



Whisper

BY MICHELLE GOTT

Dread spilled from her mouth; she could see it mingle with her breath in the frozen air. She felt it wrap itself around her like a boa, and not the pretty kind—the snake kind. It squeezed her and she imagined the dread, the breath, even the life in her, getting choked out. “Jesus,” she uttered, realizing now she’d been holding her exhale in as she heard the plea rush out like air whooshing from a deflating balloon. That’s how Whisper felt, deflated, stepped on, everything in her pffting until it gushed out, emptying its contents, fluttering to the ground.

“Who names a kid ‘Whisper?’” she remembers asking her Gammy once upon a long time ago. Like yesterday, she felt her Gammy’s breath on her cheek, the scent of peppermint tickling her nose as Gammy traced figure eights across her back, causing her skin to shiver and goose flesh to rise. Gammy had cackled then, her grin eating up her face, no matter she had no teeth left to hide her gums behind. Life hadn’t been easy, but God had been kind—that’s what Gammy always said: “Life ain’t easy, you hear me, baby girl? So, don’t never count on it. But God is good. All the time. It balances itself smooth out, Whisper. Don’t never forget it.”

She’d said, “Dem same one who prays Jesus be as close as da’ mention of His name. Dat’s who name ya ‘Whisper.’” Again, the chuckle ‘til the phlegm drowned it, shortly devoured by a hacking cough. It’s what finally got her; the pneumonia which seemed to always sit in the old woman’s chest since as long as Whisper could recollect. She shook her

head, anguish once more deluding her right mind. The mention of His name, she pondered, and “Jesus,” fell out again, absorbing the anxiety with which she felt fraught.

Shakily, Whisper inched toward the window, the pane where the dirt had been smudged just enough to peep into the room. Jack had done a number on the glass last night, leaving his handiwork for Whisper to try to peek through. She caught herself holding her breath as if she could be heard, but there was no one to hear her now. Shadows clung to the walls inside like plastic wrap to a bowl. Even a bug scuddled woodenly across the floor as if worried it might miss out on something. Whisper didn’t know what she dreaded most—what she might find if this were her childhood home—or worse perhaps—what she might not find. She shrugged her shoulders, feeling the years and the cold and the aloneness settle right there, that tender spot where all of life seemed to land.

Her breath wreathed her face and from her pocket she pulled the tattered note. She felt threadbare too. In the last shock of daylight, she unfolded it for the zillionth time to read her Gamma’s words, even though the girl could recite it by heart. She’d been traveling toward this destination maybe for years, in hopes that a momma she could just barely recall might still exist. Somewhere. Here.

Whisper squeezed her eyes shut, imagining the sketch mirroring the window she knelt before. She reached up to trace the childlike heart scratched in the surface of the old wooden window frame where her fingers fit perfectly in place, like being beckoned, retrieved by a memory. “Jesus,” His name tumbled out again, the cry with it also plunging with the silence. She’d found it, at long last. Home.

For many, home was comfort, warmth, family. For Whisper, it was evasive, just one of the nasty four-letter words she learned on the streets, a memory buried in a dusty corner of her mind. But her Gamma’s final words had propelled her. A poor sketch of an old cabin scratched on frayed notepaper, reading: “Ya must find her, baby girl. She gived ya life and breath and named ya ‘Whisper’. Ya need one ‘nother. Now go!” Nothing more black-and-white than that.

Whisper tiptoed to the doorway, the frame fallen and a door just barely hanging on. Like her, she thought. “Jesus,” she mumbled to no one. But at once, the doorknob turned. “Momma?” she said to the reflection she faced, as she felt eager arms encircle her.