

## “Things We Leave Behind” by M. D. Taverner – Awarded First Place

*Photo - Bridge*

Strange that it should surface with a flood. A medium-sized box. Turquoise. Torn corners and time-blurred marker hearts once red. It had floated along a basement wall, despite the fact that cardboard sinks, so she'd slogged through the wet mess to save it.

It hadn't been a box she'd recognized, but some small part of her heart felt buoyant. A dream fogged tug of memory had risen up.

She'd waited three days before opening it. Life had already taught her that most things were better left unopened—expectation more fulfilling than a revelation fallen flat.

But this time she was rewarded. A gift she'd thought was lost had been returned. By way of water—a disaster and a discovery all in one.

Inside was a book. *The Giving Tree*. Her favorite book in third grade and even still, twenty-five years later. The box was empty otherwise—she didn't remember placing it in the protective enclosure. The giver of the gift was a boy long gone, like her girlhood and the blushing love-crushed nine-year-old she was when she'd received it.

Errol. Even now the syllables made her feel a nervous calm—if that made sense. He'd moved to her school near Halloween and sat to her right in Mrs. Blair's class. He was polite, which she hadn't run into with boys her age, and he had a gentle smile—the kind that made her feel like she was appreciated by him—tall stature, weird humor and all. By April, he'd made her laugh until her nose ran, stood up for her when a classmate said she was carnival freak tall (which she wasn't, but boys seemed to take her height as a personal challenge to them), and once even picked her a daisy during recess.

It all flooded back as she held the book in her hand. And so did the loss, sudden and crushing, when he'd moved away in mid-May the same year. All he'd left behind was the book in her cubby and she'd taken it straight home, not having the fortitude to even open it.

What she recalled the clearest was having to look at his empty chair the remainder of the year wondering if he'd ever return. All she'd ever heard, even years after, was that his father was a writer and moved the family to another country—to England for some job or opportunity. Despite her wish that one day he'd show up as unexplained as he'd left, he never resurfaced.

She'd opened the book with a crackle of its stiff spine and turned the pages, breathing in the comforting scent of an old library, a wonderful musty perfume. A couple pages had stuck together with mildew. When she'd reached the last page, there'd been a discovery. A message:

Sorry to leave. Hope we find each other again one day.

XX Errol Macy

Her breath had caught in the back of her throat. How sorry she'd been that she hadn't ever looked inside. The kind message went blurry as melancholic tears gathered. But then an idea had come. A resolve.

A quick internet search had turned up an Errol Macy in Southwark. Another connection found an antique book shop in London by the Tower Bridge with a proprietor of the same name. Within three weeks, she'd bought a plane ticket to London, and sent a new copy of *The Giving Tree* to the bookstore with a signed reply message: I'm sorry you left too. If you want to be found, please meet me at the Tower Bridge on May 12th at 9 pm.

Still in shock that she traveled 3,748 miles on a memory and a message from 25 years earlier, she spent the late afternoon walking the drizzly streets and getting stunned by red double-deckers, age-old stone building facades and posh new coffee shops. She wondered if Errol had grown to love this new country, and if it felt as instant as her own affection.

The drizzle stopped and the sun began to set as she reached the Tower Bridge. It stared down at her in Victorian Gothic splendor from 213 feet above. The sign said the Cornish granite and Portland stone suspension bridge was opened for public transportation in 1894—in the time of Kipling and Queen Victoria. Her life felt tiny and inconsequential but it didn't stop the nerves from starting to tingle down her arms to her fingertips.

She stood there at least two hours, watching people come and go, not tiring of the sights and the sounds of the London evening. True, she should probably not be standing in the dark alone but she couldn't seem to get her feet to move. She probably blended in with the other stationary objects in the warm evening—a lamp post, a tree, a stone tower of the bridge standing strong and steadfast come what may.

Somewhere along the way in her reverie, she spotted a shadow in the distance. At closer range it became the silhouette. Tall, narrow, walking confidently in her direction. She swallowed and closed her eyes until the steps were too close not to be headed right for her.

When she opened them, a man stood before her. A stranger with hints of something familiar. She looked down and saw a small square book in his hand. When her eyes traveled to his face she saw the thing she'd missed terribly without being fully conscious of it.

His smile.