounded like a boy.

The two of them worked in tandem to put my face and head together, which I was now able to turn more easily. Then came my heart, lungs, and organs, as much of them as they could find. Then my ribcage and chest and legs and arms. I could feel that my particles were back together, but I was a garbage-filled humanoid, only a shadow of the man I used to be.

"I'm so sorry, Mister. We had to use a lot of garbage to hold you together..." said the girl.

"Most of your body was lost in the crash," said the boy sadly.

"You saw the crash?" I managed to mumble.

"Oh, yes!" said the girl.

"We watched the rocket shoot down out of the sky, and we were so frightened and very sad to see you crash," said the boy.

"Which direction did I come from?" I asked, still not remembering anything before the impact.

"We don't know..."

They both seemed to say this at the same time, and even though I couldn't see them, I felt them shake their heads.

"What was it like, Mister?" asked the girl.

I furrowed my brows in thought. Distant memories of firefighters, policemen, astronauts, and questions came back to me. They felt fuzzy and warm, like the touch of a blanket. Were they my memories? I couldn't tell. I felt respect, admiration, courage, and hope. All the emotions were so raw, so fresh, so childlike, that I stumbled over my words as I answered.

"I don't... I don't really remember..." I said sorry to disappoint the children. I wished I had more to tell them. They felt so eager to know more about me.

"Oh," said the little boy and girl together. I felt as if they were one person, but I wasn't sure how that was possible. Their emotions and thoughts were oddly in tune. I could almost sense them holding hands, but there was nothing of them left to see.

"Are you siblings?" I wondered aloud.

"No," the little boy answered. I sensed a smile and a blush. I sensed only sweet ignorance from the little girl.

"Where did you two come from?" I asked with curiosity.

There was a pause filled with radio silence from the two of them. I could hear the rustle of wind through the air. The silence was pregnant with some emotion I couldn't ascertain or understand.

The little girl's voice broke the silence like rain on a cloudy day—soft, small, and warm.

"Our parents... didn't want us." I could feel her shrug her shoulders.

"They were afraid," said the little boy. "We were forced to leave our home... and we found ourselves here."

"What do you remember?" I asked, not understanding how two children could end up abandoned in a junkyard.

The little girl sighed. "I remember feeling so warm and safe... at first. There was water all around me, and I was floating, listening to voices. I was so excited, I wanted to come out of my room and see all the voices I could hear. But then, when they learned I was growing in my room, the voices became afraid and angry. I was so afraid."

"I tried to curl up and make myself go away. I tried to go to another room, but the voices got so angry when I pounded on the door that I stopped and tried to make myself as small as possible. I was so scared. Then one day, I could hear all these beeps and lots of other voices I'd never heard before. And then, I felt sharp pains all over me and I cried and cried inside for it to stop."

"Then I saw light for a moment and all these faces. I think I saw my mother's face. She was very beautiful. I don't think she saw me. Then I was put into a dark thing, and after a long time, I found myself here. I was very confused for a while. Then I heard him." I could sense her looking at her friend.

"It was pretty much the same for me. I was crying inside when she heard me." His voice stopped. I couldn't tell if he was sad or just empty of emotion.

"I... I'm sorry..." I said.

I wasn't sure what it all meant, but my stomach, or the pieces of my stomach, ached as though I was grieving.

"That's O.K.," said the girl. "Do you think you can move, Mister?"

I tried, but it was useless.

"Don't worry," said the boy. "We can hold you together."

I felt their tiny arms and hands wrap around me. Somehow, they were holding all my pieces together. I could sense their affection for one another and for me. Then, I knew what happened to them. They were unwanted babies, killed before they had a chance to live. I had never been a parent. I never really thought about kids to be honest. But at that moment, I felt myself becoming a father. I was immediately filled with some paternal instinct I didn't know I had. I could feel all their pain, their fear of abandonment, their sorrow. It was enough to make me weep. I wanted to hold them, but they were holding me.

I hugged my own ribcage and cried. They cried with me. It was a strange mixture of sensing others' emotions with my own. I could feel their essences settle on either side of my chest.

"Why aren't you in Heaven?" I whispered. I had never been one to ponder spiritual, but the question came out as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

"We haven't been buried yet," the little girl said quietly.

It dawned on me. These two little ones were barely more than ghosts. I myself was hardly more than that, a trash carcass held together by three consciousnesses. I felt it was my duty to lay us all to rest. But not there. I wouldn't have minded for myself, but I wasn't about to bury the children in a junkyard.

"Come on," I said, feeling more strength and rising to my feet.

"Where are we going?" The little boy asked, holding tightly to my chest.

"Home," I said quietly. These two had never had a home. Never would have any human home on this earth.

We walked in silence for some time, wading through the sea of garbage. When we reached the end of the junkyard, I could see green hills bursting with color. My spirit cried at the sight.

"What is all this green stuff?" The little boy asked with delight.

"Grass," I said. In my mind's eye, I saw puppies and water sprinklers, watermelon and refried beans. I had a faint memory of running barefoot on the lawn with someone who could have been my sister.

"What is it like?" The girl asked. She needed a name. Her voice, soft and somehow rich reminded me of deep purple. I named her Violet.

"What is what like, Violet?" I asked, trying to picture her eyes wide with wonder.

"Living?" she asked.

I realized what a privilege it was to exist. To have ever seen a tree, put food in my mouth, talk with someone who loved me. Funny how I had to die to come fully alive.

"Tell us! Please?" asked my little boy. I wasn't sure why, but sandcastles and toy cars and the name Tommy came to mind. I smiled. This little boy, my son, was Tommy.

"Life is... Well, life is hard, but wonderful. You have a body that can move around, and you can eat things. You can play with friends." I continued to tell them about work and school and trees and animals. In telling them, I reflected on and measured my own life, which was coming back to me not in memories but in feelings. A pang of sorrow, the heaviness of regret, the heat of anger, the euphoria of joy.

We continued on our journey across the junkyard. I remembered a few jokes, which took some explaining, but eventually, we laughed, Violet's sounding like soft murmurs of happiness, Tommy's more like a joyous explosion I shared any faint recollections I had about life that may have interested them. They loved every minute of it.

At last, we came to a grove of trees. I don't know how I knew, but there was a graveyard just beyond the grove. I felt like a gardener, looking for the best place to plant his most prized roses. I also felt like Gilliat from *Toilers of the Sea*, a beautiful, obscure book written by Victor Hugo. I wasn't sure why the memory was so strong when so many other earthed things were forgotten, but I remembered the moment when Gilliat stood in the sea and watched his beloved Geruchette sail away, knowing she would never return to him. Still, perhaps I would see my adopted children again. Perhaps I, too, would make it to Heaven. I found myself talking to God, asking for his mercy. I asked him to forgive my faults and gross-negligence of the days He had given me. I thanked Him for life. I thanked Him for my children. I thanked Him for the gift of understanding, at last, what love meant.

The children were tired. Not just tired, they were growing thinner, like paper. I could feel them tremble like little leaves waving in the wind. They needed to fall from their tree, but they refused to let go. We walked out into the graveyard and I searched for a suitable resting place. The sun was setting at the top of a hill. That was it. The children needed to see the glory of a sunset before they left this earth. I trudged up the hill, trying to use my strength and not theirs. I kept talking to them, pleading inside for them to stay with me until they could see the sunset. At last, we reached the top.

The two of them gasped, and I could feel my chest swell with the emotion of three souls. "It's so beautiful, Daddy," Violet's voice trembled. She reached out for Tommy's hand. I was suddenly aware that the two of them were designed for each other. Had they lived, they would have met, gone through life together, perhaps had children of their own and grown old together. But they had loved each other even in death. They may not have known what love meant in the way adults speak of it, but they knew it better than I ever had.

I reached down to my leg and found a shovel. I pulled it out of my humanoid form and began to dig. It took all my effort not to use Violet and Tommy's energy, and my particles were beginning to hurt in a very dull, numbing, bone-weary kind of way, but I kept going. At last, the grave was dug.

I looked at the sunset and then at the grave. The hole in the earth did not seem frightening, but warm and comforting. After feeling so much weariness and feeling stretched thin, how wonderful it would be to lie down to rest. I sighed and the children sighed with me. We enjoyed the last bits of color that streaked the sky, the last bits of conversation and last bits of laughter. "Alright kids," I said, "It's time for bed." They each gave me a kiss before I said goodnight and goodbye.

"We love you," the children whispered to me, so quiet, as though I were tucking them in for bed.

"I love you, too," I said brokenly, beginning to weep.

"Don't cry, Dad, we'll see you soon," Tommy said resolutely.

"O.K.," I nodded.

Violet was the first to slip away. I could picture them holding her close her eyes and drift off, exhausted but peaceful. Then Tommy went. I could picture them holding hands as they walked up to the gate. Then I put my hand to my chest, where my heart had once been. I fell silently into the grave, first hoping, then praying, then knowing I would see my children again.

