



THE FLOOD MONEY ©

A work of creative nonfiction by:

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Every lot has a story, this is lot 28:

Donal watched as his daughter Cliona climbed into her princess bed, dragging her old, one-armed SpongeBob, aka ArmBob, with her. A gift from Fiona: her mother. Donal found that he could neither discard him, or repair him—he'd tried the latter once, but his heart would not allow the alteration, not even for the better; and besides, if Donal re-armed ArmBob, Cliona couldn't tell all her little friends how he'd lost it in a tornado.

"Tell me another Grimm, Daddy!" Cliona pleaded, propping ArmBob up beside her in hope of the shared tale.

"It's too late princess," he said, smiling as her eyes automatically went to the tiara on her TV stand, tattling her thoughts. Another remnant of when Fiona was still with them. "Besides," he added, "the rain is suppose to continue for days, *it'll* help you sleep. I've always loved the sound of rain on a metal roof."

"Not the same thing." She said, pouting her lips.

Donal went to her bookshelf, and got out Fiona's old copy of *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, something she'd acquired from Hilton Head Christian Academy—where they'd met. The only remotely religious thing left in his home, and it itself not exactly adored by the devout. In the front, the Academy had placed a Disclaimer of Content, warning readers that Grimm's viewpoints did not reflect a Christian worldview, and were in fact—at times—in variance with it. It was Cliona's favorite book.

"What was the last story?" Donal asked, pulling up a chair.

Little Cliona frowned, lowered her head, and eyed him suspiciously. "Where the bookmark is," she said, too much like her mother.

"Okay, Miss Smarty. What story?"

"*The Shepherd Boy* was last, now it's ... *The Star Money*."

Donal knew the story well, and he knew Cliona did too—she'd read the book several times and continued to do so. Always leaving new stains from little Cheeto-fingers, on various pages for him to find. On page 652, near the bookmark—rested a new blotch. Forensic proof of the previous day's missing Peeps.

Donal eyed Cliona with his best Sherlock expression.

She looked to ArmBob, indicating him.

Donal and Cliona exchanged another look, and began to laugh.

"Did you at least save *me* one?" he asked.

Cliona was silent, her eyes automatically going to her nightstand, tattling.

Donal didn't bother opening its top drawer, he already knew what he'd find: a single pink Peep, left for her mother, like a tooth for a fairy that would never come. He let it go.

"There was once upon a time a little girl ... named Eleonora—" Donal began, adding a good Irish name to help Cliona connect. As usual, putting his creative writing credits to use, by constantly changing and embellishing the narrative. Giving characters new personas, new purpose, and tailoring them for her: the little half of him, blended with half of Fiona. "—whose father and mother were dead," he continued, "and she was poor, so poor that she had no Peeps to leave for her mother's, or her father's angel, and the only ArmBob *she* had, was quadriplegic and smelled like dirty dishes!"

Cliona looked to ArmBob, then to Donal quizzically: "What is, quadro ... quad-ra-pedic?"

Donal smiled. "*Qudr-i-plegic*, it means NO arms, NO legs."

Cliona pulled ArmBob protectively closer.

"Eleonora," he resumed, "had no room to live in, no bed, no lava lamp, no ceiling of glowing stars. Nothing but the little

nightgown and basset hound slippers she wore. In her pocket, she carried—"

"She lost it all, *in the storm*."

Donal said nothing.

"She lost everything to the rain, when the river rose." She instructed quietly, looking to the window, and pulling on ArmBob's arm. "Like the storm that took her Mommy."

Donal felt cold. His thoughts drifted—like hers, he supposed—to the wind, it howled the same; and to the creek behind the rows of trailers, it had risen before, and would again. It was just a question of how much. He hadn't *told* her of his fear, either her little mind discerned it from his somehow, or—they shared it. He had no intention of sleeping, and would be up (coffee and blueberry danish in hand), watching, measuring the water's progress in fear of the unremitting deluge forecasted on his phone.

He recomposed himself, and resumed: "In her pocket, she carried one granola bar, it was all that had survived the flood." He reached into his right-side cargo pocket, producing a Nature Valley (honey and oats) bar, and gave it to Cliona—who eyed its good-for-you style labeling, in disapproval. "Eleonora was a good little girl, she ate such things, she danced and sang. She was never stingy—"

Cliona had opened the offending wrapper, and was about to bite into the double-bars simultaneously. When, on his words, she paused, and handed Donal one of the bars. Giving him her trademark evil-eye as she did so.

"—and because Eleonora was good, she was thus forsaken by all the world. State President Haley Coin, knew not who she was."

"A Wiccan!" Cliona added, wiping crumbs from her blanket.

"Yes," Donal agreed, "Wiccan, and not the good kind, but an evil witch enthralled by greed—she took all the state's money and spent it on her great big teeth. Teeth she used to eat out the beating hearts of those who dared challenge the Southern status quo. Eleonora got out her little boat, shaped like a big rubber duck, and—"

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"What's a status coe? Mr. Hannibal used that word too?"

"Mr. Hannibal?" Donal inquired, going into full-dad mode. "And where exactly have you met this silenced-lamb-story stealer?"

Cliona's eyes looked down. "At Kristal and Kristen's..." she said, munching granola and pretending to wipe away more crumbs.

"Mmgh. I thought so. And that's why you had the nightmares. It wasn't the *iZombie* episodes after all. I knew something was up. You always say Liv would be your friend, and asked me once if we could bleach your hair." Donal concluded, trying to look authoritative.

"I'm sorry. Don't be mad at Kristal, we didn't know. It was saved on their Mommy's TV box—a whole set—but we watched just the one, because Duster cried when we tried to turn it off. Kristal told him he was just a baby and it would scare little brothers. But he said, 'No, it just scared girls.' So we showed him we could watch it just like boys can." At the end of her sentence, Cliona took a big breath. "It scared *everybody*."

"So it was Kristal's idea?"

A crack of thunder boomed off in the distance, and lightning lit the room. Donal decided to let Hannibal go. "Alright, now where were we? Oh ... yeah. Eleonora was in her *inflatable* rubber-duckie

boat. After great efforts, it was all blowed up, and she was paddling along safely when—"

"But Daaaaady, the 'status cue?'"

"Oh, right. The status *quo*—not 'cue'—" he watched as Cliona repeated the word to herself experimentally, over and over "—means *an agenda, a plan of doing or getting a certain thing*, usually by a specific time."

"Status quo." Cliona said, expertly. "It's like teachers needing us to get good grades so they can get paid, and buy bigger hair-tails."

Donal chuckled. She had a strong dislike for one of her teachers with a pay-weekly-morphing hairstyle, that began after hearing a rumor of it sometimes including horse hair (Local farms continually reported horses on their land being assaulted with scissors, and some idiot looking to make a dollar—Cliona had cried at the sight of a clean-cut mare.). "Yes, that would be a status quo—but I think what word you were remembering is 'quid pro quo,' it means: *An equal or fair exchange*." He almost said *tit-for-tat*, but stopped himself, because the phrase conjured up his own years of teen angst; and was not quite within her approved scope or vocabulary. He'd already been in two parent-teacher-after-school-meet sessions, and one was enough.

Cliona looked to him as if he'd just told her the sky was green and the ground was purple. Showing no interest in the new word. Instead, she seemed to be once again considering the mare, holding a lock of her own hair out, examining it against ArmBob's dingy yellow. Then, suddenly, she let it go and eyed Donal expectantly.

"Eleonora was in the duck, just floatin' along the river *when*?" she

prompted.

"When all of a sudden a poor displaced woman seen her, and said: 'Oh, little girl, what a great big duck you have, can I get a ride?' Eleonora allowed the woman—in her big silver night-robe—to climb aboard, and paddled onwards. Then, they came to a child sitting on a roof, who cried and said, 'I'm so thirsty. Have you seen my Daddy?' Eleonora and the old woman said that 'No,' they had not, and asked the child to come aboard, they were going to see the State President.

"Why would you want to see her?" the child asked, climbing in. 'I heard she had great big teeth, that she used to eat anyone who questioned her. Aren't you afraid?'

"Eleonora and the old woman exchanged a look, 'No.' They both concurred—" Donal put emphasis on 'concurred,' pausing a second to see if she'd ask "—that they did not fear her. And in fact, planned to ask her to sell some of her teeth, to fix the dam."

"Ooh, you said a bad word! That's not in the book." Cliona said, lighting up.

"No, it's not *that* word. It's talking about the lake."

"Cause if the dam lake breaks, we all have to swim." Cliona said, smiling, putting ArmBob in front of her, in mock defense.

"Now the way *you* used it is bad. But no. Not us," Donal assured. "Our house has wheels, so all we gotta do is hook up old Doc, and truck on down the road." Donal added, pretending to turn a big steering wheel equivalent to what was actually in the '59 Ford truck behind their home.

"Doc's not big enough," Cliona claimed.

"Yeah he is. I took his inline six out, and put that V-eight, remember?"

She did, she'd handed him wrenches and wiped grease & sweat from his face, during those two hot summer evenings. She pursed her lips, seemed to consider his claim about the massive engine, and found it possibly sound.

"I'd pull us back upstate to the Burg, and park right beside Papaw and Mamaw's house, where the water couldn't climb." He told her, then, looked back to the book, from where not a single word in any of his story actually rested: "The child told them he didn't believe the State President would ever do such a selfless thing, and would like to come along and see. The child had a question for her too, about ethics. *If* she is in a question answering mood! The old woman laughed, and told the child she knew of what exactly he spoke, and that the State President did not fear any committees on 'ethics' — because she'd already ate the hearts of one such set—and the child better *not* ask such a thing, or she could not sell her teeth until she ate one more."

Cliona melodramatically bit at ArmBob's arm. "Like a vampire!" she said.

"Yes." Donal smiled, exposing his teeth, and she giggled.

For a moment, the storm was forgotten.

"Eleonora paddled on a little further," he continued, "they met *another* child in an oversized coat, who'd climbed a great big tree and was thirsty with no water to drink. The old woman, it turned out, had a bottle of Tennessee spring water squirreled away that she gladly gave while helping the child aboard.

"The last child looked at her in surprise, having been thirsty all the way. Eleonora too, being thirsty herself, was a little shocked by the sight of the bottle. They'd

all been told in floods not to drink from the sink because sewage backs up into the reserves, and graves let loose of their spoils. Making the water non-potable."

"Why did nobody else?" Cliona asked, quietly with heavy eyes.

"Nobody else what?" Donal said, lowering his voice, and adjusting the touchlamp to a dimmer setting, with a light tap at its base.

"Nobody else paddled?"

"Oh, that." Donal considered it for a moment. "I guess she only had the one, it was shaped like a great big duck foot, and she had to move it from side to side or else they'd go in a circle." He took note of Cliona's smile, and went on, his voice mingled with the rain beating away at the trailer's metal roof and sides. "Eleonora paddled on, with her great big duck foot, and a little further towards the capitol—another child was found. This one was on a wooden boat shaped like a swan. Some local fair deal because it had a big heart painted on its backside. This child was cold from the rain, so the last child gave the new child the unfit coat, that oddly fit its new owner, and Eleonora paddled on, since there was no need for the child to board.

"At length she got into the capitol and it had already become day, and it was there—on top of a building—sat yet *another* child. The child had purple hair, piercings in the ears *and* nose, wore a hood, and the peculiar child did funny hand gestures at them as they floated up. 'This child,' the old woman explained, was of 'capitol breed.' Good little Eleonora offered the child a ride, but the child declined. Saying, 'Can't you see where you be, this would not be if it had not been ordained! I will wait. Drink my

sink-water anyway, and pray;
because it is here the State
President has said to stay put.'

"Eleonora shook her head and paddled on. When suddenly a sky full of federal helicopters, each like a trailer with two great big rotors, appeared; and the sky turned yellow as great big sponges were dropped from above. The water receded, and they were quickly on the ground. Thus leaving nothing to do but let the air out of her great big duck. They would go on by foot."

Donal had cut the story purposely short, in response to a light snore muffled by ArmBob's arm. Donal placed the bookmark, closed the book, and moved the arm from Cliona's face with a kiss on her forehead—before tucking in her big yellow blanket. After laying the book on her nightstand, he quietly opened the top drawer, sadly finding what he'd expected: a single pink Peep. He took his uneaten granola half, and placed it in next to the Peep; but then, he took it back out, bit away most of it, and put the remaining piece back. He did the same to the Peep, leaving only its marshmallow tail ... just like she would. He imagined the conversation that would cause, and how Cliona would remind him Mommy hated his granolas! He made a mental note to write the Nature Valley people and tell them they need to talk to the Peeps people—because the combination was exquisite.

He turned the lamp off with three quick taps, and in the squared yellow of a SpongeBob nightlight that turned itself on, returned the book to her shelf on his way out. Just as he was shutting her door, leaving it slightly ajar—he stepped in a puddle of cold, murky water. The drywall outside her door was bowed inward, and a drop of water hit him on the head.

"Daddy?" Cliona calls out from behind him.

"Yes sweetie?" he returns, in his best effort of a normal voice.

"If you say somthin' to Kristal ... don't tell I told."

"I won't. Now go back to sleep," he said. But as the words left him, he felt her hand slip into his, as she let out a gasp.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed, looking to her two basset hounds' wet ears, and holding ArmBob up over her head.

Donal picked Cliona up, and perched her maternally on his hip while she kicked off her wet dogs, and he started to tell her it'd be okay; but it didn't seem necessary—she wasn't scared—just curious; living the moment as they began to slosh down the hallway, towards the raised-floor kitchen.

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