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## A Fostoria Tale

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## A Fostoria Tale

Marta Gardner doesn't know what she is doing with a five-year-old seated next to her, or rather, half-standing, waving to the driver of the car behind them. Christina's presence would seem perfectly logical to anyone who knows that Christina is her niece, her sister Mary's daughter. Heaven forbid if anyone thought she was Marta's daughter. Not that Marta cares that Christina is waving to the man or that she sung "Jesus loves me" at the top of her lungs the whole way to Fostoria until they were stalled in this line of cars. Marta just doesn't know what she, someone who isn't good with children, has never been good with children like her sister (Mary smiles and she has the kids begging her for hugs), is doing here with Christina.

Marta doesn't know what she is doing here in Fostoria, Ohio, period. It was a crazy idea of Mary's, to ask Marta to take Christina to see the Image, since she had suddenly decided to accompany her husband Sam on his business trip. Mary must know that Marta certainly isn't buying any of this Image stuff that's making headlines in the local papers. She agrees most with the Fostoria cop who, after spending an entire day directing traffic to the side road where Stryor Storage is located, was interviewed on Channel 8 saying, "It's nothing more than a light shining on the side of a rusted silo that some religious freak convinced another religious freak who convinced all these people is an image of Christ with His hand on a child's head." She can still see him wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand as he said it. Mary had already been to see it, but she hadn't taken Christina.

"When are we gonna get to see Jesus?" Marta has to grab Christina's hand to keep her away from the gearshift.

"I'm the one who's driving here, if you want to get there. We're not going to see Jesus; we're going to see a picture people think is of Jesus."

"Mommy said Jesus is on the silo." Christina looks out the window. "He's out today, isn't He?"

"What do you mean?"

"The sun is shining. You know, Father, Son, and 'Oly Ghost." Christina smiles at Marta, then frowns, creasing her forehead. "Why does the Ghost have holes, Aunt Mart?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the answer to that, Christina." Marta smiles in spite of herself.

"Mommy won't tell you either? She always says I musn't ask anyone that question, especially Father John. I think she wants to be the only one who knows the answer." Christina turns around to wave again. Marta glances in her rear-view mirror. This time the man waves back. "Aren't you going to wave to the nice man behind us?"

Marta takes her foot off the brake, lets the car creep forward. She isn't about to wave to this guy or to give a five-year-old any explanations. She's already given Mary enough. The fact that she decided to come stay with Mary for awhile doesn't have anything to do with a man, or her lack of one. She needed a place to live while she looked for a new job. She had been laid off from her managerial consultant position at the fiberglass plant where she had worked for two years after getting out of college. For some reason, Mary couldn't get the idea into her head that Marta could be happy without a husband, that Marta wasn't hiding some nasty breakup or waiting for the right moment to pour out to her sister her sadness at not having had a date in six months or however long Mary guessed it had been. Sometimes Marta isn't so sure herself that she will be happy if she never marries, but Mary should know having Marta watch *her* marital bliss isn't any way to get over it. Or rather, and she could never ever tell Mary this, it's more a way to get over it than to be convinced she should get married to a Sam who would gladly let her do all the housework and have a Christina to chauffeur.

They were finally on the side road. "We're almost there, Christina." Christina takes this as an invitation to start singing again, this time, "This little light of mine."

Marta finds side roads a lot. She hates getting stuck in traffic like this, but she is trying to consider it as just one more part of the favor she is doing Mary. Marta really does owe Mary something for taking her in, even under the false pretenses that she is to save her from emotional breakdown. Marta has never wanted to be one of those sugar beets heaped high in a dump truck with all the others, even if sugar beets know where they are going, to the refinery. The only other time Marta has ever followed a crowd was the time she had to stop for a funeral procession going across the highway; since it's not every day one sees hearses on major roads, she turned left and followed the procession to the cemetery. But that too, was a side road for her.

Marta pulls the car over to the side of the road like everyone else. Through the dusk she can just read a sign on an aluminum building, "Stryor Storage." There are a few silos near the building

and more farther away. People are getting out of their cars, some standing near them and others walking over the grass toward the building. Christina shouts, "Hide it under a bushel? No!! I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine" one last time.

Marta hears a tapping on her car window. Christina is waving wildly at whoever is doing the tapping. Marta turns to find the man who had been driving the car behind them. He is holding a clipboard and gesturing for Marta to roll down her window. "We're collecting signatures to save Jesus."

"Tell me what you're collecting signatures for again?"

"Are you gonna sign, Aunt Mart, are you gonna sign?"

"I'm sorry, let me introduce myself. I'm Matt Darrow. A group of us are trying to get enough names to save the Image. Stryor put up the light so their men could work at night. They scraped off the old paint and rust, and one of them noticed that there was an Image of Christ and a child—some say a girl, some say a boy—on the side of one of the—"

"I've read the papers."

"Well, then you know Stryor wants to repaint those silos, and if you sign this you can help make sure they don't paint over the Image."

Marta doesn't think she is obligated to sign any such thing simply because she is there. "How many signatures do you need?"

"I don't know. As many as it takes for them to listen. Probably at least 500. We've got 175 so far."

"Well, we haven't even seen it yet, so I'm not sure I want to be number 176. I'm sure Christina's mother, my sister Mary, has signed it."

"Oh, yes, Mary Verland, right? She's a member of my church, St. Anne's Catholic. Are you visiting her?"

"Yes, I'm Marta Gardner. Christina here is very eager to see the Image." Christina has been tugging on Marta's arm.

"I don't know if you noticed, but we've already kind of made each other's acquaintance, right Christina?"

Christina smiles at Matt, wriggling her tongue in the hole left by her missing front tooth. "Are you gonna show us the way?"

Marta and Christina walk with Matt (actually Christina runs a little ahead and then runs back, always waving to them when she turns around) across the field toward the silos. "I don't know how long you've been here, but this has been going on for three weeks already. More people keep finding out about it. It's pretty special. It's like a sign from Him. The first night I saw the Image was on the one-year anniversary of my divorce. He was telling

me that, contrary to my mother's opinion, it's O.K. for me to be a bachelor again. A woman I know saw the image and decided which of two men she wants to marry. A neighbor of mine, an 80-year-old man, insists that he hasn't had an arthritis attack since he saw the Image. How is He going to help you?"

Marta is comfortable watching Matt move his hands in circles, throwing one hand out in an angular gesture as he uses the other to brush back his dark hair, wondering why he needs Jesus to tell him he can be a bachelor when any other man or any woman besides his mother would see nothing wrong with a man in that state. In fact, the longer he stayed a bachelor, the more interest in him they would be. Marta stops thinking about men and bachelorhood when he asks her about help. She doesn't want to tell him she's an atheist. She's not, really, but that's what he would think. Mary thinks the same thing. "Self-designed," she calls Marta's religion. Except when she's in church, which isn't that regularly, and except for occasional pleas when she's in trouble, she doesn't think about God all that much. The idea that He could have some special plan for her involving the Image just doesn't fit into her list of the Ten Commandments. She's never found any evidence of Him giving advice to women like her in spite of the fact that, according to Mary and Matt, He gives advice to married women and divorcees returning to bachelorhood. "I'm not here for help. I'm just here because Mary wanted me to take my niece to see the Image."

"You'll see. A lot of people have come for reasons other than the one He has for them."

Christina catches Marta's hand. "Aunt Mart, are you going to marry Mr. Matt?"

"Hush, Christina. What has Mary been telling you?" Marta smooths Christina's hair. Out of the corner of her eye she can see Matt looking at her, wondering what she means by her words and the blush she can feel in her cheeks in spite of herself.

Just as they get to the first silo, a boy comes toward them with a box strapped to his shoulders. Marta thinks he looks like the guys who hock potato chips at ball games. Christina lets go of her hand and runs forward to look in the box. Then she runs back holding a pillow. "Aunt Mart, can I get this and a sticker?"

The boy is now standing beside them. He has mugs, bumper stickers and small pillows for sale, all saying some variation of "I saw the Image at Fostoria, Ohio." "No, dear, put it back." Marta turns to Matt, shaking her head.

"She seems excited. It's just up ahead, on the second silo." Christina takes Matt's hand.

"They put sugar beets in these silos, don't they?"

"Yes, they do." Matt looks at Marta as if to say, why on earth do you ask.

"I wondered since we saw so many sugar beet trucks on the road."

They round the first silo. Marta can see a light mounted on a pole. All the mosquitos still alive in September must be swarming about that light bulb. The light shines on the side of the second silo, which is on the other side of a small ditch, illuminating an outline of something in rust. An old woman is kneeling on the ground next to Marta, crossing herself. The light puts reddish glints into the old woman's hair. Marta rests her hand on Christina's shoulder, her eyes on the silo.

Marta stares at the outline. At first she thinks it's nothing more than rust on the outside of a silo, but then it starts to take on human form.

"It's not Christ; it's my grandfather," a man a few yards away says. "You can see his beard."

Out of the corner of her eye she sees a news reporter holding a microphone in front of a woman. When he asks her, "What do YOU see when you look at the Image?", she says, "Oh, you can't see Christ on the side of a silo. You can only see him in your heart."

Marta keeps her eyes on the outline. It blurs, and she can see Matt's hands. But the outline of the face seems more like Mary. She can almost hear her words, "I hope you're going to be happy borrowing other people's children for the rest of your life. Oh, that's right, you still don't like kids or baking cakes or candlelight dinners or listening to anyone else for a change!" She can see Mary's anger, her own anger, in the rust of the Image. She wonders if the Image is really nothing more than a picture of everyone who has seen it. When she finally sees the angles of the body and the length of the hair, she sees her own lean form and Mary's long hair merging, strong, female. The face now seems to smile upon a child, the arm now seems to be around that same child, to smile upon Marta, to want to reach toward her, to take something from her or to give her something. Not the Virgin Mary, not with that anger, but still more than a saint, more than human, perhaps . . .

Marta realizes that her hand is resting on air, palm up to the sky. "Christina!"

Christinas is scrambling up the other side of the ditch. She puts her hands against the silo, singing, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus when the sun goes down."



Marta starts down the side of the ditch, but she stumbles. Matt reaches out for her, lifting her back up on their side of the ditch. "I'll get her," he says.

Matt starts picking his way, but Marta follows. "Thanks, but she's my niece. I don't want you to go to any trouble."

They're both at the bottom. "I'll lift her down to you." He walks up the other side without using both hands and feet like Christina. He doesn't seem to hear Marta's protests against his aid, so she climbs up the other side without speaking. Christina is rubbing her hands against the silo, saying, "I'm taking Him down. They look so sad up there" over and over.

Matt says, "No, no, you don't want to take Him down. Let Matt take you back to the other side like a good little girl."

Matt puts his arms around Christina's waist. She punches him in the eye. He puts her down to rub his eye, and she throws herself against Marta, crying, "Aunt Mart, if I can't stay with them or take them with us, I want to be with you. I want you to take me home." Marta bends to lift her, and she digs her knees into Marta's sides, clings to her neck.

"That's one feisty one you have there," the man who said the Image was his grandfather declares.

Christina keeps her eyes on Marta's face while they are going down and up the sides of the ditch and all the way to the car. As Marta looks into her eyes, she can see the reddish glints the light makes in Christina's hair.

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