

Honey Girl's First Ark

By Robin Knowles

"AmPa," asked the bright-eyed little girl with honey colored hair, "Do you really know everything?"

They were walking from the kitchen toward the large wooden barn in the predawn light, hand in hand as they did every morning. Every day for the last eighteen months since she first came to them, she woke up full of enthusiasm, eager to go to the barn with him. Just the two of them. Like every day was Christmas, and the animals in the barn were all presents just for her.

It was cold outside. The frost-covered grass crunched underfoot, squeaking if they arched their feet just so when they walked. It was a game for her, so there were lots of squeaks and skips as they walked.

He was a tall man. He had to stoop to hold her tiny mitten covered hand. That too was a ritual, the handholding.

His wife watched them through the kitchen window, wiped a tear from her face and closed the curtain.

"No Honeygirl. I sure don't. There's more that I don't know or understand than I do. But I know I like it when you help me with the barn chores. That's for sure."

"But MeMa said you're a no-tall."

"Know-it-all," he corrected softly. "We tease each other a lot. When you live with somebody you love as long as she and I have, you can do that."

"Well, then you can tease me if you want, because I'm going to live here forever and ever, just like you and MeMa. AmPa, you know everything about horses, don't you?"

He cleared his throat – twice – then said, "Horses, I know a little bit about. Other things, not so much," he said as he opened the large wooden barn door to the warm smells of hay, horses, and the rest of the animal menagerie. "Come on, you remember what everybody gets to eat don't you? Get the buckets and I'll put the feed in for you. This one is for Molly. She gets food for old horses, 'cause she's the oldest. The blue bucket is for Tater, your pony 'cause she's the littlest. She gets more protein in her food, but not so quite so much as Do-Dad. And Do-Dad gets. . . ."

"AmPa, I know. I know. I'm just a little girl, but I remember who gets what. Do-Dad gets oats and no sweet feed, 'cause he's allergic to food with corn in it. I remember. AmPa, tell me again about the big boat full of animals."

"The Ark? I'd think you know that story by heart by now. Bet you even know the names of more animals Noah put in there than I do."

"Two of every living thing," she recited in her best musical voice. "Elephants, goats, chickens, ponies, lions and bears. But horses go first. Do-Dad an Molly an Tater. Tater makes three, but that's okay. One day when I grow up, we can build an ark, I think. Right in the back yard. You can help if you want to."

"AmPa, you and MeMa both read me the Noah story. You read it out of a storybook. MeMa reads it from the bible. MeMa says you don't like the bible. Why?"

"I like the bible just fine," he said. "Just some folks thump on it and quote inappropriate parts at the wrong time. I don't care much for the church-going hypocrites and folks who act like they're god. I can figure out what's fair and right without them telling me. Just don't go telling MeMa about what I just said. Come on; let's get our chores done. Can't having you get chilled again. We got in trouble last time you got chilled."

“You didn’t tell her, did you?” said his wife after they’d put Honeygirl on the bus for school.

“I couldn’t,” he said.

“But you said you would.”

“No I didn’t. You said I had to tell her she was going to be adopted. I didn’t say I’d do it, you just told me it was my job to tell her. I still think there should be a way she can live here permanently. We can adopt her. That couple Ms Briggie brought by can adopt some other little girl. Not Honeygirl. It’s not like we can’t take care of her. We love her and they don’t even know her yet.”

“Old man,” said the woman softly, “you know why. It was part of the foster agreement we signed. Sure, she’s special. I love her too. But it’s out of our hands. The state decides what’s best for her.”

He smiled a wry smile and pulled her close to him as if a hug would heal their pain. Still holding her tight, he said, “I know. I know. It hurts both of us, something awful. You built that frilly dollhouse thing upstairs that she loves so much. Almost as much as the animals in the barn and the reading time before bed.

“We’ve been lucky, honey. Two of our own, and two adopted. I know we agreed when Teddy left for college we’d foster and not adopt. I know that was part of the deal, but there should be some way we could change it. I could handle it if she wasn’t so focused on the animals. We’re a perfect fit for her. Those other people probably don’t know anything at all about animals, and Honeygirl needs to be near animals. Besides, I haven’t finished making her Christmas present yet. I don’t think I can bear to let her go.”

“Nothing to be done,” said the woman as he let her go, “but for you to get into your workshop and finish carving the animals that go into that little wooden ark you built. I just hope they let her keep it to remember us by. Do you think you can have it all finished by tomorrow morning?”

“Maybe, if I work late tonight and take a nap between sessions. My hands cramp up after an hour of carving. So, do I still have to be the one to tell her?”

“I’ll do it,” his wife said. “I just thought you’d find a better way to tell her than I could so that she can understand that we love her and this is really all for the best.”

“It isn’t for the best. Let’s don’t pretend otherwise. I just hope that she doesn’t hate us for letting this happen. Kids remember having their heart broken for a long time. Like elephants, real or carved out of wood, or in Noah’s story.” He smiled at his own little joke, and then headed down to his woodworking shop. As he got to the door, he said, “Sorry to make you be the one to tell her. I thought I could, but I just can’t.”