

A Shattered Treasure



he Cole house was strangely quiet. Ruble rocked her baby sister in the living room and wondered at its silence. Normally, the small house vibrated with the sounds of its eleven occupants. The doors creaked and dishes clattered, her brothers' and sisters' voices tumbled over one another, and their footsteps pounded against the wood floors.

Ruble shifted sleeping baby Hazel to her other arm. She was just about to get up to investigate the strange stillness when she heard her mother's sweet voice singing softly from the nearby kitchen and the muted sounds of pots and pans clanging together.

Of course. Mama was preparing supper, and Ruble mentally ticked off the rest of the family's whereabouts. Papa was at work. Her oldest sister Maude was sewing in the children's bedroom. Her oldest brother Dock was at his chores outside. Her youngest brothers were napping in her parents' room. Despite the December cold, Al, Nelle, and Hob were at play on the steep slopes of the mountain outside.

Ruble breathed in deeply and sat back to continue rocking Hazel. The stillness was rare, and it wasn't unwelcome.

She took in the quiet living room as if for the first time. The small room seemed empty and cheerless without members of the Cole family sprawled on its furnishings and floor. Every family member had his or her favorite place when they gathered each evening, and then the chill room became warm and cozy, almost hot with all the bodies crammed inside its four

walls. Ruble was sitting in her mother's spot, a wooden rocking chair that creaked and scraped against the room's bare plank floors.

Ruble, ten years old, relished sitting in the chair when she could because it let her gaze at the simple wooden bookcase in the corner of the room that contained the family's few treasures. On the top shelf sat her mother's carnival glass: deep purple bowls with wavy, fluted edges, not unlike waves of water, Ruble thought. At this hour, the three bowls caught the sunlight and threw specks of lavender light into the spare room.

Mama said the glass brought "a little bit of elegance to the old Cole house." Sometimes she said that about Ruble and her sister Nelle, too. The carnival glass was brought out only for special occasions, where it was admired by neighbors in the small coal company town.

Ruble was gazing at the glass, imagining how it had been made, when she heard Al's shout, Nelle's delighted shriek, and her brother Hob's infectious laughter. Their footfalls pounded up the house's wooden stairs and they burst into the room with a waft of cold air and snow, breaking Ruble's reverie. The family's dog, Frank, drawn by the commotion, bounded in, too.

Hob was holding Nelle's scarf high like a victory banner and the three of them were a blur of arms and legs as they each struggled for it, laughing playfully. Their high spirits were contagious, and Frank began to bark with excitement and run in and out of their tangle of limbs. Ruble sucked in a sharp breath as she saw what was about to happen.

The excited dog became caught in the bramble of their wrestling legs and all of them – Al, Nelle, Hob, and Frank – pitched forward precariously. They stumbled as one, lurching right into the wooden bookcase holding the carnival glass. As they fell in a jumble at the foot of the bookcase, Ruble saw a bowl rock back and forth from its perch high on the shelf.

Don't fall, she pleaded silently.

Then the bowl pitched forward. As if in slow motion, Ruble saw it fall to the floor and shatter with a crash.

The children's mirth vanished and the house became silent. They all stared in horror at the remains of the glass bowl, now a mess of candy-like purple shards. Even baby Hazel had awakened and seemed to be looking solemnly at all of them.

In the dreadful silence, Ruble noticed that Mama's singing had stopped. She had quietly come into the room and was standing before them, drying her hands on her apron.

Nelle, looking from her mother to the shattered glass, burst into tears. Frank, sensing the tension, nudged the door open and ran back outside as the boys

scrambled to their feet. They waited soundlessly as they watched Mama take in the scene.

Mama's eyes lingered on the purple shards of glass that were the remains of her once-prized bowl. Her hands stopped their motion on her apron and she said quietly to the room, "Please clean this up and get back to your chores. Papa will be home soon." She gently closed the open front door and returned to the kitchen.

The children looked at each other in stunned silence. Mama's calm reaction to her broken bowl seemed somehow more shocking, and more of a rebuke, than if she had yelled at them. They wordlessly set to work cleaning up the broken glass.

Ruble heard Nelle's stifled sobs as she swept the glass into the dustpan. Nelle was twelve. She and her mother were close, and she knew what the bowls meant



to Mama. Mama had received them as a wedding gift many years before. Since then, the bowls had survived many relocations as the Coles moved from coal town to coal town. But while the youngest family members had trudged on foot over treacherous and rugged mountains, the precious bowls had traveled safely on a train. Every time they'd settled, Mama had carefully unpacked the bowls and set them on a high shelf for display. With such care and vigilance, not one had yet broken, until today.

Ruble took the broom from Nelle. With baby Hazel still in her arms, she embraced her sister, who started to cry in earnest. "I shouldn't have run in here like that. I know better," she sobbed.

"It was an accident, Nelle," Ruble whispered. "Mama knows."

Al squeezed Nelle's arm and Hob patted her on the back. Baby Hazel grabbed Nelle's hair in her tiny fist. "Ow," Nelle said, her sobs breaking into a small smile.

"It was all our faults," eight-year-old Hob said seriously. "I shouldn't have taken your scarf."

Nelle shook her head. "I shouldn't have chased you into the house like that. It was foolish."

"Well, I don't blame any of us," Al said. "It was clearly Frank's fault." He winked to show he was teasing, and as they laughed and fell into a comforting embrace, Ruble saw that the afternoon's commotion had awakened her two little brothers, who stumbled out of their parents' room after their nap. She giggled at the bleary, confused looks on the faces of three-year-old Tony and five-year-old Fos.

"Whatcha doing?" Fos asked grumpily.

"What's wrong with Nelle?" Tony added, noticing her tear-streaked face.

Nelle wiped away her tears and bent to hug little Tony. "Nothing's wrong with me that can't be fixed by a hug," she said. Tony obediently gave her a hug, as did Fos, who impatiently let his sister cover him with kisses before promptly wiping them off.

"There," Nelle said, standing and sighing. "I'll make it up to Mama somehow. Now I'd better go help with supper."

At her cue, the other children also set to work with their before-supper chores. Al, fourteen, went to join his older brother Dock outdoors for the work still to be done, including the evening milking of the family's cow and mucking out its small shed. Hob saw to gathering the odd tables and chairs that the family would cobble together to form their oversized supper table. When Maude, eighteen, finished her sewing, she'd carry out the sewing table that would serve as Ruble's seat. Ruble, for her part, would fold laundry and keep watch over the smallest children, who were now at play on the living room floor.

Ruble groaned as she looked at the large pile of washing Mama had pulled from the clothesline. She had been putting off this chore since she'd gotten home from school; she hated the work of sorting, folding, and putting away all those clothes. She watched with envy as Fos and Tony, carefree, argued over who got to play with a wooden top.

A thought occurred to her and she pulled a sock out of the pile of clothes, holding it up for her brothers to see. "Which of you two can pair up all these socks the fastest?" she asked, looking from Tony to Fos.

"Me!" Fos exclaimed, clambering onto the pile.

"No, me!" Tony yelled, throwing himself on top of his brother. Both boys clawed through the pile, pulling out the socks and setting up rival bundles of pairs.

Ruble looked with satisfaction at the dwindling pile of washing. "Next, let's see who can sort the clothes the fastest. I want to see eleven piles: one for each family member!"

Her brothers silently nodded their assent, concentrating on the laundry game, and Ruble sat back, pleased that she had cut down on some of her work, though she'd still have to fold all those clothes. She breathed in deeply the growing aromas of supper. Soon her father would return from the coal mine.

Indulgently rocking baby Hazel a few more moments, Ruble wondered whether Mama would tell Papa about the broken carnival glass bowl. He wasn't likely to be angry at an accident, but she knew he'd be sorry for the loss of one of Mama's prized possessions. Ruble stared a bit forlornly at the remaining glass bowls on the high shelf and the gap where the shattered bowl had been.