

Mary's Story

by P.S. Nim

It was dark, it was raining, there were only two cans of soup left and she was expecting Burton Lemp.

Surely there had been times in her life when her prospects had seemed more discouraging, Mary reflected, but as she drew on the frayed old sweater. She couldn't, right at that moment, remember them. And she didn't really have the energy to try. She would need her energy – and all the sagacity she possessed – to forestall her ruthless landlord one more time, just one more time ...

As she sat at the small bare table, tired and listless, her mind kept turning that phrase over and over: *one more time, just one more time*. She knew she should be preparing her arguments, mustering tenacity and resolve, but already, in her soul, she was falling on her knees and pleading. And that was no good.

A damp chill crept into the sub-sidewalk apartment from the window-wells and Mary hugged against it, her thin shoulders pulling inward. Today a man had called out to her softly from a parked car, his voice curling with its question like a grub just dug up. Remembering, she shuddered against this, too, for she knew what he had wanted. She was still young and, she supposed, well-enough made – even if the corners were getting sharper now from constant worry and scant meals. But she hadn't been propositioned before. There must have been something – something weak or weakening – in her bearing this time as she returned home from one more fruitless job search, and this thought bothered her no end.

Idly, she reached up to tuck some straggling hairs into the French knot she habitually wore. It was not a fashionable hair style, but she couldn't afford to pay for styling or sprays and bottles of ...

Her roaming fingers quickened and then a pang went through her. She had lost another hair pin. Her hair was so fine that ordinary metal pins snagged and tore, she needed rounded tortoise-shell pins that were considered "quaint" and were very very hard to find. This set had lasted her for over twelve years ... but she had only a few left, and now one more was gone.

Totally against her will, tears rushed into her eyes. She blinked and set her jaw and tried to think about something else – some happy memory or idea or thought she could clasp tenderly against her sadness until it gave way to hope. Oh, yes ...

Jimmy Springer had mentioned a place ...

A sudden commotion from one window-well jarred her out of her thoughts, a thudding sound, then a violent rustling and the rising wail – of a small child's voice!

Astonished, Mary stared at the grimy, night-blackened window. Even in daylight it was mostly opaque, but after twilight there was never anything to be seen. The wells hadn't been cleaned of dead leaves and debris in years, and because they were in an alley, no one had ever bothered to cover them over with grids. She had rescued a dog from this one once.

The wailing continued, high and with a squeaky note of terror, and a tiny hand suddenly appeared against the glass, striking away the dirt as it flailed about. Mary leaped to her feet.

But then, as she hurried to the latch-and-lock-studded door, she hesitated. The child's parent or other grown-up companion had only to reach down and lift him out. By the time she, herself, reached the scene, rescue would be all over ...

It was very dark in the alley. Sallow light, needled by falling rain, came wanly through from the street, and it was hardly enough to see by. But Mary could tell that there was nobody in the alley except herself and the tiny being trapped in the window-well. Some small child had been wandering around this place alone ...!

This realization made her furious, but she put the emotion aside. Squatting, she reached down toward the rustling and the cries. Her hands found small grasping ones – went under the little armpits clad in something that felt like leather. She lifted the sobbing child from the small concrete pit and set him carefully on his feet.

The child – she was sure it was a boy – stood there clinging to the folds of her dress and sobbing. It was too dark to see what he looked like or how he was dressed, but he certainly was small. Automatically, she murmured comforting sounds and gently slipped around his head. The soggy hair was quite long – a girl after all?

“There, there now. What’s your name?” she queried, fondling the wet head.

This would get them started. More important questions could come later.

“Vinthent,” came the reply, squeaky with tiredness and fear. A boy then. To her surprise she was grabbed around the thighs in a frantic hug. The rain was slowly soaking her, but she didn’t care. She took the time to press him reassuringly, to let him know that he was clinging to a friend.

She was good at this. Small children were her greatest love.

“Are you lost?”

He answered: “Yeth. I’m loht. I – I don’t know what to do.”

She took his wet, cold little hand and was vaguely aware that it had some kind of hair on it. He hiccupped and she leaned over him.

Well, my name is Mary and I’d like to help you. Would you like me to help you, Vincent?”

“Yeth. Yeth, pleath.”

It was the deepest lisp she had ever heard. Surely, he couldn’t be more than five or ... *thixth* years old. Smiling, she clasped his strangely fuzzy hand and led him to the mouth of the alley. There she asked gentle questions. Did he know his address? Which way had he come? Had he been with his parents – a friend? Had he been going someplace when he got lost? But the little boy seemed confused by her questions. Mary knew a great deal about small children.

“Did a dog frighten you, Vincent?”

This got a reaction. The wet tousled head bobbed and Vincent said: “It wath a dog. I wath following him. I never ...”, he peered up at her and in the wan light she glimpsed vivid blue eyes through a shaggy fringe of hair. “I never *thaw* a dog before.” The rain made him duck his head again. The poor little thing was absolutely soaked.

“What’s your last name, Vincent?”

“I – I don’t know.” His grip tightened and he shuddered out a few more hiccuppy sobs.

Mary picked him up. He wrapped his legs around her waist.

A few cars went by, their tires whisper-sucking through the wet.

In the murky light Mary could see that there was something odd about this little boy’s face – something wrong.

But he was tiny and frightened and alone. These things were all that mattered.

He laid his head on her shoulder and she carried him back to her apartment. Mary tilted her cheek against his wet hair and carried him down the stone steps and into her spartan kitchen/sleeping room. When she sat him down he stared fixedly at the floor for a moment – almost as if he’d never seen a floor before, either. Then he glanced up and their eyes met.

Mary was very good with children. She had always known it, had always cherished this special gift, and had always nourished it in practice whenever she could get the opportunity. And Mary believed that the most important aspect of being good with children was knowing how not to hurt, not in hastily muttered, ill-considered words or in even the smallest unthinking gesture or look.

And so Mary did not react to what she saw – except with her usual gentle smile.

Before her, dripping on the rough planed floor, was the oddest-looking child she could have possibly imagined. His face, strangely deformed, was almost cat-like in its shape and features. His upper lip was divided and the cleft met a flattened, fuzzy nose. His eyes were small and deep-set but brilliant blue and his blond hair stood out in stocky tufts all over his head. He blinked at her with a wide trusting gaze – and there was blood on his chin.

Mary gasped, “Oh, you’ve hurt yourself.” She half-expected more tears at this point, but he seemed to be finished crying. While she reached her rudimentary first-aid supplies he stared around in apparent awe.

“Your wallth are very flat!” he proclaimed in a hugely impressed tone of voice. Children said such funny things ...

He was brave and only snuffled a little as she cleaned the cut on his chin. The softly fringed eyes regarded her steadily, in friendly fashion. Children were so trusting. That is, loved children were trusting. Always expecting the best of you. And for the first time that day Mary felt a deep contentment, knowing that she was so good at not disappointing the little ones. Vincent had certainly fallen into the right window well.

She drew him close and explored his strange wet clothing. His vest – it might even be called a tunic – was indeed made of well-worked leather and stitched with large clumsy – or even just decorative -- stitches, and under it were a couple of layers of patched and mended shirts. On close inspection they appeared to have been cut down from a larger size. His pants were also home-made, very worn and bound snugly below the knee with leather thongs. He wore soft suede boots with the tops turned down. Everything was wet.

She would dry him and put something warm into the little tummy – and tomorrow would be soon enough for finding out how to get him home. She explained this to him briefly and then she took him over to her bed and began to undress him. She hung his outer garment, the tunic, on a wire hanger over the iron radiator, and then fetched three almost threadbare bath towels. He submitted without protest, as she wrapped and rubbed his head and his small fingers helpfully unfastened buttons.

What a sweet child; something about him told her that he was accustomed to being tenderly cared for. But he was a skinny little thing, and his nail were so long –

They were claws.

Mary’s heart gave a violent squeeze, the way it did whenever she unexpectedly came upon something that was terribly upsetting. But once again, valiantly, she caught herself before her uneasiness could become apparent to the child. Vincent yawned and hunkered down on the floor to get his boots and pants off. But that floor was so cold ... She picked him up and plunked him onto the bed.

For some reason, she did not experience the same degree of shock when she discovered that his skinny body was covered with damp, delicate fur. Perhaps her rational, realistic self had gone numb with all this, or perhaps she was merely getting used to him, but she didn’t question it. Instead she rubbed and kneaded the little body with one towel, then wrapped it in the remaining two and pinned them so that he was, for the moment, somewhat snugly clad. Vincent must have understood that he looked funny all bundled up this way, for he giggled, displaying tiny white fangs among his milk teeth. Mary ignored this latest revelation, too.

There was a heavy knocking on the door. Vincent stared toward it with wonder and looked up at her questioningly.

Mary said: “Sh-h-h. Not a sound. You stay here and be very quiet. Stay right here. And I’ll be right back. All right?”

He nodded.

She heard the muted sound of Burton Lemp’s peculiar hacking cough. She hurried to the door, opened it and slipped through without opening it wide enough to reveal her guest.

Her landlord moved aside in the narrow, rank-smelling passageway. He had just ground out a cigarette at her threshold but the acrid odor was less offensive than the insolent glance of Burton Lemp.

His eyes, like greasy black marbles, made one indifferent pass before he uttered flatly, “You’re out of here first thing in the morning.”

Mary raised her chin. Her voice was surprisingly firm. “I have a job. But it doesn’t start for another week.”

He gave a horrid kind of gurgling chuckle and for a moment she thought he was going to spit. Last time she had imagined to herself that she would slap his face if he did that in front of her again. But that wouldn’t help her bargaining position any.

“Now ain’t that somethin’. I got a job that starts in about another week, too – you know what that job is, lady?”

She forced herself to maintain eye contact but she knew she had lost. “That’s the job of moving somebody in here who can pay rent.” To punctuate the statement he spat into the corner and then turned away and trudged heavily up the stairs. From the landing he called down. “Tomorrow morning. First thing. Or I get the cops.”

Mary backed into her apartment, closed the door and locked it. Vincent was still sitting on the bed, furry feet protruding over the edge. Mary wondered for a moment if she was dreaming. But no, dreams never have her quite such a sense of purpose.

“Tomorrow morning you can help me pack,” she said cheerfully to him as she rummaged in the cabinet over the gas range. There were two cans of chicken noodle soup left. She opened one.

“Are you going away?” Vincent questioned in his soft treble.

“I have to.” Mary replied. “But I’ll help you to get back home again first. That will be a lot easier in the morning when it’s light again.”

“Doth the light come back?”

Mary blinked. She got out the smaller of her two saucepans.

Vinent wriggled off the bed and trotted over. “Put a lot of water in.” he directed solemnly.

Mary frowned. Was someone diluting his soup too much? Attempting to make it stretch? No wonder he was so scrawny.

The floor was cold. Mary scooped him up and deposited him on a chair at the table. She found a box for him to sit on and she served him a child-size portion of soup in her one soup bowl. While finishing the rest of the soup directly from the saucepan, she watched him with interest and enjoyment. He ate slowly, managing the noodles very carefully with the spoon, still glancing around the shabby room with apparent fascination. She noticed that he moved the spoon to one side of his unique mouth. He wasn’t ugly, despite his disfigurements. and she felt almost savagely protective of him. She decided that they would leave very early in the morning, before there would be many people on the street to stare and make disparaging remarks.

The little boy finished his soup and slid off the chair. He came around the table and leaned against her thigh and Mary sensed again that was a child who was accustomed to loving attention and care. In her experience she hadn’t encountered many children who had known only kindness

in their lives. Those who had were always trusting, like Vincent. In a pinch any adult would do ... Oh, how *could* anybody be so careless with him?

She chivied him gently into the bathroom and from there back to her bed where she nested him cozily in the blankets. In the morning, she would roll up her meager belongings inside those blankets, and she found herself wishing she could tote this beautiful child to some final destination along with everything else. *Beautiful child*. She had actually thought of him as beautiful ...

Mary sat beside him, smiling as he gazed at her sleepily. His hair, now dry, was a tuffy soft halo. His rounded forehead held little puckers of whimsical expression above fuzzy, golden eyebrows and his eyes contained deep satisfaction. It was the look of a very young child whose needs have all been met, and it was a look that Mary treasured. One claw-tipped hand lay, like a little starfish, on top of the covers. Mary kissed it and tucked it in. As she leaned over to do this, one of her hairpins fell out.

Vincent glanced at it with interest as she retrieved it and she said: "Oops. There I go again. I keep losing those.:"

The puckers in his forehead deepened. "Loothing them?" he repeated.

She nodded. "I've been careless, Vincent. I've lost so many of my hairpins that I hardly have enough left to keep my hair up. If I lose just one more I'm really going to be in trouble. Pins like these are very hard to find."

Vincent's eyes widened with a look of concern. Some very important thought worked its way fully across his delicate features, before matching itself up to words in his sleepy brain, and Mary watched this procession with delight.

"We have pinth like that where I live."

This was totally unexpected. In fact Mary wondered if she'd heard him right. She pulled out the hairpin again and showed it to him.

"Like this? You mean just like this, Vincent?"

He nodded. "Uh-huh. Thara hath them and tho doth Amy and Flo. You have hair jutht like them." He stirred, and then inquired, "Do you know any thtorieth?"

Hair just like them ... Oh, but this was wonderful.

Somewhere there were women who wore their in "buns" and used "quaint" hairpins. It was a comforting thought.

"Yes, I know some stories." She murmured out the tale of the *Gingerbread Man* and *The Three Bears*, but Vincent was charmingly asleep before *Goldilocks* had managed to work through Little Bear's helping of oatmeal.

Mary stretched out beside his tiny form and slept.

And her dreams were filled with a sense of purpose.

END