

A Heart in Hiding

People were too complicated, so Audrey Rose decided to start a family with a puppy. She skipped down to the kennel where she had watched dogs grow up. A litter was weaning. Audrey Rose let herself in the pen and sat. First, a little boy came up to her and sniffed and wagged his tail, but it was the runt of the litter, brown and black with black eyes that captured her heart. The tiny body sat at her feet and looked up to Audrey Rose. Audrey Rose lifted the little life into the air, spun around with it, giggling. When she brought the puppy's face close to hers the puppy's tongue reached out and licked the tip of her nose. She named the dog Riley.

At home, the puppy was quiet, sleeping a lot. She wouldn't eat, only drinking water. Her skin became tight, elastic on her body. When Audrey Rose took her to the vet, she found out Riley had Parvovirus, a virus that infects the muscles and causes extreme pain. Any movement caused the puppy to wince. Riley was barely as big as Audrey Rose's hand and Audrey Rose couldn't stand to see something so small in so much pain. She howled to the world, screamed her most primal scream, then stroked the fur that felt matted and dry.

Audrey Rose could feel the puppy's pain in her own body, slept on the floor curled up next to the pup. Audrey Rose refused to drink water for two days, so her body would understand what her little friend was going through. When her muscles tightened and body shivered with chills, head rushes each time she stood up, the puppy dragged herself closer to Audrey Rose offering all the love she had. As they suffered together, Audrey Rose finally understood why she didn't allow lasting relationships in her life.

Scooping the puppy into her arms, Audrey Rose began to walk. For days she walked, holding the puppy close, feeding it water to hydrate it until she arrived at the cabin of the woman she called grandmother. A negligible form held skin and bones; the yellow hair was now white, the eyes clouded, but the spirit within still sparked.

"I need your help," said Audrey Rose.

"Who are you?"

"Audrey Rose. Your granddaughter."

"What makes you my granddaughter?"

"My mother is your daughter."

"Who's your mother?"

"Patti Anne."

“Where do you live?” asked her grandmother.

“Steamboat Springs. You have to tell me. What do you do when someone dies?”

“Everyone dies. What do you mean what do you do? You just do. What other choice do you have?”

“But how do you get rid of the pain?”

“Where do you live?”

“Steamboat Springs.”

“Who are you? Why are we standing out here? Come in. What’s that in your hands?”

They moved into a room that was tidy. Everything in its place, but there were stains on the tablecloth and the carpet. They sat in chairs covered in red velvet. Audrey Rose presented Riley to her grandmother.

“Oh, a puppy. I want a puppy.”

“She’s sick.”

“You are a beautiful girl. Come closer. I can’t see your face.”

Audrey Rose moved closer, inches from her grandmother’s face.

“Oh, you’re a good girl. Where are you living now?”

“Steamboat Springs.”

Her grandmother nodded her head, taking in this piece of information, something to be added to the swirling vacuum that allowed her to retrieve information only if she could grasp that tiny speck in the whirlwind of memories.

“You aren’t dying, duck.” Duck was the nickname her grandmother had called her when she was young. Audrey Rose pulled her chair next to her grandmother, placed Riley in her grandmother’s lap. “Ah, I see,” said her grandmother when she felt the fragile body in her lap. Audrey Rose snuck her hand into her grandmother’s, every bone, every roopy vein she could feel. The heartbeat softly pumping life.

“Come on, let’s go outside. Her grandmother carried the puppy outside, shuffling slowly, tiny steps. She laid Riley in the grass, flowers growing up around her. The coolness of the grass seemed to comfort the puppy, she stretched out, sighed. Audrey Rose’s grandmother took her hand again.

“It’s all a cycle, duck. All my friends are dead and I don’t remember the people that are still alive.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” Audrey Rose wanted to hug her grandmother make all her memories come back, but maybe her grandmother’s life was more peaceful without memories.

“That’s part of the cycle. You can’t heal if you don’t hurt. You can’t withhold love because you’re afraid of someone dying. You rob yourself of life’s beauty. Your heart is shriveling just like your puppy’s. I’m getting tired. Let me make you lunch.”

“I’ll do it, Gran.”

They left the puppy to rest with the smells of summer wrapping around her. Audrey Rose opened the refrigerator to find most of the food moldy and expired. She cleaned the refrigerator, found a couple of cans of soup and heated them up. When they sat down to lunch, her grandmother blew on the soup.

“It’s hot dear. Be careful. So where are you living?”

“Thanks Gran.”

“For what?”

“For being you.”

•••

When Audrey Rose left, her grandmother squeezed her hand tightly. “You’ll come see me again soon, won’t you?” It was almost a plea. But Audrey Rose knew her visit would be forgotten before nightfall. With Riley in her arms, she set out back for Steamboat. They trekked over mountains still covered with snow. At the top of an unnamed mountain, Audrey Rose placed the body that had stopped breathing in the snow to sleep.

-Do not attempt to recreate the events of Audrey Rose’s life. They will result in internal and/or external death or at the very least a yeast infection.