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Best Mirrors



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A fanzine based on the television series

Beauty and the Beast

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Remember the Oranges

by Linda Mooney

Traditionally, Thanksgiving Day was spent with family and friends participating in the traditional holiday feast, followed by a lazy afternoon and evening gossiping and generally digesting the noon meal. On that day, no schedules other than guard duty were enforced, and even then the guards were changed every two hours instead of the usual six, to give everyone a chance to enjoy the company and fellowship of the holiday.

The Wednesday before found William and Soon Ling, along with several of the older boys, lugging a wheelbarrow and a small cart of items to the underground entrance of The Antique Shoppe. Included in those items were pieces of furniture hand-worked by Cullen, rag rugs woven from scrap materials, and an odd assortment of whatnots collected from Above and refurbished or repaired for resale in the small shop. And with this last load of the day, Wren and Carleen would be ready for the Friday following the holiday, when the start of Christmas sales would begin in earnest.

The group soon reached the makeshift door leading to the basement, and William went first to make sure the coast was clear. Although everyone connected to the shop were tunnel people, caution was still observed. Finding the cellar empty, William pulled the door away from the wall as Tall Peter helped to drag the cart into the tiny room and Soon Ling followed with the wheelbarrow. As they were beginning to unload, a voice came from the head of the cellar stairs.

"Who's down there?"

"Just us," William called back, and presently a slim, petite woman came down. Dressed in jeans instead of her usual tunnel garb, she looked different from how William remembered her as she greeted everyone with a hug and a smile.

"Jiggers, it's good to see you! Been a coon's age since I've been Below. How's Father?"

Soon Ling answered, "He sends his love and we're expecting you, Carleen, and everyone to join us tomorrow for dinner."

"You're looking good," William commented. "Been busy?"

Wren tossed her head of thick, black hair and motioned for them to follow her back upstairs. "Shoot fire, you'd better believe it. Amazing

what some people will pay for recycled junk.” Like her name, the young woman moved with quick, sure gestures. Having been found on the streets nearly fifteen years ago and brought down into the tunnels to live, she was no bigger than she had been at the age of four. Father suspected her to be a victim of midgetism; she was perfectly formed, right down to her size one shoes.

Wren bounced ahead of them, calling out when she got to the top of the stairs. “Hey, Carleen! Company!”

Carleen Mitchell, original proprietor of The Antique Shoppe, met them at the cellar door. “William! My goodness, however did Soon Ling pry you out of the kitchen, especially with Thanksgiving tomorrow?”

William eyed Soon Ling, who gave him a playful jab in his abundant ribs, before replying. “Let’s just say I didn’t have any choice,” he mumbled.

Carleen and Wren laughed and showed them into the main showroom where the group began to place the furniture and objects for sale. Carleen exclaimed over the high-backed chairs from Cullen, fingering the artwork painstakingly carved into the backs.

“Every time I see something of his, I’m just amazed at the beauty of his style,” she whispered. Having inherited the shop from her father upon his death, Carleen believed her world had been reduced to a round of drudgery and hopeless despair until that eventful Saturday, not quite a year ago, when Wren had entered her store and her life carrying a battered Remington Rand typewriter. Ever since then, she felt she had been blessed by knowing the tunnel people—and they in turn had found a friend, a Helper, and a halfway home for those tunnel people wishing to re-enter and live again Up Top. Even now, the second floor of the two-story building held not only Carleen’s and Wren’s rooms, but four more rooms currently occupied by tunnel people turning into Helpers.

While the womenfolk, as William thought of them, showed Tall Peter and the children where to place everything, he walked to the front of the shop and looked out the window. Snow was falling, the first snow of the winter, swirling and flying thick and fast; already the streets were slick in the glow of the streetlamp. Small piles were drifting onto the ledges of the old pane glass of the bay window, and William could only guess at how cold the wind was blowing outside. He didn’t hear Soon Ling come up beside him to gaze out the window, her memories following the same set of parallel tracks as his, until her soft, lilting voice asked, “Remember the oranges?”

Suddenly, yesterday was as clear as the single tear on his cheek...



After the Vietnam war had left its smear of blackened memories in his heart and mind, after the terror and pain of being a prisoner of the Viet Cong for nearly two months was firmly embedded in his nightmares—which occurred during the days as well as the nights—the United States Army saw fit to release Sergeant William O’Sullivan out onto the streets and into normal civilian life. Unfortunately, the Army did so without regard to his emotional stability, for all they saw was an overweight ex-mess hall cook who looked none-the-worse for imprisonment. They therefore used the metaphor of the duck to determine that if he *looked* alright, if he *sounded* alright, and if he *acted* alright...then he must be ready to face the stresses of everyday life.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, for William O’Sullivan found himself suddenly unable to cope with even the most basic skills needed for survival.

To begin with, he couldn’t find a job. It wasn't that his skills in the kitchen weren’t appreciated, but that he couldn’t get along with his fellow workers or with his boss. And with the large population of Asians living there, and immigrating Vietnamese flowing into New York City every day, the sight of one would often set him off into a fit of insane anger.

Secondly, with the nightmares haunting his every unconscious moment, the rest he needed, the respite he so desperately craved, was denied him. Like many ex-servicemen fresh thrust back into “the world”, William sought solace in alcohol where he found that the bottle helped him to get a few hours of numbed sleep at night...but soon that expanded into spending more and more time in the arms of Jim Beam and less and less time trying to earn a living.

In the end, William made his home in the alleys and deserted buildings of the city. Once in a while when he could no longer ignore his craving for solid food, he would find his way to the nearest soup kitchen where he would help fix one or two of the meals and thus earn enough money for another bottle after eating his fill.

It was more than a vicious circle. It was Hell.

When his first winter at home hit the streets with two inches of snow and a wind chill factor of minus two degrees, William nearly froze to death in his makeshift cardboard lean-to. It was bitterly cold, and the liquor did nothing to keep away the blueness in his hands and feet. Unfortunately, all the missions were full. But by now, William gave little heed to whether he lived or not. His father had died when he was twelve. His mother had passed away while he was in 'Nam. His older sister who was married and

had been taking care of their mother wrote to tell him of her death, but at that time William was a non-guest of honor of the Viet Cong and listed as Missing In Action; and when he had finally been released and returned to the States, he found he couldn't pick up the pieces of his past life and carry on as if the last sixteen months had never happened. So he gave his sister one final hug before walking away forever and catching the next bus out of the Milwaukee terminal.

Now as the snow drifted into layers on his newspaper blanket to melt and turn the newsprint cold and soggy, William looked past the hand clutching the neck of an empty bottle, past the Army issue steel-toed boots now scuffed and nearly soleless, and into a pair of eyes filled with pity...

A pair of eyes with epicanthic folds...

A pair of Asiatic eyes.



Soon Ling watched his face as he stared silently out the window. She could still see shadows of pain, ghosts from his past, etch the lines in his face which would take many days and nights of strong, caring love to erase. She had done it before; she could do it again.

"You're fighting wars that no longer exist, Billy," she said softly.

"Why did you bring me up here, then?" His voice was hoarse with emotion and his ears were red with remembered shame.

"To see the snow. Snow is beautiful. And clean. We're all like the snow until something or someone comes along to turn us to slush. But snow, no matter how dirty it becomes, eventually melts into water. Water feeds the trees and flowers to help them live and grow." She took a hefty hand between her own two petite ones and rubbed her cheek against the hairy back.

"It still frightens me to come Above," he reminded her. "I'm afraid if you leave me, I'll...I'll go back..."

"I know, Billy."

"I can't do that again, Soon. Ever. It'll kill me for sure."

"I know, Billy."

"Dammit, Soon, I love you."

She sighed. "I know, Billy."



Those eyes...

William reeled back in shock, knocking away the flimsy cardboard walls, until he flattened against the wet brick wall and couldn't retreat any farther. But the eyes never wavered. Set into a moon-shaped face, they were full of concern and empathy. And a gentle voice inquired, "Are you cold? Would you like a blanket?"

William blinked. He tried to re-focus. In his clearing vision, he saw that the small figure bending over him was a woman dressed as pitifully as himself, but she looked *clean* and *well-fed*. At first his numbed mind didn't accept the contradiction in terms. He had zeroed in on the patched blue flannel blanket she held out to him, and he reached out with a shaking hand to touch it.

"I'll make a deal with you. Give me the bottle and I'll give you the blanket. Deal?"

He stared at her, still semiconscious in a partial alcoholic stupor, not quite grasping her meaning. The woman saw his confusion and took immediate action. Gently but firmly, she pulled the nearly empty bottle from his frozen fingers and tossed it behind her, ignoring the sound of breaking glass. Shaking the folds from the blanket, she tucked the ends around his legs and beneath his chin.

"Who...why..." Try as he might, William found his tongue was too thick and his lips immobile from the cold. No matter—his mind was still incapable of normal thought.

The woman smiled. Dimples appeared in both cheeks. "Better?"

Better? Incredibly, he *did* feel warmer. The woman rearranged his makeshift room of old boxes, reinforcing and bracing the sides in order for them to withstand the wind, until the frigid blasts no longer knifed through his clothes.

He finally managed to move his lips. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. There. You should be able to make it through the night now."

"Uhh..."

"Go back to sleep. You need to sleep off that cloud of whiskey that's pickling your brain."

She moved out his range of vision, but William somehow managed to turn his head to follow her and keep her in sight. It didn't matter, anyway. He was unconscious again within moments.

The difference between night and day in New York is marked only by the rising and setting of the sun. For the city never slows down, even in the infant hours of the morning. Cars and taxis honk and race down the streets. Honest citizens prowl the sidewalks in the daylight, while the hookers and gangs command them by moonlight. Restaurants close, but then the bars serve sandwiches—and one still can find the twenty-four-hour deli or pizzeria.

William awoke, surprised to find himself not only alive but vaguely warm. Wet and uncomfortable, but warm. And ravenous.

He could smell oranges, and the smell started a chain-reaction response in his stomach. Bleary-eyed, he turned his head and spotted an empty coffee can by his shoulder. And sticking over the rim was the tip of a banana. Pulling himself up onto his elbows, he looked inside the can to see two oranges and a slip of paper—a note.

*Eat the banana if you throw up.
Eat the oranges if you don't.*

Because his stomach rumbled instead of roiled, he ate all three.

The fruit was real. The blanket was real. Therefore, the woman had been real. *The Oriental woman*, he reminded himself—and he was taken by surprise by his lack of emotion, the lack of a violent reaction from the memory.

Getting to his feet, William carefully folded the blanket and hid it beneath a pile of newspapers before heading off to the mission house a block away.

Inside the large room swamped with fellow indigents, he parked himself at a cardtable and wrapped his hands around the styrofoam cup of black coffee as the liquid slowly trickled heat through his veins.

He buried his nose in the steam and closed his eyes, but the only visions which focused behind his lids were of soft brown eyes surrounded by a moon-shaped face. The clatter and hum of the people around him chased away any trepidation her nationality could have wrought in him. And the faint scent of oranges still clung to his fingers. It was odd—he felt no fear. Incredibly, the unnamed terrors were leaving him alone even though she bore the stigma of his nightmares.

“Who the hell are you?” he half-muttered aloud.

A thin black man across the table gave him a watery eye but otherwise ignored him. Homelessness often bore offspring named “schizophrenia” and “depression”, so to hear people muttering to themselves was not an unusual occurrence.

A callused hand clapped him suddenly on the shoulder, and a familiar voice said, "Saints be praised! I was hopin' you'd show up. I need an extra hand in the kitchen. Can you help?"

"Sure, Murray, sure." He started to rise.

The beefy, red-faced Irishman gave William a once-over. "Have you eaten recently?"

William grinned. "I had breakfast," he admitted.

"Liquid or solid?" Murray half-teased. As proprietor of the mission, he had specific rules which he made everyone adhere to, especially the help. And when it came to drugs or alcohol, if you were clean, you worked—if you weren't, you walked.

In response, William held his hand out under the man's nose. Murray sniffed out of curiosity, then laughed. "Good enough," he said. "Now get your butt to the kitchen and start peeling me some potatoes."

For the next few hours William alternated between preparing and serving while keeping an eye on the window where face after face passed by with a tray and cup. But none of the faces were moon-shaped, and none had the warm, almond-shaped eyes he vaguely remembered. Perhaps she frequented another soup kitchen, he mused. But that still didn't explain why she'd singled him out, why she had tried to help, or why she was willing to risk him going over the edge by approaching him in the first place.

By three o'clock the last of the pans had been washed, dried, and put away. Murray slipped William an extra couple of dollars on top of what he'd earned, with the admonishment, "I want to smell oranges on you again tomorrow, big guy. Don't let me down."

William nodded and left the mission. In the past he would have headed straight down the street to the liquor store on the corner to purchase a bottle for the night. But today he paused, then dashed across the street, dodging traffic, to a nearby vegetable stand, where he bought an orange, two apples, a bag of Fritos, and a large bottle of Coke before heading back to the alley which was his home.

The blanket was still there, as was the can containing his banana and orange peelings. Pulling everything around him like a bear getting ready to hibernate for the winter, William dragged the top newspaper from the heap next to him and scanned the headlines. The paper was dated two weeks ago, but that was fine with him.

The moist gray sky promised fresh snow. The winds had died down and the temperature was steadily dropping, but none of that mattered anymore to him. The woman would come back—he knew she would—to check on him. And he wanted to be sober enough to ask her why.



“Why, Soon Ling, why? It's not enough that we're in the midst of a shortage ourselves. And heaven knows there are more and more homeless showing up on the streets. But we can't allow *all* of them down here! No matter how pathetic or pitiful they look, regardless of how hungry or cold they are, we're severely limited to how many we can serve. What do you know about the man? Tell me that!”

The young woman sighed but faced the Council with the strength of her conviction. Father was sorely vexed at her request to grant asylum to the alcoholic vagrant she'd taken under her wing. And to be painfully honest, she *didn't* know what attracted her to him. Lifting her chin, she replied, “I know that he's sincere and hard-working. I've seen him give aid to others, even at his own expense. He may be gruff and coarse on the outside, but inside he's hurting. That's what led him to the bottle, I believe. Unless someone can prove to him that he matters in this world, he'll become just another dead body on the streets before the year ends.”

“So will thirty or forty others just like him,” Pascal interrupted.

“Even so, what is it about him that made you take the risk?” Mary brought the original question back into focus. “It's not like you, Soon. You're one of our quietist members. To have you appear before us like this and ask to sponsor his admittance into our community is...is...”

“Out of the question,” Father finished. Soon Ling opened her mouth to protest, but the elder held up a hand to silence her. “*Unless...unless* you can prove to us that he will not pose any danger to our world, that he could assimilate into our way of life with a minimum of difficulty, *and* that he has a viable gift or ability to give to the tunnels. Then...then, perhaps, we will review your request.”

Soon Ling smiled, releasing her nervously held breath, and nodded. They hadn't turned her down, thank the Lord—just given her a stern warning to be certain, *absolutely certain*, that the man she wanted to bring into the fold would not turn out to be a serious mistake.

“Are we clear on those points?” Father reiterated.

Again she nodded. “Very clear. Thank you.”

Mary smiled as she prepared to hear the next case. “For what?”

“For giving him another chance. I *will* prove his worthiness. You'll see.” She turned and left the chamber, a definite spring in her step.

After her departure, Father leaned over the arm of his chair to ask Mary, “Do you suppose there's more here than meets the eye?”

“I don't know. But I have a feeling we'll be seeing a lot more of her. She won't give up on this man, or on us.”

Father grumped in reply, settling back in his seat. Giving Mary one last puzzled look, he cleared his throat and called for the next case.



She didn't come back the next day, nor the next, nor the day after that. In fact, William waited somewhat patiently for four days for the woman to reappear, but when she failed to show up, he began to worry. So many reasons, so many excuses filed through his mind like troops on maneuver. Perhaps she was one of those people who went around, looking out after other homeless folk until they were on their feet again—and then moving on to someone more in need. Or maybe something had happened to her...an accident, or (God forbid!) something much worse and much more...permanent.

What if he'd done something to scare her off? he began to wonder to still the rapid, frightened beating of his heart. Then he'd slap the palm of his hand against his forehead and berate himself for his concern. After all, the woman was a squinteye; what was he doing entertaining such morbid thoughts about her? She was a Survivor, he could tell that from the start. Her kind would always be around—tough and resilient—not like the flabby, sodden throwaway he'd turned into. Maybe someone with a good heart had taken her in, given her a decent home and accepted her as part of their family.

Or there was the chance she wasn't a homeless person at all. She could've been one of those immigrants whose family had flooded New York and made it rich through back-breaking work and determination. And to pay back the country for her success, had taken on a personal crusade to care for its refuse.

Yeah, and if pigs could fly...

Staring at his hands, which now sported a pair of fingerless gloves, William flexed his fingers, feeling the tingle of cold biting his nails. He'd stayed sober these past four days. God knows how he'd done it, but overall it had been to his advantage. He'd been able to eat well at the mission house, stay on good terms with Murray and the workers, and even manage to catch a second part-time job sweeping out the little deli and bagel shop at the end of the block.

Still, the nights were too long and cold. And lonely. His nightmares were not so bad because he was worried about the moon-faced woman, yet they never went completely away, either.

He hoped she'd come back some day. Soon. He prayed nothing terrible had happened to her. And, more than anything, he wished he'd have a chance to thank her for her help and generosity.

Which was why he literally stopped breathing the next morning when he woke up to find her leaning over him, the scent of oranges pungent in the crisp air.

"Oh, God! You! You're back!" He struggled to sit up as she watched in amusement.

"You been keeping sober, big boy?" she asked softly, her dark brown eyes twinkling. A glance around the domicile told the whole story. "Looks like you been eating well, at least."

"Where you been? I've been waiting for you to show up!" Now that his initial shock at seeing her and the subsequent flood of relief had settled in his system, William tried to conceal his care with gruffness. It didn't fool her.

"I've been...well..." She gave a half-hearted laugh. "Tell me something. You look like you know something about food." Giving him a playful back-handed slap on his belly, she straightened and waited for him to get to his feet. "Grapevine says you've been helping Murray out in the soup kitchen. And that you're a wiz at feeding large crowds."

"I used to be mess cook in the army."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah," he nodded, "over in 'Nam." He froze suddenly, afraid he'd said something he shouldn't.

The woman smiled gently. "Care to talk about it?" she inquired.

William shook his head, more resigned than afraid. "It's something I'd rather forget, but it won't let me. Too much happened over there."

"Which is why you tried to drown those memories in a bottle? Look, it's early. If I buy, will you share a bagel and a cup of coffee with me?"

William stared at her and realized with a start that her facial features no longer bothered him. In fact, she looked...

"Sure. Why not. I know the owner of the shop at the end of the block..."

"Rosenberg's. Yeah, I've eaten there before. Makes a pretty decent BLT, too."

They walked to the deli where Irv Rosenberg gave them two cups of coffee and two bagels on the house. William found them a little table in the corner by the walk-in freezer where they could talk. He noticed she was wearing the same sort of clothing he'd seen her wear before: clean, well-worn and a little threadbare, but not ragged or torn. As if great care had

been taken to keep it patched and practical. And his suspicions were raised regarding her being a homeless person like himself.

She started the conversation. "So...what have you been up to while I've been gone, besides staying on the wagon?" Her tone, while serious, was also teasing.

"You think it's been easy?"

"No. Not in the least. But *something*'s kept you preoccupied."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I can tell from looking at you you've been spending your money on stuff other than Wild Turkey. You're not pale and glassy-eyed anymore, and you're taking more pains with your appearance. I bet if you trimmed that beard a bit, you'd look halfway human."

William rubbed a hand over the growth covering his chin and managed a grin. She had a quick wit, challenging him, keeping him on his mental toes. The coffee was strong and the deli was warm. And for the first time in a long, long time, he was glad to be alive and feeling again.

"I was waiting for you," he announced, surprising her. "I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me? For what?"

"For...the oranges. Look, I *don't* even know your name."

She looked at him over the rim of her styrofoam cup. "Soon Ling," she finally replied.

"Soon Ling," he repeated, tasting the sound of it on his tongue. "Is that..."

"Chinese. My grandparents came over during the war. I'm third generation, you could say. And what do people call you, besides 'Hey, big boy'?"

"William...O'Sullivan. Family's been farming in Wisconsin for more generations than I can count."

"So what made you pitch a cardboard tent in our fair and glorious city, Sergeant O'Sullivan?"

He stared at her. "How'd you know I was a sergeant?"

Soon Ling shrugged her shoulders. "Wild guess. Answer the question."

So he told her—about the war, about the POW camp, about going back home and finding out he didn't exist anymore. He told her about the nightmares, about his problems facing each day after frightening day, and how he'd come this close to merciful oblivion...until she'd stepped into his life with a blanket and a coffee can full of oranges.

Why he let it all come out in a flood of numbed feelings, he couldn't explain. But she was a good listener, patient, and only asked him to elaborate on details he glossed over. Rosenberg refilled their cups and

left without asking for payment, perhaps understanding that the big man sitting at the corner table was in the process of healing...something which had been denied him from the moment he'd landed back on American soil many, many months ago.

And all the while, the petite Chinese woman listened with half an ear—because she saw volumes in the way O'Sullivan used his hands to describe his ordeals, how grief and pain and confusion clouded his face and eyes, and the desperation which weighed heavily on his massive shoulders. Father had always said she had a gift for reading people. And if there was something she was sure of, more than anything in the world, it was that Sergeant William O'Sullivan belonged in the Tunnels, with her tunnel family.

And with her.

His story and the coffee ran out at the same time, signaling a natural end to their meeting, but neither one made the first move to leave.

Finally, Soon Ling said, "William...may I call you William? Or do you go by Bill?"

"My mom used to call me Billy, but everyone else called me William."

"Well, William, you said you were a mess cook, which means you're used to fixing up a lot of food for a lot of people with sometimes little or no supplies. Isn't that the way the army worked at times during war?"

He chuckled, a deep, throaty sound she liked to hear. "More often than not."

"Well, I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. Actually, it's a big secret, and you have to swear on a stack of Bibles and your life you'll never reveal this secret to anyone!"

William stared at her and at the intently serious look on her face, and nodded.

"You see, I live with a group of people in a very strange but special place. That's where I've been these past few days."

"You live in a commune?"

"Oh, Heavens, no. Kind of like a small village where everyone knows everyone, and everyone cares for everyone..."

"And it's called Mayberry, right?"

Soon Ling laughed, and her bright, silvery cheerfulness brought an honest smile to his own face. "I never thought of it that way. But, no, it's not Mayberry. We do share in the chores and all, though, and a few days ago our cook left to go Topside, leaving us without someone to fix the meals."

"Topside?"

"Everyone's had to pitch in to help with breakfast and dinner and supper. I hate peeling potatoes, and I can't stand chopping onions, but the worst part of it is cleaning and gutting chickens!" She shivered with disgust, making William chuckle. "It's not funny!" she shot at him.

He laid a hand on her arm to soothe her ruffled feathers. "Let me guess...you're looking for a new cook, am I right? And you'd like for me to apply for the job. So why the big secret?"

Sighing, Soon Ling stood up and nodded to Irv before turning back to William. "Follow me."

She led him to the rear of the deli, through a paisley curtain which separated the front of the store from the storage in the back. Past boxes and cartons and canned goods, she showed him a small door set into the concrete wall behind a stack of flour sacks. She opened the door and motioned for him to stay with her.

Once through the door, William found himself in a narrow corridor leading down and away from street level. Soon Ling produced two candles and a book of matches from the deep pockets of her vest.

"Let me guess, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*?" he quipped.

"No. I'm taking you home," she whispered, taking his hand and showing him the way.

They followed a maze of corridors, each one opening up to a larger one. After a while there were torches, then lanterns, lighting their way. And they passed other people going in the opposite direction—people wearing the same kind of weirdly-patched clothing and waving or calling out a friendly greeting as they walked by.

William realized he was under the city, and that the tunnels they traversed were cold, but not as cold as the nights were in the city. Soon Ling's hand never left his, a startling contrast seeing her slender fingers engulfed by his large, beefy ones.

Presently they came to one of the many openings he'd seen them pass in the tunnels, and Soon Ling stepped through the doorway. He had to bend over, ducking under the frame, to enter into what he discovered to be a large chamber filled with more junk than a secondhand store, and an even larger number of people gathered within. Several more people were seated in an odd assortment of chairs, and the whole room had the feeling of a town meeting.

Giving his hand a squeeze, Soon Ling let it go and approached the people in the chairs. "I've brought the man I told you about," she announced clearly, confidently.

An older gentleman sitting in the middle chair stood with the help of a cane and gave William a good, long look. "And your name, sir?" he asked.

"William O'Sullivan," William replied, curious but polite. From the corner of his eye he could see Soon Ling crossing her fingers behind her back, and suddenly he understood that his presentation was as important for her as it was for him.

The older gentleman continued. "Mr. O'Sullivan, Soon Ling tells us you're an accomplished chef, is that correct?"

"I was a mess cook in the army, yes. And I've done my share in some of the local soup kitchens."

"I've also heard you're a drunk."

The word was like a slap in the face. "I'm beating it, sir," William said softly. "Odds are in my favor."

"Are they now?" But the tone of the older man's voice was not sarcastic. "Do you know where you are?"

"Somewhere underground."

"Do you know why you were brought here?"

"Because you don't like to peel potatoes, chop onions, or gut chickens for yourself."

The crowd burst into laughter, and to William's relief, so did the people sitting in the chairs...and the older man, who turned toward the slender woman.

"He's solely your responsibility until his probation is expired, you understand, Soon Ling?"

"Yes, Father," she smiled.

The older man called Father walked over to William and extended his hand. "I'll leave it to Soon to explain everything about us here in our little community. But let me be the first to welcome you. We hope you'll stay and remain a part of us."

William shook his hand, and the tension flowed out of him. Several people congratulated him and slapped him on the shoulders before Soon Ling led him back into the corridor. "Of course the *real* test will come when you fix lunch and everyone gets to see what kind of cook you are," she said.

"What did I do, pass a test or something?"

"We're very private and very protective down here. Have to be. This place is like a sanctuary. Many of us are here because we need to heal and rest and feel like we're worth something again."

"I can sympathize."

"But we also have to be very selective. We can't just let everyone know about us. Space is limited."

"But if you have a special skill, like cooking, chances are good you'll be allowed to join?" he ventured.

She nodded before turning a corner. "Here's the kitchen."

She showed him the large room containing the pits for the fires and the handmade racks of pots and pans. Although the accoutrements were dented castoffs, many in poor shape, it was clear that everything was kept in spotless condition and cared for. There was another smaller room off to the side where foodstuffs were stored, and an even tinier chamber for perishables. Camping in the rough had more luxuries, but William enjoyed the challenge.

“Well...?” she asked hesitantly.

“How many mouths do I have to feed?”

“Right now, thirty. Twenty-four adults and six children.”

“Children?” He glanced at her in surprise.

“We're a family. Oh, and sometime I need to tell you about Vincent.”

“Who's Vincent?”

She ignored the question. “Can you have lunch ready in an hour or so?”

“I can try my best. I take it I have no need for a shopping list.”

“All of our food is donated or...borrowed. There's no choice in the matter. Sorry.”

He smiled. “Sounds just like the soup kitchen. Well, then, give me an apron and a little elbow room and let me see what kind of damage I can do.”

Soon Ling stepped back and turned to leave, prepared to let him do his job, when he called her name. “Soon?”

“Yes, Billy?”

He shrugged his shoulders, unsure and a little embarrassed. “Thanks.”

Her smile lit her whole, shining face. “No problem.”



The snow was falling harder now, making the world look like the inside of a little glass globe. Soon Ling tugged at his arm to lead him away from the window.

Everything was ready for them to go back underground. Tall Peter had already left with the empty wheelbarrow and Carleen was fussing over a set of carved candlesticks.

Wren gave them a wink and held open the door which led downstairs to the basement. “Nice to see you again, William. Come back soon.”

Glancing back at the window and seeing the cold frosting the panes, he managed a small smile. "We got the kilns finished finally. Come down and I'll bake you the best damned bread you ever ate."

"It's a deal!"

After Soon and Wren had exchanged farewells, he and Soon Ling walked in silence through the tunnels with only the light of a small candle to guide them, Tall Peter having left with the lantern. It was a while before Soon spoke again.

"Thank you for coming with me."

"You're welcome."

"I know it was...hard for you."

"I would have had to do it sooner or later. I'm just glad you were there with me," he admitted, patting her hand where it lay on his arm.

They walked a bit further, when William suddenly stopped and pulled her against him, surrounding her with his love. Kissing her gently, he smiled when she reached up to brush the single tear from his cheek.

"I'm so glad I found you, Billy," she murmured tenderly. "I love you."

"I know, Soon, I know." Sighing deeply, he kissed her again. "But not as much as I've come to love you."

They held each other for several more minutes until the candle guttered and threatened to go out, and then they silently continued on their way towards the main hub of the community...

...and home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Mooney wrote dozens of Beauty and the Beast stories and produced, edited, and contributed to many fanzines. You can read more of her fan fiction online at:

[Tunnel Tales](#)

[WFOL 2013 - Reunion Stories: Pennies](#)

[Finally Online \(a project of WFOL\) - Song of Solomon \(full zine\) \(WFOL 2012\):](#)

Much of Linda's work can be found only in hard copy. These 22 zines may be borrowed from the [Crystal Rose Lending Library](#).

Linda is, today, a published author, with many titles of sci-fi, fantasy, paranormal, and sweet romance, as well as horror, to her credit. Visit her website for news, excerpts, and several free reads:

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