

Broken glass flew in all directions. The small blond-haired boy watched the sunlight sparkle through the shards of the bottle that had just exploded against his scarred wooden baseball bat. A slight breeze bent the patches of grass around him and carried away the dust that his tattered red Converse sneakers had kicked up.

He reached down into the 50-gallon oil drum turned trash can and produced another amber brown, red labeled Budweiser bottle. He lifted the empty vessel to his eye level and peered through it at the rolling hills of slowly dying grass.

The brown of the near autumn grass turned a lighter shade through the amber bottle's lens. The boy tossed the bottle high into the air before shattering it with another smooth, precise swing. The sunlight burst through the shards as they tumbled through the air. A single, jagged piece of the glass flew to strike the boy across his left cheek. He stumbled into the red dirt and gravel that surrounded him as his hand flew to his face. He felt the warm drops of blood beginning to form along the cut, and pulled his hand away for a moment to watch the red liquid run down his hand. The boy pushed himself off of the ground and wiped his bloody hand on his torn blue jeans as he cast about for something to bandage his cut. The grass encircling the oil drum was littered with empty shotgun shells and discarded copies of Auto Trader and Playboy. Grabbing the faded red cover of the closest magazine, he tore out some of the inner pages and pressed them to his still flowing cheek. The boy held the pages tightly to his face to stem the bleeding as he surveyed the scene in front of him. A flash of light caught his eyes as he tossed the now useless paper back into the weeds.

A golden coin with a smiling sun on its face lay in the dirt where the faded red Auto Trader had previously resided. The boy reached down to the ground and lifted the coin from the shadow of the garbage can into the light. As the sunlight hit

the coin, the smile on the sun's face widened and warmth spread from his hand, up his arm, and filled his entire body with a glowing sense of peace and contentment.

"I am always with you."

The words resonated in the small boy's head as he held the coin at arm's length. He felt no shock when he heard the words, only stillness in his mind and heart. The sun's smile returned to its former scale and the heavy warmth that had filled the boy's body faded to a soft tingling. He became aware of the sound of a vehicle approaching. The boy turned to see his father's faded blue pickup truck speeding toward him. He coughed at the cloud of dust that enveloped him as the truck screeched to a halt. His father, tall and dark haired, his face streaked with dust and grease and clothes dirty from farm work and smelling of sweat and diesel fuel, leapt from the vehicle and yelled for the boy.

"Get in!" he half sobbed, his face red and eyes swollen with tears.

"There's been an accident, your mother . . ." his voice trailed off, choking back the sobs he didn't want his son to hear. The boy looked at the coin he still held in his hand and placed it deep in his pocket before running and jumping into the cab of the truck before his father, who climbed in and mashed the throttle, blotted out the sun with a cloud of dust from the spinning tires.

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The wind howled bitterly through the bare branches as it carried the lily white snow to the earth. The footfalls of the small girl were barely audible above the gale as her yellow snow boots crunched into the quickly piling powder. She imagined her footsteps painting a giant river behind her as she weaved in between the trunks of the cottonwood trees so tall they seemed to her to be touching heaven. Snow melted on her rosy face as the flakes struck her cheeks and trailed

down her chin into her bright red scarf. As she traveled further along her path, she noticed a small form fluttering in the snow near the base of one of the naked cottonwood trees. She approached it and kneeled on the ground. A small sparrow with a broken wing lay struggling before her. The little girl cupped her mittened hands together and scooped up the frail creature.

“Don’t be afraid, little thing!” she intoned to the sparrow.

But the little bird was afraid. It still trembled, and with a desperate burst of strength it flapped its broken wing and lifted itself from the girl’s hand into the wind. The currents of air carried its tiny body away and tossed it against the rough bark of one of the cottonwoods. The girl watched the sparrow fall limp and disappear into the snow at the base of the trunk. She sat down hard on the freezing ground, a tear running down each cheek as it mixed with melting snow. She sniffed hard and drew the back of her tiny fist across her running nose. The girl stayed still as snow began to build up in the folds of her jacket. Her lips began to chap as she remained motionless, seemingly oblivious to the cold wind that whipped her face.

A heavily bundled figure approached her from behind and scooped her into its arms just as she had lifted the sparrow.

“Sweetheart! What are you doing? It’s too cold out here for anything as little as you!” her mother cooed to her as she hefted the little girl on her hip.

The girl said nothing in return, only tightly hugged her mother’s neck and buried her face in her shoulder as she was carried back along the river of her footsteps toward home.

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The young man watched the thousands of glowing lights reflected in the bay as he rubbed the golden coin in his right hip pocket. Even at three a.m. the city was still bustling. Sirens and horns carried their shrill notes across the early

morning air as the young man retraced his journey in his mind back to the present. Some ten feet away from him stood a young woman wearing a red dress and yellow sandals. A beautifully flowing brown sparrow with a crippled wing was tattooed upon her neck, and a small diamond in her lower lip sparkled as she turned her head toward the young man. She watched the streetlight above his head reflect off the shiny scar on his face as she wondered how he had acquired the mark. The pier on which they both stood was bare save the two of them. The young man felt the pull of the woman's gaze and turned to face her. He stared back at her green eyes, and began to walk slowly towards her, his thumb still tracing the lines of the sun in his pocket. As he walked in her direction, the young woman felt none of the fear that usually accompanied an approaching stranger. The world in her eyes had taught that even familiar things weren't to be trusted, but this scarred stranger stirred no trepidation in her. The young man stopped before her, took the young woman's hand, and without a word placed the coin from his pocket into her palm. He closed her fingers around the sun in her hand and lightly touched her shoulder before returning to the skyscrapers he had come from. The young woman who had lived out her life to that point in uncertainty and fear traced the lines of the face on the coin as it glinted from the glare of the streetlight above.

“I am always with you.”

The coin smiled.

