

Going Once

The Auctioneer was a dark-haired, ageless man who seemed to exist solely for Sundays, his face frozen in a toothy grin and his trademark navy suit always ironed to perfection. The inhabitants of Finer Fronds often wondered what he did the rest of the week, but only in the sort of idle way that drifted in people's heads when there was nothing better to think about, and slipped back out again once there was. In the end, it didn't matter if he took the bus to work or bought whole-grain bread or had a family of his own. All that mattered was his voice, cast out over the town square every Sunday like a fishing net tossed into a hopeful sea.

As much as everyone tried to deny it, Finer Fronds had lost its grip on fall and was sliding down the gradual slope of winter. This Sunday was already drowning in flurries, and when it was time for the auction to begin people came out of their homes reluctantly, their mouths shut tightly as if to keep their warm breath from seeping out. Cecily Pierpont and her parents were among the first to arrive. They stood stiffly at the foot of the great marble steps of the courthouse, collecting a thin layer of snow for nearly half an hour before the Auctioneer burst through the gilded doors.

“Good morning!” he bellowed, as always. Responses of various degrees of enthusiasm trickled out through chattering teeth.

“We're running a little low on inventory today, what with all the storms getting in the way of the delivery services, but I do think we have a batch of winners today!” the Auctioneer exclaimed. He gestured vaguely to the gathering, and Cecily could've sworn that he winked at her. “So before we're all waist-deep in snowflakes, let's get started, eh?”

That was the cue for those bright double doors to swing open again and for the caretakers to trickle outside. It *was* pretty slim pickings as far as auctions went, but people had ceased to be picky years ago. One woman ushered out three toddlers who waddled onto the top step, each with a thin rope encircling their wrist that secured them to the woman's belt. Another lady pushed a stroller with one hand and held a completely-covered child to her chest with the other,

her eyes downcast. The last woman was balancing two infants in her arms, rocking them gently back and forth, humming a soft, nondescript lullaby.

Cecily peered eagerly at all of them, straining to see past the folds of heavy fabric to the children inside. It was a good variety. A sleeping baby with skin the color of coffee beans. A cerulean-eyed little girl with a tumble of nearly-white curls. Cecily fingered her own sleek black hair and examined a tan finger. She cast a furtive glance at her parents, who were both fair and pale. Some couples bid only on children who matched their coloring or facial structure, but to hers, race clearly hadn't mattered. She scanned the kids again and wondered if her younger brother would look anything like her.

The Auctioneer glided to the nearest caretaker and scooped a wailing pink little girl out of her arms. He smiled at the baby, shushed her, and held her up for the crowd to see. A ripple of murmuring began as families bent their heads together to deliberate.

Cecily looked up, but her mother shook her head. "We decided on a boy, remember? Plus, she's crying already."

Her father put a hand on her shoulder. Its weight was solid and reassuring. "This is a big decision. If we don't find him today, we can wait until next week. Wouldn't want to rush into anything, would we?"

The Pierponts had been discussing another child for a few months now, but this was the first auction they had actually attended. Initially Cecily had been adamant about it being a girl, so she could dress her up and have tea parties with her, but she had been overruled. She decided that she could still have tea parties with a little brother.

From somewhere in the middle of the throng, a young woman raised her hand, her eyes shining. "Eight hundred," she announced. Those two words set into motion a frenzy of numbers thrown like daggers from the mouths of eager men and women into the capable hands of the Auctioneer, who prodded the chaos along, stroking the girl's squashed-up nose. The price rose and the feeling of breathlessness built until Cecily buried her face in her father's pant leg to try and block out the noise.

“One thousand!” crowed a man who already had a small army of children playing at his feet.

“One thousand, one hundred!” offered an elderly lady, her hair like layered spider-webs.

“Two thousand!”

“Two thousand, five hundred!”

The Pierponts waited out the session in silence as the volume escalated and the people around them lurched forwards, waving their hands in the air and pressing up against the marble steps. When the price hit four thousand, many of the voices died down until it was only the first woman, her fingers wound through her hair, bidding against a barrel-chested man. They shrieked at each other until five thousand. Then the man threw his hat onto the ground and scowled, and the woman dragged her dazed-looking husband up the steps to embrace their new daughter. She stuffed a giant bundle of cash into the Auctioneer’s upturned top-hat. When she turned to face the city, there were tears dripping into her smile.

“Our very first,” she proclaimed. People nodded and chimed in with their congratulations as the Auctioneer noted the purchase in a small log book that had seemingly appeared from thin air.

As icy wind clawed at the fingertips and noses of those in the crowd, the Auctioneer held out a pinched-faced baby boy with a shock of red hair. Cecily’s parents raised eyebrows at one another, but Cecily shook her head.

“No. Not him,” she insisted.

Her mother ran her thin, bony fingers across Cecily’s hair, rearranging the part.
“Sweetie, why not?”

There wasn’t anything wrong with the child. He looked healthy enough, although a bit scrawny, maybe. But Cecily couldn’t imagine herself holding him when he cried, or cooing at him from his crib. He had the kind of thin, pale mouth that was frozen in a perpetual frown.

“He feels like a stranger,” she said.

“Honey,” Mr. Pierpont said gently, “they’re all strangers now. Once we buy them, we’ll get to know him. That’s how you build a family.”

Cecily stuck her hand in her pocket and began fiddling with the coins she found there. “But not him, Daddy, please. I’ll know when I see him. I’ll know.”

A troubled, wary look flashed between her parents, but Cecily was sure of herself. She could feel it like the beginnings of a cold, something creeping up her throat and taking root in her every breath—something just around the corner.

“Five thousand three hundred, going once, going twice? Gone!” Since he was lacking a gavel, the Auctioneer simply stomped his feet and did a short jig. After passing off the redhead boy to a middle-aged couple, he reached for the next infant without missing a beat.

Prices climbed higher this year than they ever had before; parents were getting desperate. Between the strange illnesses that had left the residents of Finer Fronds unable to conceive their own children, and the storms, and dangerous roadways that made deliveries tougher and tougher, people’s lives had begun to revolve around the Sunday auction. These imported children could be from any overpopulated corner of the globe, sold by poverty-stricken parents to places like Finer Fronds where people were willing to cough up a pretty penny for an addition to their family.

The third, fourth, and fifth children were all girls, so the Pierponts clenched their fists and waited. Now the only child left was a squirming bundle cocooned deep inside layers of periwinkle fabric. Cecily wondered if it could breathe through all that cloth. The caretaker who held it moved more carefully than before, stepping forwards with a quick glance at the crowd. People waited expectantly for the blanket to fall away, but she froze at the top step, her lips pursed in a thin line.

“Alright, ma’am, if you’ll reveal him for us all to see?” prodded the Auctioneer. He pulled at his tie as if it had suddenly become too tight.

Cecily brushed the snow from her shoulders and waited. The woman nodded hesitantly and curled her fingers around the blanket, tugging it down out of his face. And then, as if on cue, the entire congregation quieted.

The child was dark-eyed and dark-haired, and, like Cecily, he looked like he came from somewhere sandy and tropical where the local language didn't include a word for "snow." But here he was: dusted in white, greeted with silence, and marred by a scar. The eyes of the town stared at his cheek, where the burn mark started—a mottled red patch that covered the entire right side of his face and disappeared under the blanket.

"Let's see the rest of him!" cried a man near the back, his voice bouncing off of every tree and stone until the air was ringing with his demand.

A teenage girl to Cecily's left was shaking her head. "He'll freeze if we unwrap him," she murmured. But she made no move to stop the Auctioneer as he plastered on a smile and pulled at the fabric until it fell to the staircase in a heap. This time people didn't stifle their gasps. The noise blended with the rustling wind, making it sound like Finer Frond's very earth and skies were inhaling a sharp breath.

"Oh, poor baby," sighed Cecily's mother.

The jagged pink scar continued down his neck and across his shoulder, circling his back and disappearing underneath his diaper; the skin was shiny even in the gray winter light. His soft folds of infant fat were a mottled mess of scar tissue; he looked like some patchwork doll that had been taken apart and put back together, some pieces mismatched and others forgotten altogether. He waved his hand in the air as if saying hello, and Cecily clutched her hands to her mouth.

The caretaker snatched the blanket off of the ground and glared into the crowd. "You've had your look now," she hissed, folding it around him and cradling him to her chest.

The Auctioneer scanned the crowd. "Let the bidding begin."

A crowd of people suddenly became very interested in inspecting their boots.

The child giggled. It was a high-pitched, infectious sound, and one that was entirely at odds with the situation. Cecily found herself staring at his eyes as he laughed, at the way they crinkled in the corners and glistened like they knew something.

She took a step forwards.

The Auctioneer only shrugged. “He’s otherwise healthy.” When that was met with noises of disbelief, he narrowed his eyes. “Listen—the blizzards are only going to get worse, and deliveries will stop coming. This might be the only batch for months.”

“Then we’ll wait.”

“Send the poor child back where he came from.”

Cecily looked up at her father, who was taking care to look at the ground. Everyone knew that kids were never sent back. Auctioning was a one-way street, and Finer Fronds was a dead end. Parents couldn’t exactly afford to be choosy because of the limited inventory, but on the rare occasion that a child didn’t receive a single bid, he or she disappeared behind those golden doors and was never seen again. There was no city orphanage, no charity-house nursery. If a child couldn’t be sold, if couldn’t be cared for.

Looking defeated, the Auctioneer scratched under the child’s chin. “Alright, then. Best wishes to the new families, and—”

“Wait!”

For the second time, the entire group froze, but this time they turned to look at Cecily. She swallowed and forced herself to keep her eyes on the little boy, on his little smile.

“Miss?” said the Auctioneer.

Cecily’s parents stood ramrod straight, looking like ice sculptures behind her. She cleared her throat and pulled a wad of crumpled bills from her jacket pocket. “Four dollars.” A silver coin slipped out from in between and clattered to the ground. “Actually, four dollars and

twenty-five cents,” she amended. The allowance that she had so carelessly stuffed in her pocket the day before now felt like a treasure-trove of gold.

“Ridiculous!” squeaked a mousy-haired woman. “She’s only a child. She can’t bid.”

Cecily sucked in a breath. She could feel the air crackle as it went down her throat. “Auction rules say the child goes to the highest bidder. Unless anyone is going to bid higher than four dollars and twenty-five cents, that’s me.”

The Auctioneer smiled at the crowd as if daring them to object. He plucked the child from the stunned caretaker’s hands and held him up for the whole town to see. “Four dollars and twenty-five cents, going once?”

Cecily wiped a snowflake from her eye.

“Going twice?”

Her mother stepped forwards and gave her a shaky kiss on the head.

“Gone!”

When Cecily realized what that meant, that she was supposed to go up and pay now, she lurched forwards and found that a path had been cleared for her. Her neighbors and friends watched in astonishment as she hurried to the courthouse steps and took them two at a time—and then in numb horror as her foot caught on the top step and she tipped backwards. For a moment her arms whipped through the air like windmills. Before she could fall, though, a strong hand caught her shoulder, and she looked up to see the Auctioneer smiling down at her.

This time, he definitely winked.

After she dropped the wrinkled bills in his hat, someone thrust the boy into her arms. He was solid and warm despite the chill in the air, and the flurries suspended in his long eyelashes. She ran a finger over the uneven pink skin on his cheek, which immediately made him burst into laughter. Soon, unable to help it, she was laughing too, and the brother and sister stood on the

top step laughing uncontrollably while the rest of the city tried to burrow themselves further into their coats.

“Hello, beautiful,” Cecily murmured. “Welcome to the family.”