

## Survival of the Sparrows (excerpt)

### **Medusa**

The southern live oak that had given great comfort, shelter, and shade to May Wellbeloved's family for four generations had died five years ago, having succumbed to oak wilt. It was a fast-spreading disease that took the imposing tree in just one season. May mourned the loss of that tree as she peered out of the back screen door of the white colonial house her great-grandfather built with his own hands in 1904. She blamed herself for not catching the fungus sooner — for not noticing that the spotted leaves were dropping in mid-summer when the tree should have been producing flowers and nuts — for forgetting that its foliage should have been the same deep hue of mossy green that she had treasured for the past sixty-six years she had known the tree — for letting her ancestors down. That tree had protected her family from the hot Georgia midday sun and from several hurricanes for one hundred twenty years. Now, it was gone; the spot it had shaded replaced by a lush and verdant green lawn, the tree's wide and glorious trunk the sole remnant for May's imagination. Her father had said the tree was over three hundred years old. He had a habit of divulging that fact, as if it were top-secret information, to everyone who visited the rural two-acre Johnsonville, Georgia property. May's father was Johnsonville's first black mayor, serving the small community of less than a thousand inhabitants from 1970 to 1988, when he died of a stroke at the age of fifty-four. Mayor Wellbeloved was truly well beloved by all. He was an honest, stern, and demanding man who expected the residents of Johnsonville to behave with the same reverent morality and social dignity that he demonstrated as their mayor. Mayor Wellbeloved also expected these qualities of May, his only child. In fact, the residents of Johnsonville *still* spoke highly of Mayor Wellbeloved some thirty-odd years after his passing — and equally of the barbecue he hosted for the community under the colossal oak tree. That barbecue was such a successful event that by 1975 it was held annually over the long three-day Labor Day weekend. Most Johnsonville residents attended the barbecue, with invitations and RSVPs sent out a month earlier requesting their preference for which day they were to attend — Saturday, Sunday, or Monday.

May gazed through the screened door onto the sprawling lawn where the live oak had for so long spread its enormously thick limbs out over the pristine, spring-fed Robin Lake. She reminisced about when she was a teenager hanging on the twisted rope swing that once dangled from one of the tree's abundant and strong boughs. Oh, how she adored to climb up the two-by-

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four ladder her father had nailed to the wide trunk, grab hold of the rope, push herself off, and gather more and more speed and height with each oscillation until she built up the nerve to let go and fly. May would squeal with a nervous laughter that children often masked their fear with as she splashed down into the lake's clear and cold water. She continued to lumber up the side of the tree and swing into Robin Lake, right on up until it was felled when May was well into her sixties. She *still* shrieked with delightful fright each time she let go of the rope, because sometimes fear feels good, and often forces people to appreciate the life they have been given.

When she was thirteen years old, May named the southern live oak tree "Medusa" for the way the tree's sprawling limbs reminded her of the mythological creature's writhing head of snakes that she was reading about in *The Golden Fleece* in her eighth-grade English class. The unfortunate coincidence about naming the tree Medusa was that May wore her hair in neat rows of nappy-chic Bantu knots, and her father was all too keen to use the Medusa moniker on her as well. May rested her graying head of hair, still tied into Bantu knots, against the screen and smiled as she recalled Mayor Wellbeloved calling her Medusa in that soft, southern gentry accent of his: *Yo' homework done, M'dusa? You gon' scare them boys 'way with that M'dusa head a hair a yours*, he'd say. And then he'd howl exuberantly as if he had delivered the cleverest joke ever told in southern Georgia on any bright, blue-skied day. Medusa was a nickname May hated to be called *then*, but that she now longed to hear spoken from the Mayor's lips. How she wanted him to call her Medusa one last time.

What May most admired about *The Golden Fleece* was Perseus' boundless courage. Perseus was the ultimate hero — courageous, clever, tenacious, and exceedingly handsome. He was a man who would do anything for love, including slaying the sea monster, Cetus, to save his beloved Andromeda from certain death. Her Perseus, her husband Winston, was seated at Medusa's wide stump, drinking black coffee out of a mug inscribed with "*I'm a Grouch*," scribbling down simple architectural plans on an old grocery list.

Medusa's stump was glorious, measuring twenty feet in circumference, and when Scotty Highland and his crew from the local mill felled the tree, Winston was adamant that the stump be planed level, exactly thirty-three inches tall, so he and May could continue to celebrate the tree's gift in the form of an outdoor table. Winston went as far as painstakingly covering the stump with a half-inch-thick coat of clear epoxy to seal and beautify the wood, and before he laid down the sealant, May covered the top of the stump with photos and memories honoring the tree's life:

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Mayor Wellbeloved with an assortment of family and friends at his annual barbecue, her as a child climbing up the ladder to the swing, a *Gone with the Wind* thirty-year commemorative flyer, and several photos of her and Winston under the tree. Now, four comfortable, padded chairs encircled the stump that was still the main focal point of the backyard. May let the screen door slam behind her as she walked toward Winston, coffee pot in hand. The sun was just stealing above the southern pines across the lake, giving light and warmth to the entropy that was slowly creeping into Johnsonville.

“I thought you didn’t write plans down, Mister *I got it all right up in here?*” May said, as she tapped mockingly on her skull while simultaneously kissing Winston on the crown of his head. She refreshed his half-filled coffee mug and plopped in the chair closest to him.

“Jes’ tryin’ ta work it all out, May,” Winston said, not looking up, but setting down his ruler and bringing the hot coffee to his lips. He wore an expression of anxiety on his face, which wasn’t natural for him. He was always May’s rock — the foundation on which her life was securely fastened, and a man who feared little. Or so it seemed, but not today.

May tried not to worry. “Will you start it today?”

Winston looked up at her and caught her eyes welling with tears. “You know I won’ let anythin’ bad happen to you, Mother.”

Winston sometimes called May “Mother” because of the long line of blue tabbies she’d cared for since getting married. May loved every one of her cats, but Winston was indifferent to them. Amadeus, their twelve-year-old cat, was the only one left now. He was kicking around the property somewhere, most likely tormenting a defenseless chipmunk or salamander. Independent and easily agitated, Amadeus was not a friend to Winston — the cat wouldn’t so much as let Winston touch him. Still, Amadeus was the only “child” May and Winston shared together, regardless if he and the cat liked one another.

“I know, Winston, it’s just that this is... this is...”

May was searching for the right word.

“It’s *war*,” Winston said in a matter-of-fact tone as he spread his left arm across Medusa’s stump and clutched onto May’s right hand. “And I take my vow seriously that it’s my duty as your husband to protect you.”

May flashed a sentimental smile.

“You’ve always taken *such* good care of me, Winston.”

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“Well,” Winston lobbed a crooked grin, and returned to his plans.

When Medusa was felled, the live oak produced a considerable amount of good, strong wood — too good to burn, in Winston’s opinion, so he paid Scotty to haul his portable milling saw over to the house, and together they milled Medusa into stacks and stacks of usable lumber. Scotty took the raw lumber back to his mill to kiln dry, and May utilized the enormous mountain of sawdust to mulch around her shrubs, trees, and ornamentals — Medusa continued to give precious life to the Wellbeloved property even in death.

For the entire week following Medusa’s transformation from three-hundred-year old shade tree into kiln-dried dimensional planks, Winston designed an architectural plan to build a barn to replace the tattered sheds that so unpleasantly squatted to the rear of their driveway. Medusa provided more than enough lumber to frame and floor a barn that measured thirty-two feet long by twenty feet wide, and with a tall gabled roof for storage. As far as wood materials went, Winston only had to purchase the tongue-and-groove boards for the barn’s exterior walls and plywood sheathing for its roof. He prepared the tough Georgia clay, leveling it precisely, and poured fifteen three-foot Sonotube footings with cement at each eight-foot interval. This was the barn’s foundation, which was set twelve inches higher than grade, and provided an easily accessible, cool hiding spot in summer for Amadeus. The work was tough and fulfilling for a man who had spent his entire adult life, before retirement and after a tour in the U.S. Army, as a structural engineer up in Atlanta, where he helped to construct the city’s tallest buildings.

Scotty and a few of his men helped Winston erect the barn’s framing, roof, and floor — it took just three days — and Winston, with May’s assistance, completed the barn together over the course of the late summer and fall, transforming the barn’s skeletal framework into a work of beauty and craftsmanship. The barn’s long side, with two windows, faced the house, the driveway in between, and a single window faced the woods to the side of their property. There were no windows on the short ends of the barn; the side facing Robin Lake was used to stack two cords of firewood left over from last winter under an overhang in two neat rows and covered with blue canvas tarps. An entry door was placed next to a large traditional double barn door between the windows that faced the house. The barn was elegant in its simplicity — Winston was pragmatic with the design, which was strictly utilitarian, except for the hinged ornamental cupola on the top of the roof — that was May’s creative touch. Atop the cupola, which could be opened from the inside for easy egress to the barn’s roof, was a weathervane adorned with a

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flock of wrought-iron sparrows. They were May's favorite bird, and the weathervane, with its poll of darting sparrows in perpetual flight was the barn's highlight.

The inside of the barn was stark — its walls unfinished and littered with an assortment of lawn tools, and the miscellaneous bric-a-brac one collects in barns, its ceiling rows of parallel joists with a plywood loft to store larger items, and its floor a creaky layer of Medusa's knotty limbs. To Winston, the barn was perfect in every way — including the exterior color, with eight-inch wide pine boards painted traditional barn red. May had insisted the barn be painted to match the house — colonial white, but Winston asserted that barns of such southern gentry *must* be painted barn red. It was an argument that had lasted for several weeks after the barn was completed, with the barn standing in gray primer until Winston finally caved in to May's insistence of a color that matched the house. He begrudgingly drove down to Calef's General Store and bought four five-gallon tubs of the same colonial white paint that colored the house. The paint went on when May was out of town for the day visiting friends over in Lafayette, Georgia, a forty-minute jaunt due west of Johnsonville (much like her father, May was the social butterfly of the house, while her husband was the introvert). Winston got halfway through one side of the barn and changed his mind — the barn *just had to be red*. So, he drove back to Calef's and exchanged the three unused tubs of white paint for barn red and hustled back home. He managed to paint the entire barn — two coats — by the time May returned home later that evening. She said nothing when she saw the color of the barn, and would have been *more shocked* to see the barn painted white. Winston was stubborn — it was his worst quality, but May grew to accept the hideous color. Now, five years later, the barn — Medusa — would be called upon to save their lives. Color no longer mattered.

### **T Minus Two Days**

The early morning dew and sweet Georgia breeze gave no indication that the United States was a nation at war — on its own turf this time. For only the second time in contemporary American history, war had broken out on its own soil. A conglomerate of Soviet, Middle-Eastern, and North Korean armies had attacked with the finest of military, logistical, and tactical precision. They called themselves *The People's Liberating Army (PLA)*. The U.S. had finally pissed off its enemies one too many times, and its allies were mute as a result of the current

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administration's inability to commit to the UN and NATO, after several nation members were attacked by the PLA, and the U.S. had withdrawn its support of a number of global initiatives and treaties. In short, the world left America on its own to fight a war that could have easily been prevented had its leaders governed with respect and dignity.

The PLA systematically and violently dismantled the U. S. government. A sniper's deadly accuracy blew the president's head off while he gave a *last-ditch effort* speech in Geneva, pleading for the UN to intervene, but his relentless criticism about the organization's legitimacy and authority over the course of two perilous terms in office sealed the fate of the American people — the UN simply would not intervene. The vice president and the speaker of the house were both beheaded on live television. Ranking members of Congress were either gunned down or killed by suicide bombers as they attempted to flee Washington or their home states. Massive conventional explosions rocked the Capitol and the capital cities of every state, the national power grid went offline, and transit systems were methodically sabotaged. Even the U.S. military wasn't immune, with worms and viruses infecting many of its computer systems. To seal the deal, electromagnetic pulses rendered the complicated U.S. military infrastructure blind, its systems of communications stripped down to nothing more complex than walkie-talkies. The U.S. was thrown into such a state of chaos and confusion that its usually law-abiding citizenry simply could no longer endure the anxiety. Rioting and looting became the order of the day, with conservatives and liberals blaming each other for the array of military and political blunders that allowed the attacks to happen, further propelling the country toward a new civil war. Americans became their own enemies, turning on each other with little hope of recovery. And while the U.S. unraveled from within, the PLA advanced its directive to march right onto its soil with nary a defensive strategy to stop them.

At least the war wasn't nuclear — yet.