

White Pawn Opening

~2011~

Carolyn walked through the orange and red leaves scattered across the sidewalk. The tree lined street was bursting with fall colors. The oak and maple foliage had shirked the conspicuous green and revealed its hidden vibrancy. With the burgeoning of autumn leaves upon the road, the street radiated color under the lamp light.

The other homes, lining the promenade, reflected thoughtful architectural details of long-forgotten wealth. As the years changed and other neighborhoods became more affluent, this street of Aylesbury had become diminished and neglected. Weaving through the tightly parked cars, Carolyn crossed the isolated road toward her building.

The old Victorian-era house had been converted into small flats to facilitate as many tenants as possible into one abode. The edifice held hints of a glorious past, but presently only showed its derelict façade. Climbing the sagging porch steps, Carolyn opened the stained glass door.

The entrance hall's worn linoleum was chipped and broken in places, revealing patches of wood flooring. The ground floor had one large flat, belonging to Mr. Clements, the manager. An expansive staircase rose up from the middle of the room. Tucked off to the side and slightly behind the stairs was a modern attempt at a lift. Carolyn had been told by her neighbor that it had been out of service for years.

Yet, while the lift did not work, it wasn't devoid of occupancy. It was home to a woman and her several grocery bags of necessities. Yen Li was a remnant of the boat people who fled Vietnam via Hong Kong, eventually settling in Britain. She was the unofficial doorman and postbox to the building's residents.

"Good evening, Yen." Carolyn smiled.

Yen ceased rummaging through one of her sacks. "Good evening." She bowed her head, saying each word with the residual staccato of a Vietnamese accent. "You are out late, yes." Yen sat crossed-legged and serene. A fringe of bangs feathered across her forehead, her eyes and mouth slightly downturned

with a twinge of sadness.

“I tried leaving early today but was asked to stay and help file information on some new clients. I missed the train and had to wait for the next one.”

“Do you have time for a story?”

Yen had a penchant for tales. Carolyn and her sister, Stacey, had often received the benefit of some woven tale of yore. Carolyn was conflicted. She eyed the twisted staircase that wound to her third floor flat, and the weariness of the day weighed on her normal acquiescence.

“I probably should...”

Yen hurried, “The fable will not take long. You might find favor with it.”

Carolyn realized a small token of her time wouldn't make the staircase anymore tiresome than normal to climb.

“Alright, Yen, but a short story today.” Carolyn walked over to the thick banister post and leaned against it.

“A wealthy landowner promised his daughter to a rice farmer.” Yen's voice was soft and soothing. “If the man worked the landowner's fields, a reward of a marriage would be granted. Three years passed. When the time for the wedding approached, the landowner broke his vow by offering his daughter to another man. The laborer complained and threatened to go to the emperor. The landowner relented but wagered the laborer hadn't toiled enough for his precious daughter. In order to be wed, a bamboo stalk with one hundred segments would have to be obtained as a price for the bride.”

“Did the laborer find the bamboo stalk?” Carolyn tilted her head with interest.

“It was a trick.” Yen's lips turned in a sly, knowing grin. “The wealthy owner knew it would take years, if not a lifetime to find such a thing. In the meantime, the daughter would be married off to the other man.”

“Yen, I said a short story not a sad one.”

“No, it is a tale of faith.” The long sleeves of Yen's shirt hung over her

hands. Whatever the season, a full garb of simple cotton clothes would cover her whole body. “The plant of the bamboo is solid and hollow. It can bend and sway but not break, like the laborer’s faith. After divine intervention, the laborer triumphs in the end. He marries the daughter and ends up the landowner.”

Carolyn glanced around at the dilapidated entryway. It was grungy and dirty, but it hadn’t crumbled, even with the negligence.

“Maybe it is true, if you believe enough, good will happen.” Carolyn smiled sadly. “It would be nice, if it was.” The waning light made Carolyn aware again of the late hour. “Did the post come for me today?”

“Right here with the others.” Yen’s brown gloves moved over the neat piles and grabbed Carolyn’s stack.

Carolyn could see the red envelopes and knew it was mostly full of past-due notices and demands.

“Thank you, Yen,” Carolyn’s spirits drooped at the thought of more money worries. She retrieved the stack. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

The intricate carving of the twisting staircase was the solitary reminder of the once stately home. Many of the finely turned spindles were missing. There were consistent depressions worn in the middle of the stairs. Even with those injustices, the staircase’s craftsmanship was evident in its solid construction.

Carolyn ascended to the third level. Reaching the landing, her flat’s door had a small glow emitting underneath it. She inserted her key and jiggled the lock. Twisting the knob, she kicked the bottom corner of the consistently stuck door. It burst open.

Stacey had been licking a spoon. She was startled by Carolyn’s entrance.

“Cara,” Stacey said Carolyn’s nickname cheerfully. Tucking the utensil behind her back, Stacey added. “You’re home.”

The whole flat was the size of a modest bedroom. Carolyn took in the spreading leak on the ceiling above the kitchenette. A worn mattress rested on the floor in the far corner; it functioned as the sisters’ couch and bed. Their one piece of furniture, a chair, stood in the middle of the room. A cardboard box drooped next to the threadbare chair’s arm, as a makeshift end table. An old

lamp listed off kilter between two windows that looked out to the distant canals. The bright light-bulb illuminated the missing pieces of opaque lining from the shade.

A door on the far wall showed the small bathroom. The closet-like room had a standing shower with a nozzle head which dripped constantly. The toilet's bowl cycled through filling and emptying water into its basin. Between the bathroom's cacophony and the age-appropriate creaks and moans of the building, the girls were serenaded throughout the night.

"Yes, I'm home at last." Carolyn sighed again at the state of their dwelling. "Did Mr. Clements come to fix the shower head?"

"No... and the kitchen tap is spitting brown grunge again."

"I can't wait for another wonderful conversation with our mythical maintenance man. When and if he materializes."

Stacey giggled and held the spoon over her mouth. She noticed her indiscretion and tossed the utensil quickly into the sink. "He appears when our rent is due."

"It is truly amazing how he can manage that little feat." Carolyn closed the door behind her and locked it. With her back turned, she voiced out loud her sister's obvious behavior. "Stacey, it is okay you had something to eat. I'm not an ogre."

Stacey's face constricted with worry. "I'm sorry, Cara. I know it is between pay periods. I was very hungry. We had algebra problems at math today. I used too much brain power to work out what x equals and y equals. I was starving before class was over."

Carolyn twisted around and went over to kiss her sister. "Stacey, it is fine. I'll be paid tomorrow, and we can get more food."

Stacey seemed relieved. "I tried saving something for your tea. There's a piece of that baguette from two nights ago and an apple left."

"You can have it. I'm not that hungry."

Carolyn's stomach growled with a rumbling complaint. She hoped Stacey hadn't heard its objection. Carolyn started flipping through the stack of letters. Her appetite withered anyway, as her suppositions were validated that the

mail was a stack of bills.

“Really, Cara,” Stacey beamed. Her skinny limbs contracted with excitement.

Carolyn paused and glanced up. She smiled sadly at her sister. Stacey’s elation over a piece of bread and an apple highlighted their pathetic predicament. Carolyn nodded her head and smiled reassuringly. “I’m fine, go ahead and have your feast.”

Stacey threw open the fridge’s door. She snatched the food from the empty wire shelves. There were a few scattered items left inside, but the refrigerator was mostly bare. Stacey shut the door with her hip, while hungrily eating her meager meal.

Carolyn had moved over to the curved armchair. The chair’s seat rested on the floor due to missing legs. The support of the wooden floor bolstered the sagging cushion’s springs. Tossing the bills one after another onto the cardboard box, the unopened letters spread across the surface. Carolyn paused at a thick envelope of quality paper stock. Her name was addressed in cursive. The sender was unknown.

Running her finger carefully along the edge, she managed to avoid another paper slice, an occupational hazard with her current employment as a file clerk. She carefully pulled out the similarly styled paper and unfolded the letter. Her eyes darted down the missive. Carolyn plopped onto the chair. She blinked several times with surprise and absolute relief. The note rattled in her shaking hand. She was holding their salvation, and it couldn’t have come at a better time.

“I can’t believe it.” When Carolyn initially scanned the contents, it seemed ludicrous to her.

Finishing the last bite of an apple, Stacey tossed the core into the bin next to the fridge. She felt apprehension over Carolyn’s pale face.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, what is it?” Stacey rushed to her.

“It is the answer to our prayers. We have come into an inheritance.”

“What!” Stacey stumbled back and flopped onto the floor. “It must be a gag.” She bolted upright and pivoted on her knees. Her eyes were bright with excitement. “But why now, how much is it? Can we move out of this horrid

flat?" She scooted closer to Carolyn, trying to peek at the document. "Who is it from?"

Carolyn giggled over Stacey's barrage of inquiries. "So many questions, little sister," Carolyn stood up. She glanced over the official document with disbelief. "The letter is full of formalities and cordial greetings at our untimely loss. We have been named beneficiaries of an estate." Carolyn referred to the letter, "Including a large engineering company."

Stacey had settled into a seated position on the floor. "But Mother and Father died a year ago, isn't it a bit late for sympathy notes?"

"Except it isn't about our parents, it's..." Carolyn faltered and began again with more composure than she felt. "We have a grandfather, on Mother's side. He recently passed away," Carolyn couldn't help exclaiming incredulously.

"Mother's side, but I thought..." Stacey sat up straighter and stared at her older sister. "I thought they were all dead or something."

"So did I; Mother never breathed a word about any family. In fact, once when I was thirteen..." Carolyn smiled down at Stacey and ruffled her blonde hair. "A little older than you..."

"I'm twelve and almost a half," Stacey folded her arms across her chest. "You weren't that much older."

Carolyn chuckled. "The point is I asked Mother about her family. She gave Father the oddest look. Father grabbed her arm and stared at her while he told me they were all dead. It was very uncomfortable. I never asked her again, especially since it had made them both so distressed." Carolyn choked up and clutched at her throat. The letter fluttered to the floor.

Stacey rushed to her sister, wrapped her arms around Carolyn's waist. "I miss them, too."

Carolyn rested her cheek against Stacey's hair. Their situation was some historical tragedy relocated to modern times, two penniless sisters all alone in the world.

Composing herself, Carolyn commented. "It was fate how the car accident happened, that both should die instantly and together."

Stacey started crying. Carolyn had witnessed her sister grow from

carefree teen into a solemn, young woman. Cooing softly, Carolyn thought how in a matter of months after their parents' passing, their well-off family had disintegrated into paupers. It didn't help that she wasn't qualified for anything which could make substantial money. While art was admirable, it didn't support one person, much less a two-member family. Carolyn had quickly grasped the adage of a starving artist and been forced to take a job as a file clerk.

Holding her sister away from her, Carolyn spoke gently. "Shush now. We can return to our old life, and you can go back to Eastland." Wiping the tears from Stacey's peach cheeks and brushing wet, long strands of hair from her face, Carolyn smiled tenderly at her sister. "You don't have to worry anymore."

Stacey sniffled and smiled tremulously. "You mean I could get Buttercup back?"

Carolyn placed her hands on Stacey's skinny shoulders. "Yes, Buttercup shall go to the top of the list."

Stacey's face lit up and clasped her hands together. "You promise?"

Carolyn held up her hand and crossed her slender fingers. "I promise to get Buttercup back well before the Eastland Dressage Exhibition in the spring."

"Oh, Cara," Stacey hopped around her sister.

Twirling around, Carolyn tried to keep up with her sister's joyful bouncing. Stacey said enthusiastically, "I can't believe it. I thought I would never go back to Eastland. I thought I would have to stay at that awful, new school forever. I have no friends."

Carolyn protested. "That's not true, you have Marisa. She is your best friend."

Stacey paused, as she thought about Marisa Sinclair. The two girls had bonded over their experience of loss, when one is too young to cope with the obscure purposes of why. When Marisa was eight years old, her mother died from breast cancer. The long illness had snuffed out her mother's light. Stacey and Marisa understood the momentous significance of dying. Death changes more than family dynamics; it marks each individual connected to the loved one.

"Yes, Marisa has been the sole thing to keep me from being so lonely. Without her, everything would have been horrid all the time. Yet, I ached to

return to our old home, where it was cozy and safe. It seemed unfair that we had to be so near it, but not be able to live there.”

“There is no need to fret anymore. Things can start to seem normal again.”

“You’ve made me so happy.” Stacey grabbed Carolyn’s hands and together they danced around the room.

“You silly girl, it wasn’t me. It was this mysterious grandfather. I had faith that something better had to come from our tragedy.”

“So, what happens next?”

“I have to contact the London solicitor,” Carolyn paused and glanced at the letterhead again, “Edgar Davenport.”

Stacey wrinkled her nose. “That is a seriously stuffy name.”

Carolyn giggled, “Yes, it is, isn’t it.”

Scooting closer, Stacey rested her head against Carolyn’s arm. “What will happen after you contact him?”

“I presume he will set up a meeting to discuss the details of the will and then *voilà*.” Carolyn snapped her fingers. “We are back to our old life. No more leaky faucets and irritated flat managers. No more, *please, Carolyn do you mind spending an hour after work without pay. It would help us justify your position.*”

“Our old life again, I can’t wait.” Stacey sighed and released all the angst she had held within herself, since the devastating loss of her parents a year ago.

Stacy’s confirmation echoed in Carolyn’s heart. The worrying could cease. At last, the twenty-two year old girl could breathe. In order to assume the mounting responsibilities of their crumbling life, the worrisome woman Carolyn had morphed into could totter away.

When Carolyn rang up, Erin was relieved to hear from her friend. Carolyn hadn’t returned Erin’s calls for several weeks; then, the number was disconnected.

“Carolyn, where are you? I’ve been sick with worry.” Erin clung to the receiver in desperation.

A moment of silence followed. Carolyn was at a loss as to why she had chosen to ignore her oldest and dearest friend. The embarrassment of Carolyn’s family situation or what little there was left of their existence had prevented her from picking up the ringing phone. She couldn’t continually deny the charity that Erin would generously offer or resist the temptation to take it. It was too much for her battered pride.

“I know, I’m sorry, I…” Carolyn stalled over her words. She cleared her throat, rather than finish her inept reply.

“You don’t have to apologize, you ninny, I’m thrilled you finally called me.”

Carolyn sighed and almost started to cry. “Oh Erin, I was a fool. I see that now.”

“Where are you calling from? Your number was disconnected.”

“The phone company and I had a disagreement. I couldn’t pay the bill.” Carolyn gave a hallow laugh. “They terminated our phone service. I’m calling from a pay phone, probably the last pay phone in existence. I can’t talk long. I had hoped you could help me.”

“Of course, I’ve been dying to do something.”

Erin held in check a gasp at her insensitive choice of wording. She pleaded into the phone, fearful that she might have offended Carolyn from finally reaching out for help. “Let me be a friend to you, like you always were to me.”

Carolyn took a deep breath and pushed through her fragile construction that she could handle things on her own.

“Would you mind watching Stacey?” Carolyn asked hesitantly.

“I would love to.” Erin was eager to finally have a concrete means of helping. “When do you need me to sit on the baby?” She joked.

Carolyn giggled. The rhythm of their friendship slipped back into the groove of playful bantering. “Well, she’s not much of a baby, but she does throw temper tantrums now and again.”

“I heard that, and it isn’t true,” Stacey said over Carolyn’s shoulder.

Carolyn rounded on her eavesdropping sister. With a hand over the receiver, the intended muffled response could be deciphered by Erin.

“It’s rude to listen in on calls.” Carolyn chastised.

“Well, it’s rude to talk about someone, so there.” Stacey folded her arms and sniffed.

Carolyn held the receiver away. “I told you I would only be gone for a tick. You could have waited up at the flat.”

“I don’t want to be alone, and I’m still hungry.”

Carolyn felt a familiar pang of guilt at the fact that their lives had still tumbled into disarray, no matter how hard she had tried to maintain their old routine. The harshness melted from her response. “Wait over there by the swings. I’ll make some jam and toast for dinner very soon.”

“Again,” Stacey whined. “We’ve had jam and toast three nights in a row.”

Carolyn glared at her sister.

Stacey reminded cheekily, “Besides, the bread is all gone.”

“Stacey, please,” Carolyn warned.

Stacey’s shoulders drooped contritely. She sulked over to the rusty swings of the small park on the common ground. Soon, the steady creaking of the chains emitted from the old equipment.

Carolyn sighed and raised the phone back to her ear.

“Sorry about that, teens are so predictably unpredictable.” Composing herself, Carolyn resumed to the immediate task. “It would have to be tomorrow. Stacey’s school has been called off, due to a teacher in-service day.”

“Tomorrow,” Erin replied shocked.

“Will that be a problem?” Carolyn asked anxiously.

“I have a shift scheduled at Bongo Java.”