

The Lottery

Catriona Law didn't know what she was thinking the morning she took in a family of climate refugees. Perhaps she felt resentful that government policies had destroyed her farm and she wanted to make a political statement. Or she was afraid that a neighbour would take a shot at the family, and claim later that they were shooting deer. What else was she to do when she found Abdul, Leila and the six month old baby at Leila's breast all huddled around the small campfire, waiting for a blackened teapot to boil. Perhaps she viewed the baby as a miracle dropped on her doorstep, one that demanded a response. She'd long dreamed of having her own, but her time had run out. Here was one for her to take care of. She invited the family into her kitchen for tea.

They sat opposite her; spoke in their own language. They didn't respond to Catriona's questions of, "Where are you from?" "What can I do for you?" They only exchanged names. Leila's large dark eyes remained downcast. She clutched her daughter as if afraid someone was about to take her away. Abdul had a thin and creased face that showed no emotion other than a cold determination to survive. Leila's fear dissipated when she saw the spread of scones, pancakes with jam, cakes and fried eggs. They ate as if they hadn't had a meal for days. What am I to do now? Call the police? It's what her neighbours would do, and that was good enough reason for Catriona to do the opposite. She knew what would happen if the family was caught. That they'd be confined to the crowded barracks of a detention centre. If they didn't die there of black fever, they'd eventually be shipped off to Africa and dumped in some war-torn country, only to be jailed again.

When Hugh returned for lunch, he halted in the kitchen doorway as if struck by a thunderbolt.

“Would you like to join us?” Catriona said. “This is Leila, Abdul and little Sharma. They need a place to stay. I was thinking that Abdul might be able to help you out on the farm.”

Hugh needed the help. Twenty years earlier, when the price of diesel rose beyond the reach of the average farmer, mechanized farming collapsed. Tractors and farm machinery stood rusting. He sold off his fields to people from down south, reduced his livestock and along with the new neighbours ran a small subsistence farm. The Highland Clearances that once created large farms moved in reverse over Scotland. Not altogether an improvement, Catriona thought when she looked out on the neighbours’ tall fences and watchtowers, built to keep out wolves, climate refugees and city gangs from Aberdeen. The open sky with unobstructed views belonged to the past. Wind generators stood like alien sentinels in every field, their blades creating the ever-present hum. More than the loss of open skies, Catriona mourned the loss of community, the days when country people stood by each other. Exchanged services. She barely knew the names or faces of her neighbours. The stresses of global warming had changed a lot.

“We’ll have to keep them under cover,” Hugh said. “The neighbours will split if they see them. How do you expect our refugees to move about the farm with all the towers and CCTV watching them?”

“Hugh, I don’t have all the answers. We must take care of them. I will not report them to the police.”

“You already gave them breakfast. Send them on the road and forget about them.”

Catriona felt an uneasy shiver. Hugh wanted to wash his hands of the refugees, but now that she'd shared her table with them, she couldn't. Leila was traumatised like a battered wife. Her eyes cried out for help. If Catriona had left them in the forest, she could have turned her back on them, but not after they'd crossed her threshold. If she let the family go, by sunset they'd almost certainly be in a detention centre.

"Don't ask me to do that. I can't. I want them to stay with us."

"For how long? A week? A month?"

"I don't know. As long as they need to be here."

The new family installed themselves in a small caravan parked strategically where it couldn't be spied on by neighbours. Abdul worked in the cow shed where no one could see him. An energetic worker, he rose early each morning to milk the cows, muck out the shed and spread straw. Two other boys who came regularly occasionally saw him, but because their immigration status wasn't clear, Hugh knew that they wouldn't trouble him about Abdul.

Leila was in her mid twenties, had long black hair tied in a bun, wore a bright blue hijab and a long black dress. Catriona offered her a choice of dresses from her wardrobe, but Leila wouldn't consider them. She helped Catriona in the vegetable patch, choosing a corner shielded from view by a brick wall. Every afternoon she and Sharma came over for tea. Leila allowed her to hold the baby. She and Catriona communicated using words and gestures. While Catriona was speaking Leila's large eyes met hers. She nodded to indicate that she understood; tried to reply using the few English words in her vocabulary. After tea she'd motion for Catriona to sit down, while she gathered dishes and washed them, then took a broom and swept the kitchen floor. Where was she from? What had driven her to that remote corner of Aberdeenshire? Catriona wished she knew, but sensed that even if Leila could speak

English, her past was too terrifying to discuss. Strangely Catriona found herself talking about her difficulties with Hugh, her loneliness and troubles with the neighbours. Leila focused on every word. Even though she couldn't follow the words, her eyes expressed deep sympathy and understanding.

Every time the phone rang, or a visitor pulled into the driveway, Catriona's heart went into a flutter. She'd send Leila and the baby to the toilet room until the coast was clear. Hope the baby wouldn't start crying. On one afternoon when Catriona was trying to dispose of Nicky, the local gossip, the baby started crying.

"You have a baby that I don't know about?" Nicky asked.

"That's my niece's daughter. They're staying for a few days in our caravan."

"Oh, I never met your niece," Nicky remarked, then passed on to small talk in the glen.

After a month Hugh tried to force the issue. Catriona saw from his implacable look when he came in for dinner that she was in for it.

"This can't go on," he said. "This is like trying to hide Jews from the Nazis. They can't live like this, moving about only after dark, keeping indoors. It's degrading."

Catriona felt blood rush to her face. "My house isn't degrading. Look at the detention centres, filthy and disease ridden: the places where people are supposed to be treated humanely. That's degrading. We're not criminals. All we've done is to take in people who came to us. Don't you see Leila's eyes, how grateful she is for the tin can of a home we gave her? Don't you see how happy I am to have her here? To have a baby to hold?"

Hugh gave in. For two years he'd resisted Catriona's demands to adopt a baby. If the refugee family filled that need, it was a small price to pay.

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A few months later came the day she had been dreading. A UK Border Agency van pulled into the driveway, a male and female agent in uniform and displaying their bright badges rang the bell; asked to talk to her; Officers John Brand and Jessica Stevens. Hugh was in Huntly for groceries. Leila and Abdul were nowhere in sight. She could only hope that they'd spotted the van and had taken off for the forest. What if they hadn't?

Her heart beating, her legs a tremble she asked the agents in and offered them tea. While she rummaged in her cupboard, barely able to find a couple of cups and the teabags, the agents sat stiffly.

"You mind if we record our conversation?" John Brand said.

"Actually I do," Catriona said. "Can we first have some tea, and you'll tell me what this is all about?"

"We're looking for a Sudanese family, a man woman and small girl who escaped a while back from a detention centre. One of your neighbours thought they saw them in this area. We wondered if you'd spotted them, or have any information about them."

"I..I did see some people like that. A couple of weeks ago, walking down the road toward Dufftown," Catriona said, trying not to stammer. The agents' stiff looks told her that they were not only dissatisfied, but insulted by her response. They knew the family was there.

Brand nodded. "I see. We're searching the neighbourhood. We'd like to take a look around your farm."

"There's nothing to see," Catriona said, feeling a rush of confidence. "I know everything that's on my farm" The agents had no search warrant, and could not search

her place unless she allowed them to. And she wouldn't. If they wanted to engage her in ping-pong, she knew how to play.

The woman spoke up. "Mrs. Law, we have reason to believe that the fugitives are on your land. I advise you to..."

"Reason? What sort of reason?" Catriona broke in. "If someone has been telling stories, I want to know the source. There's a lot of idle gossip in this glen."

"As I was saying, we have a job to do."

The woman took another sip of tea. She would have said more, come across more forcefully but for the tea.

"Please take a pancake. My husband made this jam from our own raspberries," Catriona said. The woman looked to her companion. He shrugged, suggesting there was no harm in Catriona's hospitality. "You must have a very difficult job. Very awkward at times."

"Awkward?" the woman shrugged. "Someone has to do it. The law is the law."

"Well, you won the lottery."

The pancake paused halfway to the woman's lips. The man frowned, tightened his lips. He shook his head. "What lottery?"

"Where were you born?"

"I'm from Perth."

"So, you won the lottery to be born in Scotland. What are the chances that anyone in the world might be born in Scotland? As small as winning the lottery. Not many people do."

She tried to speak evenly, but an emotional tremor pervaded her voice. She thought of Africa, the starvation and the war that Leila's family had fled from, of

Holland, mostly under water. Southern France, once lush with vineyards, was now a desert of prickly bushes. The agents didn't understand. They didn't want to.

The lottery comment must have fallen flat because the man drained his tea and stood up. "Thank you for the tea. Now, if you don't mind, we have our duties."

"It's all right," Catriona whispered.

"I'll just take a walk around the farm. Jessica, you take the house."

He went out, letting the door slam behind him. He walked past the window, whistling aimlessly, heading for the cow shed. What if Abdul was there? Hugh said something at dinner about having Abdul muck out the stable that morning. The whistling died into the background hum of a wind generator.

Jessica Stevens gave no indication she was about to search the house. She cut the pancake into small pieces, dipped each one in jam.

"You live in a beautiful place," she said with a nod at the hill visible in the picture window. "I wish I had this view from my flat in Aberdeen."

"It is very special. Once you've lived here you don't want to leave. My family's had this house for sixty years. I left home when I was in my twenties and only came back here after dad died. By then Hugh and I were married. Once I was back, I couldn't move away again. Not for all the fences and watchtowers." She paused, hoping for a response, but Jessica sat silently.

"I stay very busy with the vegetables," Catriona continued. "They're our main source of food. I can't pass a day without my hands going into the ground, pulling a weed or sowing seeds."

Jessica smiled. "All I have is my window box with some Busy Lizzie. I wish I could at least have an allotment. I've looked at buying land out here but who can afford the prices these days?"

The whistling sounded again, an aimless tune that made Catriona shiver. The agent was heading down the track toward the trailer where the family lived. Why was he whistling like a deliveryman who wanted to make his presence known? If he wanted to surprise her family he ought to be creeping around like a cat.

Jessica took a small sip of tea. “The city’s a bad place to bring up a family. I have two daughters and I’m always worried about them. All the violence and crime. You see it on the news. People have become so hard. If only we had a place for the girls. Like your place.”

“Send them here any time. I’ll teach them how to milk a cow.”

“Do you have any children?”

“Of course.” The words left her lips before she could stop them. She’d been thinking about Sharma, already a toddler, always underfoot and who liked nothing better than to grab small kittens and squeeze the life out of them. “Yes, I have a girl. Just adopted. Hugh and I couldn’t have any of our own...And so...” She broke off lest she say too much.

Almost in response to her thoughts a faint cry came from upstairs. Sharma was in the house, and Leila had to be not far. The agent looked up. She’d noticed the cry.

“Yes, Hugh and I tried for a few years, but you see, we married late. We decided to adopt.”

“A lot of children need a home,” Jessica said. “I admire anyone who can give them one. So many children in government custody or foster care don’t have a chance.” She drained her teacup. Her lips tightened and she let go of her cup; about to get up.

“More tea?” Catriona said.

“No, I really need to get on. Mind if I take a gander with you about the house.”

“Well, yes. I suppose it’s all right.”

The sound of someone bumping down the stairs came through the closed door. Then adult footsteps. No --- don’t come here. Catriona would have screamed from terror but she bit her tongue. Already Jessica frowned, wondering what the commotion was about.

The kitchen door opened and Sharma dashed in followed by Leila. Leila never would have appeared if a visitor was around. Sharma didn’t know any better. “Kitten?” she said, looking around for her favourite animal.

Leila froze in the doorway as if she’d surprised a venomous snake. She recognized Jessica’s uniform; knew immediately why she was there; knew that running away was futile. Her arms reached out for Sharma, but Catriona was quicker. She’d already scooped up the child and hoisted her on one knee.

“This... this is Sharma” she said.

“Sharma?” Jessica stiffened. Her amiable manner faded as if it had never been there. She turned to Leila, “And you are?”

“Leila,” Catriona interjected. “Sharma’s mother.” She tried to say more but her voice died inside her. She could already see Jessica demanding to see Leila’s passport and visa.

But then words came to her unexpectedly from an unknown quarter as if someone offstage was prompting her. “Leila is having to leave Scotland. Her visa is about to expire. We met in Huntly and I offered her my house for a few days. I explained how much I wanted to adopt a baby. To give her baby a chance. She sees how I adore this baby.” Tears started in her eyes. “It’s the least I could do for her. You know, she’s played the lottery too. Everyone has.”

“I don’t believe this,” Jessica said.

“This is my child. She’s staying here. The paperwork hasn’t all gone through but Leila wants her to stay with us. Even if it means that she’ll never see her daughter again. At least she won’t be sold into slavery or shot in some African war.”

“Is this true?” Jessica said.

Leila, her eyes full of tears, said, “Yes.”

“You’re giving up your child for adoption?”

Leila nodded again. She must have understood the question; its terrifying implications. Catriona knew that normally she’d never agree to such a proposition, but she was a war survivor. She sensed Catriona’s subterfuge; knew the answer she had to give if she was to stay.

Jessica shook her head. “This isn’t procedural in Scotland.”

“No it isn’t. A lot of things don’t happen according to our plans. Mothers don’t normally give away their babies, but they will if it’s their only hope. I’m Leila’s hope. She can’t do anything more for her baby. Look at what Hugh and I have to offer out here.”

Jessica closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “This is something I hoped I’d never have to face. It’s dreadful. I don’t know what to do. Back in the office it all seemed so simple.” She stared long at Catriona. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t say that I don’t admire you, but you must know that I can’t help you.” Jessica got up, smoothed the creases from her uniform. She tried to appear cold and detached but her hands trembled.

“It’s time that we left. Thank you for the tea. Do me and yourself a favour. Tell your neighbours that we searched the farm and didn’t find anyone.”

She left the room, whistled loudly for her companion. “John --- where are

you?"

"In the shed. Nothing so far."

"Let's roll."