**Nephew**

Sandy Smith

Narcissa Penny had a favorite nephew, but this boy could not be him. This boy did not have lively brown eyes; he did not call her Auntie. This boy sat stolid and dumb, his eyes dull as stones in a dry riverbed.

She was cold in this room. They’d taken her sweater because the brass buttons on it made the metal detector screech. She smoothed her skirt against her legs and sat, sifting through her thoughts. Who was this boy?

The guard standing a yard or two apart from her had a beefy red neck stippled with ingrown hairs, his collar so tight it pressed a pale line into his flesh. He kept his large hands clasped at his belly, just below the buckle of his gun belt. Did he have a wife, and was he kind to her? She wondered what manner of man chose this for his work.

Narcissa’s favorite nephew played the guitar and had a long-haired dog that did a trick, jumping up on his hind legs like he was dancing a jig. This boy did not seem like the sort of boy to teach anything clever to a dog. His hair hung down in his eyes; he looked forsaken and wild.

The boy wore an orange jumpsuit. A chain was wrapped around his waist, and both his hands were handcuffed to this chain so he couldn’t move them more than a few inches in any direction. There was a red-purple egg on his cheekbone, and his swollen bottom lip was split like a fat plum. The detective at the desk told Narcissa it had taken four guards to hold this prisoner down as they washed blood from his skin and hair and dressed him in the orange jumpsuit. This slack-jawed, dead-eyed youth had injured the index finger of one guard by biting it hard, breaking the bone.

Narcissa let her eyes settle on him, who could not be the one she loved because the boy on the other side of the Plexiglas wall had killed his mother. He’d hit her head with a hammer until she was dead, and even after had not stopped.

How could this be?

Yet Narcissa’s youngest sister, Ophelia, was dead. Ophelia, who worked at the nursing home, delivering meals room to room. On the weekends, she’d waited tables at Perkins. She wore a silk flower on her nametag and knew everyone by name. When they stripped the boy down, the police found fifty-seven dollars in fives and singles in his pocket.

Narcissa was in the bathtub when her phone rang. She heard it down the hall, where it sat on the table next to an umbrella stand shaped like a squatting frog. Narcissa let it ring. She did not wish to leave her tub to answer the phone, which was ringing too late in the evening to mean anything good.

Later, a policeman had knocked on her door. She clutched her robe together at her neck as she listened to the policeman, who spoke with his hat in his hands. He waited in the kitchen while she put on slacks and a sweater, then he helped her into his car and took her to see her sister’s body.

Dark half-moons of dried blood rimmed this boy’s fingernails. The detective said he’d fought so hard, they’d had to push his face against the floor while a doctor shot him up with tranquilizer. The blood on his hands was not his, but his mother’s.

Narcissa placed her palm against the thick clear barrier. When the boy laid his palm opposite hers, the temperature of the plastic didn’t change. He would not meet her gaze.

After a while, the guard cleared his throat and told her gently visiting time was over. Narcissa thanked him but kept her eyes where they were. Then she dropped her hand and stood up slowly; her hip pained her from sitting on the metal chair. The guard knocked twice on the square of glass in the door and called, “Coming out.” The metal door opened--¬she could not see how--and the guard gestured politely that she should go before him.

The boy’s hand might still have been raised or might not; Narcissa did not turn to see. If she heard him whisper, Auntie, as her favorite nephew might have, she did not acknowledge it. She passed into the yellow-painted hallway, and the guard followed her. The heavy metal door rattled shut behind them.