

CEMETERY SOULS



by
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Naomi adopted Beth on a crisp fall day in 2001. It was a perfect event, in terms of emotions flowing and promises made. One only needed to overlook the fact that Beth had been dead for six months and that all of the witnesses were

dead, too, having been laid to rest in the Greenbriar Cemetery anywhere from two hundred years ago to just yesterday.

It also did not hurt to overlook that Naomi had neither a legal connection nor knew the child. Adoption was in the

eyes of the beholder, Naomi reckoned, and anyone who wanted to dispute it could just stand watch over Beth for awhile and see how justified Naomi was in taking this path.

It started while Naomi was on one of her daily wanderings of the cemetery, which she viewed as a roomy old home needing company to keep from feeling too empty and neglected. She began with the usual chat at her mother's grave, smoothing down the cool dirt with her fingertips, tearing out weeds and replacing the old Safeway bouquet with a fresh one. She sat in the damp grass, recently cut, and enjoyed the earthy smells mingled with chattering birds issuing about as much noise as she cared to tolerate.

As always, the delicious solitude sucked her deeper into the grounds after

she was finished visiting with her mother.

On one such stroll, she stumbled over the tiny grave. At first, Naomi wasn't sure what troubled her the most—how small it was, or how the little mound seemed so bare and lonely. You could hardly see it from the narrow road winding through the grounds. But, by God, there it was, tucked between the larger graves of two strangers, hard to miss once you were upon it, certainly hard to forget once you tripped over it.

Beth was chiseled in plain script on the cold headstone. *February 4, 1998- March 3, 2000. May she rest in peace.*

“Not long ago,” Naomi told the stone. She watched as her exasperated sigh scared away a sparrow perched nearby. How irritating. No flowers, no decorations. Nothing like the sea of memories dotting the hillside around her.

Naomi parked alongside the grave and pondered Beth's situation. A small child, lost early in life, alone in death.

Suddenly, she tied back her long black hair and shook her arms and legs madly to chase away the sharp, prickly pain that came from sitting squashed up too long. She straddled the mound, clearing away the weeds and smoothing out the ground. She gently brushed away dirt collecting on the headstone, digging her fingers deep into the lettering.

She marched back to her mother's grave.



"Let's give this little girl one of your flowers, okay? She needs some attention."

Naomi liked how the red carnation contrasted with Beth's grey stone. "Good night, sweet pea. Sleep well."

When Naomi next visited her mother, she automatically put Beth on the itinerary. Clutching fresh flowers, Naomi dropped to her knees and tidied up the spot. She eased herself cross-legged onto the ground and sought images of the little girl's life. Certainly, the death could not have been an easy one. Had the girl known innocence and affection? Had she been praised and loved, or beaten down and neglected? Did anyone remember her now and celebrate her short life?

"What do you think, Mom?" she asked one day. "I mean, can you tell whether she had what you gave me? You always made me feel so confident and proud. So normal."

Day after day, Naomi stood guard graveside and watched people stride purposely in her direction. She hoped they were family coming to spend time with Beth. She dared them to be. They always continued by with a nervous nod, baffled at the combative young woman with a neglected look protecting the small grave.

“Hello, Naomi,” one of the groundskeepers greeted as he made his rounds. “How’s your mom today?”

“Okay,” Naomi muttered. “Hey, Bill. Can you find out anything about this one?”

He studied Beth’s grave. He pulled his shoulders into a “why bother?” shrug and went on his way.

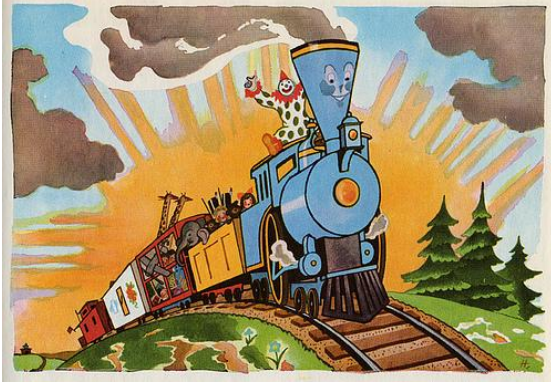
Weeks passed. Naomi lost her job for showing up late too much. She watched blankly as her squirming boss tried to demonstrate a balance between

compassion for *her loss* and the *need to act responsibly*. Her coworkers gawked from behind their computers and mounds of paperwork, glad it was not them in the hot seat. Naomi picked at the dirt under her nails and barely followed the conversation.

After apologizing about her job to her mother, Naomi swung the conversation back to Beth. “We have to make sure her soul is at ease,” Naomi complained. “What if she hasn’t found another body?”

She knew toddlers liked books. She read to Beth during each visit.

“Today, I brought ‘The Little Engine That Could,’” she chirped on a sunny morning. “I think I can ...I think I can...”



The words stopped her cold. It is true, she thought. If I think I can, then I can.

She floated the idea by Beth, her mouth dry and her heart fluttering. “I can be your mother.”

She toyed with her hair, afraid Beth wouldn’t like the idea.

“Okay!” she gushed after a long silence. “I’m glad you like it. Well, more than glad. Let me go discuss it with your grandmother.”

Naomi’s mother wasn’t so excited, but Naomi decided it might be fear about sharing her attention. After all, they had

been together more as friends than mother and daughter for so many years. Naomi tried to reassure her mother she had enough love and attention to give both of them. Then, she trundled away to the nearest bookstore and began scouring the Legal Self-Help collection.

It did not take much for Naomi to give up on the idea of really adopting Beth through the court system. The forms were a mumbo-jumbo mess of legalese. Even though she had worked as a clerk around such files, she couldn’t figure out what to do.

Bill the groundskeeper disappointed her, too. He got all funny acting when she asked him to help her figure out what documents she needed and to be a witness during the adoption. After that sticky conversation, Naomi noticed he always seemed headed a different direction when she was around.

However, being quite determined about her idea, she persisted in carrying out the adoption, legal forms and live witnesses be damned, on a colorful fall day when change was as much in the air as it was in her heart.

After the ceremony, she celebrated with a Dairy Queen value meal, savoring the hot, salty fries and juicy cheeseburger as she mapped out a new daily routine. First, she would make a trip to the food bank or a feeble attempt at finding work. This would take a good part of the mornings. Then, she would divide her time between visits to her mother and Beth.

Things were on track as the season began changing and Naomi proceeded with her plan. She wished she could move the two closer together, but at least her family was intact.

It was a chilly day with the brittle smell of winter in the air when Naomi's original prayers were answered, even though she wasn't sure she really wanted those prayers answered, now that they were indeed being answered and she had gone ahead with the adoption.

She trudged up the hill with a pot of burnt orange mums and a copy of *I Love You, Stinky Face* for story time.

The weight of someone's body had crushed the grass by Beth's grave. A lone rose rested by Beth's name. A note waited, too, propped against the stone, *To Beth's Visitor* scribbled on the envelope.

Naomi's trembling hands could barely wrench the damp paper free from the envelope.

"Thank you," started the wobbly words. "I have been away, trying to figure out my life. You have cared for

Beth. I can tell she is at peace. I look for her every day in the face of another child. Thank you for helping with her journey. Her Mother."

Naomi sat at the foot of the grave and waited, her fingers fiddling with the soggy pages of the book she would never return to the library. The sun moved from east to west and still she sat. She waited until it felt right to wait no longer, then she heaved up her body and

situated the mums next to the rose. She kissed her fingertips and brushed Beth's name. This was their good-bye. Her tears blended with the light rain.

"Have a good life," she whispered.

And she wandered off, first to tell her mother the news and then to weave among the headstones. There was certain to be another lost soul in need of her attention.

