

## The Secret of Broken Tickers by Joe Murphy

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Even the horned toads knew what was coming. Sprokly stood on the edge of a small bluff, where the west Texas chaparral of prickly pear, mesquite, and tumbleweed overlooked the sandy Red River bed. In twos and threes, horned toads—the size, shape, and shade of one of Ma’s charred pancakes—emerged from the scrub and darted onto the sand.

A scissortail swooped from a low-growing mesquite tree, a black and white flash intent on easy prey. The targeted horned toad saw it, however, lifting its thorny head, puffing its body, and “kzzzzt!” spat something, most likely a seed or pebble. It caught the scissortail in midair. The bird squawked and veered away.

Sprokly wanted to cry but held it back. Instead she brushed at her short blond hair. A snag caught her fingers. A few strands had tangled beneath one of the screws that fastened the wooden top of her skull.

She forced herself to count the gathered horned toads. One hundred, hundred fifty, two, two ninety—just about every one the Maezel family had made.

“Hey, girl.”

Sprokly turned and managed a smile. “Evening, Grampser.”

Grampser limped up to her, one thumb hitched above the bib of his overalls, the other hand holding a cane. His smile floated on a sea of well-tanned wrinkles as the wind picked up, toying with his gray wisps of hair. “Well.” He pointed toward the western horizon. “It’ll be a while.”

“Any time now,” Sprokly agreed.

A vast black and gray thunderhead darkened the western sky. The final blood red rays of setting sun slashed through the blue-black sky as the clouds churned. In the distance, a wall of rain darkened the air, advancing slowly. As one, the horned toads lifted their heads and watched the storm with red bead eyes.

“Your Ma would hate to see this,” Grampser said.

“We could get a wheel chair, tote her out here.”

“I’m afraid she’s too well for that.” Grampser shook his head and scowled.

Sprokly nodded. Grampser *never* told the truth. The head of the Maezel family, he seemed to enjoy the confusion. She’d asked Pa about it once, but he’d

simply shaken his head and smiled an enigmatic smile that hinted of Family Secrets.

Right now, Ma worried her. Three days ago, Sprokly had found her face down by the clothes line, laundry scattered like so many dead chickens. Unconscious and breathing in fits, the elderly woman appeared to have suffered a heart attack. She was home, bedridden, tended by Sprokly's Pa. Both would have loved to be out here.

The storm hit. A wall of wind and water slapped Sprokly's face like a wet blanket. It forced her back a step. Blinking, a quick gasp, but then Grampser's hand closed on her shoulder. Lightning flared, blinding her momentarily. Thunder rolled across the sky.

"It won't be happening yet," Grampser shouted as the wind tore into them.

"There it is!" Sprokly took Grampser's arm. High above the river swirled a mass of ugly clouds the color of bruised flesh. Another thunder clash, by the time Sprokly's eyes adjusted from the lightning, a giant funnel corkscrewed down to slam into the river. The funnel twisted, dancing, brightening to silver as it sucked up water.

"Turn your eyes away!" Grampser shouted and released Sprokly's hand. She staggered in a blast of wet wind, caught her balance, and paid close attention as Grampser pulled a spoon-handled device from his pocket. He fitted this *tuning spork* to his cane. It glittered with seven glass cogwheels, each tooth carefully inscribed with numerous letters, symbols, and numbers.

The old man grinned, spun the cogs with his fingers, and lifted the device high. A darting shaft of red sunlight struck the cogs. Letters, hieroglyphics, arcane pictograms threaded the sky, inscribing long strands of whirling words upon the funnel.

The tornado jumped, following the river as such storms did. With the bellow of some ancient god, it slammed down once more, sucking up water and sand. Black polka-dots of horned toads careened through the air around it.

A moment later the funnel rose, a serpentine coil that wormed back into the clouds. The rain moved on, leaving a cool fresh smell in Sprokly's nostrils, a tingling along the outside of her arms.

"Grampser, what did the words mean?"

"What words, missy?" Grampser focused his attention on the tuning spork, blinking water from his eyes, peering over the tops of his specs as he unscrewed the device from his cane.

Sprokly sighed, refusing to be exasperated. Prying anything out of Grampser

took work. “From the tuning spork. What did you read in the tornado?”

“Nothing important at all.” Grampser shook his head. “Especially to an old woman with a broken ticker.” He winked at Sprokly, reached over to smooth the water from her hair, and limped off, back along the trail.

He paused to smile and study the rickety remains of a bladeless windmill before moving on. A couple of horned toads, having declined to ride the storm, glared up at her, then darted after him.

How on earth could a twister help Ma? Sprokly frowned and started along the river bed, out onto the same sand the tornado had touched. She had her own path back to Waxacholie-Nazarene, and chores to finish.

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“That feels much better,” the relation said as Sprokly pulled her winding key from its back. It turned to face her, the smile painted on its wooden lips somehow growing wider. Eyes the color of sun-glazed quartz regarded her with a blank but pleasant stare. “Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

“You’re more than welcome.” Sprokly tucked the winding key into the back pocket of her jeans. “Got your chores done yet?”

“Not quite, ma’am.” The relation shook its head, squeaking slightly. “I was just about to hoe them garden weeds when I ran down.”

“Best get to it then,” Sprokly allowed. “And mind the horned toads.”

“You betcha.” The relation ambled off, the gears in its legs rasping. Sprokly started for the barn. The relation who tended the cows usually needed winding this time of evening. Far across the deserted lean-tos and sand-scoured empty buildings that made up Waxacholie-Nazarene, a car horn sounded three abrupt beeps.

“That’s Billy!” Sprokly whirled and dashed toward the only occupied house in the deserted town. “What’s he doing home?”

A blue 1961 Plymouth sat in front of the house. Not a real one of course, but a more than passable imitation. Grampser and Pa had built it after seeing one advertised on The Red Skelton Show. The car was Billy’s going-away present. There were no hard feelings, the elders maintained, when Billy had finally convinced, cajoled, and nagged them into allowing him to attend Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls.

Sprokly jerked to a halt and gripped a fencepost to catch her balance. The Plymouth’s trunk was open, Billy leaning into it. A young woman, wearing hip huggers and a white blouse, stood beside him. A real woman!

Grampser, Ma, Pa, Billy, and her sister Marybeth, these were the only real people she knew. The elders didn't allow visitors, and Waxacholie-Nazarene being so far from the roads, they didn't get many. Fewer still had been allowed to leave.

Billy pulled two suitcases from the trunk. He turned, starting towards the house, and saw her. A quick grin, a mumbled word to the woman beside him, and he shouted, "Sprokly! Come give your brother a hug!"

Restraining the impulse to dash up and grab him, Sprokly waved hesitantly and approached. The woman appeared about Billy's age.

In the way Real People counted that would be nineteen. To Sprokly and the Maezel family, however, Billy was twenty-six; he knew twenty-six Family Secrets and that's what really mattered.

The woman looked pretty, Sprokly decided, a page right out of the latest Sears Roebuck Catalogue. Her blue-green eyes watched Sprokly cautiously, but without surprise. Grampser and Pa would be furious.

"Hello." Sprokly held out her hand. "I'm Sprokly."

"I know," the woman said. "Billy's kid sister, right?" She smiled at Billy. "He's told me about you." She looked Sprokly up and down, before their gazes met. "It's a pleasure and privilege to meet you."

"How's Ma doing?" Billy's worried frown brought out freckles that had never left him. He brushed back his dark crew cut. "I came as soon as I heard."

"She's still in bed." Sprokly stared at the ground, noticing the woman's shiny black pumps. "She wakes now and again, but she's awful weak."

Billy cocked his head toward the house. "Did they bring in a doctor?"

Sprokly shook her head.

"I was afraid of that." Billy turned to the woman. "See what I mean, Sylvine?"

The woman opened her mouth but never got a word out.

"Hey, Boy!" Pa stood on the front porch. Like Grampser he wore overalls, a starched white shirt, and a dusty-colored Stetson. He was short, a dwarf-shaped body with heavily muscled arms, long delicate fingers. He stepped off the porch, his gaze still on Sylvine. It wasn't a pleasant look.

"Pa, I..." Billy started. Sprokly stepped back, still watching her daddy.

“You brought someone out here.” Pa stopped in front of them and folded his arms.

“Hello, Mr. Maezel.” Sylvine stepped forward, wiped her palm on her pants, and offered her hand. “I’m Sylvine Porter. I’m in Billy’s biology class, working on Pre Med.”

Pa studied her, frowning faintly before slowly unfolding his arms and grudgingly shaking the woman’s hand. “Miss Porter.” He glared at Billy then. “Why don’t ya’ll come in the house? Sprokly, get their bags like a good girl.”

Sprokly snatched up the suitcases before Billy could argue. Billy smiled weakly, put a hand on Sylvine’s arm, and very gentleman-like escorted her towards the front door.

“Getting a little dark in here,” Pa said as they entered. He looked at Sylvine, then slowly and deliberately pulled out his winding key and stuck it in the wall socket. After five quick turns the lights came on.

The woman didn’t even blink. Sprokly suppressed a grin. How much had Billy told her?

“Why don’t you both have a sit down?” Pa motioned towards the doily-covered couch, while taking his usual place in one of the easy chairs near the television.

“Thanks.” Sylvine sat down; Billy hurried to a place beside her.

“So how’s school going, boy?” Pa asked, a hand reaching into the pocket of his bib overalls. Billy opened his mouth, eyes growing big as Pa produced a tuning spork. His mouth clamped into a flat determined line when Pa, without waiting for an answer, flicked the spork’s cogwheels, sending ghostly gold letterings over the walls, ceiling, and into Sylvine’s eyes.

Sylvine’s mouth dropped open. Her stare grew as blank as a relation’s idiot gaze.

“Boy,” Pa growled, “Make your point or I’ll take her memory right now.”

Billy stared at Sylvine’s empty face, then matched his father’s glare. “I’ll make two.” He glanced hopefully at Sprokly, then focused on Pa. “Come hell or high water, someday, I’m gonna marry Sylvine Porter.” He held up one finger, quickly followed by another. “And two. Her daddy’s one of the most respected heart specialists in Texas.”

The heavy thumps, Sprokly realized, was her, dropping the suitcases. Pa stared at Billy a moment longer, then took a good hard look at Sylvine Porter. He reached out with a grease-stained finger and stopped the spinning cogs on the tuning spork.

Sylvine Porter gasped, blinked blue eyes, and shook herself all over like a dog.

“Miss Porter, I reckon you can share a bed with Sprokly here.” Pa returned the spork to his pocket and began to laugh. Big laughs, loud guffaws that doubled him over and made him slap his thighs. From her position angled to one side, Sprokly doubted that Billy saw what she saw. Her brother only had eyes for Sylvine anyway. But clear as glass as it wormed its way down the deep creases that framed her father’s eyes—a single tear. Joy or sorrow, she couldn’t tell which.

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“Don’t you understand, Mr. Maezel?” Sylvine Porter gently returned Ma’s hand to her chest. “Your wife needs urgent medical attention.” She straightened and studied Ma’s half-closed eyes. “Everything will be all right, Mrs. Maezel. You’ll see.”

Sprokly nodded. Her mother’s lips thinned to a weak smile. The heavy-set woman lay within a sea of quilts and comforters, her long grey hair spilled over the pillows that propped her up. The bedroom light flickered, so Sprokly turned to wind it again.

“I’ll get the fan.” Billy reached into his own back pocket and pulled out a winding key.

“Never you mind, boy.” Key already in his hand, Pa brushed past Sprokly, then Billy, and wound the fan that oscillated steadily on Ma’s nightstand.

“Mr. Maezel, sir.” Sylvine stepped up to face Sprokly’s father, spreading her hands, a gesture that might have been a prelude to a prayer. “You’ve got to reconsider. I could ask my father if he’s willing to come out—”

“That’s right kind of you, Miss.” Pa shook his head. “But we can manage.”

“You can’t take care of her yourselves.” Anger edged Sylvine’s voice.

“Inherent or inscribed.” Pa glared at Billy and Sylvine. “We’ve made our choice. At least some of us have.”

“Enough,” Ma whispered. Her wrinkles deepened as she frowned at Billy and Pa. Her hand waved in a limp shooing motion. “Take your arguin’ somewheres else.”

“Yes ma’am,” Pa and Billy said at once, the look of guilty sheep on their faces.

“Come on, Sylvine.” Sprokly took the woman’s arm. “Let me show you our room.” She managed to guide Sylvine’s softly resisting steps out of Ma’s bedroom. Behind her, Pa and Billy’s low voices, like distant thunder, rumbled into the living room. Shadows alone occupied the rest of the house. Where had Grampser gotten off to? A stranger should have brought him running.

“This here’s my room.” Sprokly quickly wound the lights. The glow brightened, revealing a plump double bed with a rose chenille cover, a dresser whose mirror gleamed. Gauze curtains framed an open window that let in the cool night breeze. Sylvine’s suitcase sat in the corner by a table.

“It’s very nice,” Sylvine said dryly. Sprokly watched as the woman looked around the room. She faced Sprokly and folded her arms. “Sprokly, your mother is very sick.”

Sprokly turned away. She moved over to the bed, slumped down on its edge, and pulled off her boots. “I know.”

“That’s why Billy brought me out here. Why he chose to tell me so much about your ... interesting family.”

“We’re just a family.” Sprokly shrugged and pushed her boots beneath the dresser. The bedsprings creaked as Sylvine eased down beside her.

“I’d hardly put it that way.” Sylvine’s gaze seemed to drill into Sprokly. She looked down and even studied Sprokly’s toes as they wiggled free of her socks. “Can I ask you something? Without hurting your feelings, I mean?”

Grampser had told her this day would never come. So of course it had. Sprokly frowned, wondering why it chose to arrive with Ma sick and all. “I guess.”

“Sprokly,” Sylvine took her hand. Sprokly marveled at the softness of the woman’s skin. “What, uh, what exactly are you?”

“I’m a girl.” She stared at the floor and waited.

“Well,” a note of gentle amazement crept into Sylvine’s voice. “You’re far more lifelike than any manikin I’ve ever seen. You sure don’t act like the robots in the picture shows Billy keeps dragging me to. But you’re not...”

“Real?” Sprokly looked up at her and smiled.

“That’s one way of putting it.” Sylvine clasped her hands and smiled back. “Can you tell me more?”

Sprokly hesitated. An explanation would mean showing this outsider a Family Secret. Neither Grampser nor Pa would like that. But Pa had told Sylvine to bunk with her, instead of giving the woman her sister’s old room. Surely he’d known such a question was bound to come up. Was he testing her? Testing in the same way he’d tested Marybeth and then Billy before they left home?

Sprokly had even practiced an answer. She didn’t have Billy’s hunger for knowledge that led him to the university. But someday, she would go out into the real world. Wasn’t this the first step?

“Looky here.” Sprokly rose and dug into the contents of her dresser drawer. She pulled out a pair of spectacles, a series of jeweler’s magnifiers soldered to the frame—a birthday gift from Billy awhile back. Three of the jeweler’s lenses appeared cloudy, similar to the cogs on a tuning spork.

Carefully, she placed the spectacles in Sylvine’s hands. “Put these on.”

“Are they prescription?” Sylvine asked, “Because if they are—”

“Don’t matter.” Sprokly waited until the woman obeyed, then reached over and flipped down the cloudier lens. “Look at me now.”

Sylvine gasped, her hands fluttering around the spectacles, not quite daring to touch. “Words,” she whispered. “Not just the wood of your skin and metal veins, but words, all over you.”

“Can you read any?”

Sylvine shook her head sharply, then touched the spectacles, eyes squinting. “They’re just out of focus.”

“Good.” Sprokly nodded. “You’re not ready for that yet.”

“But what’s it all mean?”

“Inscribed, not inherent.” Sprokly took hold of the woman’s fingers, found them trembling. “Where some see atoms and molecules, Grampser sees letters and words, which are far easier to work with. My family, they inscribed me with life.”

“Good God almighty!” Sylvine fumbled the spectacles off, nearly dropping them. Her lower lip trembled. Sprokly’s eyes widened; the girl looked about to cry.

“It takes some getting used to,” Sprokly allowed and put the spectacles on the



dresser. “Even to me sometimes.”

“But it’s not possible.” Sylvine slowly shook her head. “Unless everything Science teaches us is wrong.”

“Does Science teach there’s only one way to do a thing?” Sprokly smiled. When Sylvine’s mouth opened and nothing came out she giggled. A giddy thrill pulsed through her. She had done it. Just like Billy, she had shared a secret with an outsider.

Sylvine rose abruptly, nearly toppling Sprokly off the bed. Whirling, she grabbed Sprokly up in a great hug. “Your secrets are safe with me.”

“We’re uh, friends now?” Sprokly asked.

“Absolutely.”

“We better get to bed then,” Sprokly managed, unsure what else to say. “The bathroom is down the hall. You can change there if you want.”

“Amazing. Absolutely amazing.” Sylvine went to her suitcase. She set it on the table Sprokly had cleared and then clicked open the locks. “But the words, what do they say?”

“Maybe Billy will teach you.” Sprokly grinned and searched out her pajamas from under the pillow. She’d given her new friend enough for one night. Some things took quite a bit more explaining. “After you’re married, of course.”

“Married.” Sylvine frowned and looked at Sprokly as if she’d grown a horned toad head. With a short, nervous laugh Sylvine slipped out.

Sprokly stared at the door. Sylvine’s answer somehow reminded Sprokly of Grampser—a single word that didn’t quite mean what it should. She covered her confusion by hurrying into her own pink and yellow striped pajamas.

Should she run and ask Billy about it? No, he and Pa had taken their argument to the kitchen now. Their voices, though muted, reminded Sprokly of the sharp rasps of a tin roof in a dust storm.

Sprokly climbed into bed. The door creaked softly as Sylvine returned. Sprokly pretended sleep, listened to the padding of flesh on carpet, felt the bed give as Sylvine slipped beneath the covers.

Distant thunder growled. As the lights flickered and wound down, Sprokly glanced out the window. Nothing but night. Then lightning flashed, illuminating the arcane symbols and letters threaded within the curtains. Could Sylvine see them?

“Sounds like a storm,” Sylvine whispered.

“A big one,” Sprokly murmured, and rolled onto her side away from the real woman.

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A claw gently scratched at Sprokly’s cheek. She opened her eyes, stared into two glowing red beads that gazed sharply back.

“He needs you, girl,” the horned toad squeaked. “Needs you right now, by golly.”

“Thank you,” Sprokly whispered. She was about to jump out of bed when she became aware of the sloping mattress, the strange warmth of the woman beside her. Carefully then, Sprokly eased from beneath the covers.

Dark as the inside of a blind man’s skull, she decided, fumbling, searching out her boots and clothes as quietly as she could.

“Sprokly?” Sylvine’s voice sounded heavy with sleep. “Something wrong?”

“Call of Nature.” Sprokly couldn’t resist a grin. Dressing quickly, the last thing she did before leaving the room was pick up the horned toad. The rest of the house remained just as dark, just as quiet, until thunder pealed across the sky almost making her jump. She sat down on the front porch steps to put on her boots, placing the horned toad beside her. “Where is he?”

“Down by the river,” it replied. “He wants you to bring the engraver.”

“The engraver?” Sprokly stared at the creature. “What on earth for?”

The horned toad puffed itself and lurched, a gesture that came off amazingly like a human shrug. “Engraving?”

“Just so,” Sprokly chuckled. The engraver was one of many devices Grampser had invented to help with the construction of various mechanical entities, herself included. It allowed one to etch the arcane symbols and letters, the Inscribed Meaning that Grampser built into the Universe and so gave life to his creations.

She hurried to the workshop and retrieved the device. It wasn’t particularly heavy, but rather bulky, a boxy thing with several trays and pulley-operated arms, each with a different sized stylus. The darkness didn’t help, forcing Sprokly to pick and choose her way by lightning flashes.

Rain started as she stumbled along the path to the river. Sprokly topped the

final rise where the chaparral gave way to sand, and halted.

“Grampser!” she shouted. He stood atop the wooden frame of the old windmill. Rain lashed at him as the wind picked up. Too dark to see more, but Sprokly could feel a tingling on her skin, the air charged and willful like a young stallion.

“Take your time, girl,” Grampser shouted and bent to adjust a glittering contraption. Sand clutching her ankles, Sprokly surged forward.

“Hey, watch it!” a voice squeaked.

“Oh!” The next flash showed the horned toads massed around Grampser’s tower. “Sorry.”

“Big foot,” the horned toad rasped.

Sprokly ignored the creature and hurried on. Thunder slammed across the sky and the clouds opened up. Wind slapped her. The tower top sparkled in the lightning, hazing the hunched shape of her grandfather in ghostly silver lettering. Cogs by the thousands, more than Sprokly had ever seen.

“Just set it on the ground, girl.” Grampser shouted. “Damn it, there ain’t no hurry at all!”

“Yes sir.” Sprokly clambered up the first three steps of a rickety wooden ladder to hand the engraver up. Grampser snatched it out of her hands so quickly she almost lost her balance.

“You’re clumsy as a goat with boxing gloves, and blind as a bat with its head in the sand,” Grampser snarled. “Besides, you haven’t got a clue what to do with this thing.” He latched hold of her arm and dragged her onto the platform.

Sprokly knew what he meant; her young fingers and young eyes were better than his. Before she could answer, his next words drowned beneath a roar like the mother of all express trains. She glimpsed the funnel outlined in jagged yellow flashes as the tornado descended.

Clutching the tower against the wind, she crawled to the engraver. Grampser rose, staggering beside her, hands reaching for a crank that Sprokly recognized from Ma’s old washing machine.

The cogs hummed beneath the storm, and, with a slowly increasing speed began to turn. Even with the wind, Sprokly felt the wash of their spinning as they picked up speed.

“It’ll never work, girl,” Grampser cackled. “Never in a million years! Hee, hee, hee!”

The next flash lit the whole world. The towering tornado swirled black and silver, mesquite trees flung like tumbleweeds, sand and rain mixed together, blasting Sprokly’s face. Another flash—words replaced the world.

Hebrew words, ancient Babylonian, hieroglyphics along with jagged sizzling symbols that made her eyes hurt and her brain throb.

Wind is Life! Storm is life! How good to shred the trees. The delicious sweetness of swirling sand. To roar and dance with the river. Live and die in the cloud’s eyes! The tornado’s very being, its savage joy threatened to fill her up until Sprokly closed her eyes. Swirling pictograms, which were somehow horned toads, glowed beneath her eyelids as they cartwheeled into the sky.

The tower shuddered as the tornado neared. Sprokly tangled her legs in the flooring struts to hold on. She scribbled for all her life. Words washed over her, through her, and down, smaller and smaller, etched upon a little glass lozenge Grampser had locked into the engraver. She bit her lip, clinging to the device with one hand, working the levers that inscribed the tornado’s consciousness into the glass.

The tower rocked wildly, tilting, then with amazing slowness toppled. Lightning flashed across Grampser’s face, and she was never certain whether she heard, or read the letters on his lips.

“Aw shit!” Which came as close to saying what he meant, as she’d ever heard. Sand and water and wind slammed against her until the world of words vanished into blackness.

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Her hand hurt. Sprokly opened her eyes and saw red. Focusing, she stared into the rising dawn. A cloudless sky brightened to a rosy blue. Sprokly squinted and a shadowy figure eclipsed the sun.

“Girl,” Grampser reached out and shook her. “You still with us?” He pulled Sprokly gently into a sitting position. “Everything broken?”

“I’m all right.” Sprokly looked down at herself to be sure. Enough sand clung to her wet clothes to start a small garden. Nothing else seemed amiss. “Except maybe my hand.” She held it out for Grampser to inspect. “I can’t open my fingers.”

“Couldn’t be some strut or joint damage.” Grampser took her fingers and gently folded them back. “Now that don’t beat all,” he breathed.

For there, centered in Sprokly's palm, raising more than a few splinters in the finely inscribed wood and lodged beneath the filigreed metal that formed her heart line, lay the glass lozenge, its surface cloudy with tiny letters.

"I must have grabbed it when we fell." She smiled. Grampser beamed down at her, weathered face split from ear to ear.

"That just don't beat all," he said again and pulled her to her feet. They stood there, grinning at each other, just grinning to beat the band, the dawn a velvet silence around them.

"But, uh, what's it for?" Sprokly finally found the presence of mind to ask.

Grampser slowly worked the lozenge free of her damaged palm. He held it up to the sun and studied it.

"It sure as hell ain't for your ma." Grampser pulled out a hanky, wrapped up the lozenge, and carefully stowed it away in the pocket of his overalls. He took her hand and gently pressed the splinters into place. "Might as well stand here all day."

"Surely," Sprokly agreed. Together they started past the fallen windmill and up the trail.

"Storm is Life," someone cooed in the high grass. "Wind is Life."

Grampser looked up sharply. "Tarnation!"

"I know that voice," Sprokly said and hurriedly veered off the trail.

They found Sylvine, still in pajamas, sitting in the weeds. The woman's hands lay wrapped around her knees, head lolling to the side. Her upturned but unfocused eyes stared at the sky.

"These can't be yours." Grampser growled and snatched the jeweler's spectacles that dangled from Sylvine's ear. The glare he turned on Sprokly nearly stopped the perpetual springs in her chest.

"I didn't know she followed me," Sprokly began. "I mean, I only wanted her to be my friend."

Grampser's shoulders sagged. The lines on his face deepened with his scowl. For the first time ever, Sprokly gazed into his darkened eyes and realized how truly old he'd become—old and hurt. He swallowed once, brought his hand to his mouth as if to cough but his voice rasped weak and frail. "See to your mess."

He tossed his tuning spork at Sprokly's feet, and then was gone. Sprokly knelt down and picked up the device with her good hand. She'd used one before but only in Grampser's workshop, and never, ever on a real person.

"Storm is life," Sylvine murmured as Sprokly spun the cogs and the morning light played over the woman's face spelling those very words in prismatic script.

"Sylvine," Sprokly put a firmness into her voice that she didn't feel. "Sylvine Porter."

"Twister!" Sylvine's voice shrilled into a giggle. Sprokly reached out with her free hand to touch the 'T' that glowed on the woman's cheek. The letter obediently moved to her fingertip. She kept it there, watched it grow larger as her hand moved away from Sylvine, back to the spork until she found the cogwheel that made it. Her thumb twisted the cog and the letter vanished.

Word by word, letter by letter, Sprokly removed every last trace of the storm. The sun rose higher while she worked. A string of drool trickled down Sylvine's chin. Motionless, her skin glowing with a thin sheen of sweat, the real woman stared at the sky.

"Let's see what we have now," Sprokly murmured. Again she spun the spork's cogwheels. New patterns, new words flickered over the Sylvine's face.

"Sylvine wants," the woman said. "Sylvine wants to know ... everything!"

Sprokly's arm ached from holding the spork steady for so long. Yet another ache grew within as she read the needs already inscribed in Sylvine Porter and the truth reared its ugly head: The chance meeting in the school cafeteria where Billy'd told too much about his family. Sylvine's disbelief and disdain until Billy had shown her what lay under the Plymouth's hood. Then all the schemes, right down to following Sprokly in hopes of stealing secrets.

Sylvine hungered for knowledge the way her brother did. She loved knowing things, knowing more than anybody. She loved that kind of power, but nothing and no one else, not even her own cold father—or Billy.

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"I don't want this anymore." Billy dropped his tuning spork into their mother's lap. Ma tucked it into her apron pocket. The old woman didn't rise, but opened her arms. It took a moment, until finally Billy stepped forward, bent to an awkward angle, and allowed Ma to embrace him with a tight squeeze.

"You can always come back for it," Ma said.

"Not with her here." Billy glared at Sprokly. "Hell no."

“Damn it, Billy!” Sprokly jumped to her feet, fists clenched. Her eyes blurred, but she’d be damned if she’d let that stop her. “The storm filled Sylvine up. There was hardly any of her left. I fixed her best I could.”

“Just like Pa would have fixed her, or Grampser,” Billy shouted. “You did their dirty work for them.” He brushed at his eyes, turning his back, turning away from more than just a sister, Sprokly realized.

“She loved me,” Billy’s voice grated harsh in the summer sun. “And you killed that in her.” He started for the car, back ramrod straight, arms and legs stiff as boards.

Sprokly opened her mouth, started to speak, then let her jaw sag. The truth would only hurt him.

“Give him some time,” Ma said quietly, a hand touching Sprokly’s wrist, easing her back into the porch swing.

Billy stopped behind the vehicle, stared for a moment towards the paint-worn barn that was Grampser’s workshop. Sprokly followed his gaze. Was that the barest flicker of a curtained window down there? Billy’s fists clenched, he shook his head and got into the car where Sylvine waited.

Billy said something to Sylvine. The real woman ignored him. Billy spoke again, and even through the dull gleam of the windshield, Sprokly saw Sylvine’s idiot stare, blank as the inside of a blizzard. Her brother’s shoulders slumped and he started the car. The tires kicked up dust as the vehicle veered a circle and bumped along the dirt path.

“They gonna be all right?” Sprokly asked.

Ma smiled and squeezed Sprokly’s hand. Sprokly marveled at the strength of her mother’s grip. It was hard to realize the old woman had been bedridden only yesterday.

“The girl will be fine by the time she gets to school. Won’t remember us, of course. You did a pretty good job on her.” Ma paused for a sip of moon tea. “Billy’s heartbroken. First true love and all, but he’ll get over it.”

Sprokly nodded. They sat awhile longer, watching the horned toads play in the yard. “I guess I should get down to the workshop. Grampser and Pa will want help.”

“Stay a while yet.” Ma shifted in her seat and regarded Sprokly with a warm generous smile.

“Heartbroken,” Sprokly tested the word in her mouth. She thought of the arguments and stony silence during the last day, Billy’s final stare, cold as a Seven Year Norther. She knew what heartbroken meant now, from the inside out. Her vision blurred again but she forced a laugh. “That’s kind of like you, Ma. Your heart was broken too.”

Ma glanced down at her chest, at the small glass lozenge, all cloudy glowing gold, suspended on a string. The life and energy of the tornado inscribed within the old woman, had written the inherent heart problem away.

“Tarnation, Missy,” Ma rasped in gentle imitation of Grampser. “You ain’t learned nothing that won’t fix all these broken tickers?”

Sprokly frowned and thought for awhile. Looking up into Ma’s dark brown eyes, she grinned and took her hands.

“There’s a secret. The Secret of Broken Hearts is to make them strong. Toughen and test them so that whatever happens, they heal quick and a body can get on with life.”

“Now how would you do that, young lady?”

Sprokly turned her gaze to the cloud-smearred sunset. Finally, she laughed. “Storms.”

Ma leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “You make me proud, girl. Happy birthday!”