



# **A Lock of Ra**

*by Sandra McDonald*

The supermarket shelves had little on them, and the produce bins held only moldy tomatoes and some shriveled cucumbers. Ann bought all that she could, paying more than twice what she would have just a month ago, and drove through the mostly empty streets of Cloquet, Minnesota to her mother's small house. The neighborhood was quiet in the gloomy afternoon light, all the summer gardens withered from neglect.

"Sweetheart, why did you bother?" Mary asked when she opened the door. "It's too much for just little me."

Ann carried a box of canned vegetables and soups to the kitchen table. "I had to, Mom. I don't know when I'll be back."

The television on the counter displayed the face of an anxious newscaster. Ann stared at him, wondering which crisis had risen to the forefront. Mary used her remote to turn off the screen.

Mary said, "Never you mind about what's going on out there. Lindsay's all you have to worry about."

"And you." Ann started putting the cans away and nearly snagged her wedding ring on the side of the box. "I wish you'd come to Rochester with me."

Mary shuffled to the kitchen sink and reached for a bottle of yellow pills. "This is where I was born and this is where I'm staying. John Fritz across the street promised to keep an eye out. He's got two shotguns and a pistol. It's Daniel who should be with the two of you, and not hiding behind his desk."

"He's not hiding," Ann said, hating the note of defensiveness in her voice. Daniel had been called over to Duluth by his employers. His job was their only source of income, and they desperately needed the medical insurance.

"Men and illness," Mary said. "Oil and water."

Ann put away the groceries, fixed a running toilet, and lugged three bins of trash out to the curb. The sanitation truck had not been by in awhile, but the stench in the garage was overwhelming. Afterward she scrubbed her hands clean and let her mother fix her a sandwich. Ann ate it along with warm soda and stale potato chips. Outside the kitchen window, a skinny black dog without a collar nosed at the trash.

"Before I forget, this is for Lindsay." Mary handed over a small piece of jewelry. "Tell her I'm sorry about not being able to visit."

Ann took the brooch. The rim was a smooth oval of tarnished gold. At the center of it, under old glass, someone had embroidered a castle and tree under a small, watchful sun. "Where did you get it?"

"From Mae Woolcott, at the church." Mary put their dishes in the sink and gazed out the window. "She said they're going to try down south, maybe her son can find work there. None of them have been the same since her granddaughter passed."

Ann squeezed the bridge of her nose.

"No one should suffer like those children do," Mary said. "You don't say it, but I see it in your eyes. All the little lambs."

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