

Swamp Town

Far From Anywhere. Close to Somewhere. Next to
Tomorrow.

Written and edited by: Brian Kortmeyer
Edited by: Rhonda Blasongame
6th Edition for Editing Purposes. Family Fiction
for All Ages.

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Thank You to: My King Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
My Family, My Friend Rhonda and to all the
dreamers out there. I love you all. - Brian

I dedicate this Story to my nephew Mason and my
niece Pheonix.

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John 3:16 from the **Bible**

For God So Loved the World, that he gave his only
begotten Son, that whosoever Believe in Him shall not
Perish but have Everlasting Life.

Chapter 1: Sunrise on Saturday

Night is just about over and morning time is arriving quickly. The sky is a beautiful dark blue. A soft gray moon sits quietly in the morning light. The air is chilly with a damp bite to it. There are no echoes in the wind as it is well asleep. On the outskirts of town is the outside world.

A curving train track loops around like a race track into this closed edge of a swamp forest. A mile of it to be exact. This track will welcome Elmie and her two children: Toriah and Telbert, like the center of a labyrinth or maze they spent many hours getting to.

A train is arriving at great speed and will deliver these three people to their new lives. Little do they know the wonders and surprises that await them. The walls of the train car are made of oily light brown wood. An open door to the train car allows the cold air to swirl around Elmie and her children. They are huddled in the far corner. They lay in darkness as the moon light keeps them safe. Elmie is half awake as she guards her sleeping children.

The three stowaways have only one big blue blanket to cover themselves for warmth. Elmie holds the children tight in her arms. The last few years have been rough and she just escaped an unmentionable end. She wants to start a new life. The train swiftly moves along the short loop.

The train begins to turn and arches around the corner. Along comes Rito, a thirty-year-old man running alongside the train. Rito is a part of the official Swamp Town lookout team. He is one of three scout captains in charge of watching the border of the outskirts. Time is everything in Swamp Town. It is impossible to enter or leave Swamp Town without a scout escorting you all the way.

It is dangerous and you can get lost! So, be careful. A perfect schedule means a perfect arrival, if you keep your watch correctly wound and your shoe laces tight.

Faster and faster Rito runs along the train cars. The first has a closed door. He speeds up to the second train car. Another closed door. Finally, he speeds up and then sees the third train car has a door opened wide. "Hello? Is anyone inside this car?" Rito asks quickly as his breath beats heavy. He looks with expectation inside the train car for a sign of anyone. Elmie responds, "Yes! Who are you Sir? Where did you come from?", as she is surprised by this person coming out of nowhere.

Rito, out of breath while running alongside of the train car screams out, "Mam, my name is Rito. I'm from Swamp Town and heard that you were coming with your two children." Elmie exclaims, "What?" Are you trying to trick us or something?" Panting as he keeps up with the train, Rito blurts out "No Mam. We are expecting you and your family. Coming up around the corner is a big pile of hay. If you want to get off here, you need to jump off with your children into the hay pile. Do you understand Mam?"

The Children awaken suddenly to all the shouting between their mother and the man running along the side of the train car. Toriah and Telbert rustle out of the blanket and stretch while staring at the man with amazement. "Mom, who is that Man?", asks Toriah.

Telbert is too tired to speak, but you can read his face trying to figure out what is going on. Just ahead by a few hundred feet a pile of hay approaches. "At least get off of the train to have a break and some food maybe?", Rito says.

Elmie thinks to herself, "Am I dreaming this right now? This man wants me to jump off this train with my Children?" Elmie, Telbert, and Toriah are very hungry. They have not eaten in two days and are starving. Elmie stands up and crazily folds her blanket into her round stow bag. "Mr. Rito, if you are offering food for my children, I will take your offer!", Elmie says.

"How do we get off this train? You need to tell us what to do!", exclaims Elmie. Just about out of breath Rito hollers, "Mam, you need to jump at the count of one into the pile of hay arriving ahead. It won't hurt you and you will be alright.

I will start counting down at ten. Are you ready?" Elmie screams, "Yes. Now Toriah, hold on tight to your brother. Do not let go of him! Telbert, here you stay in the center and hold onto my hand." Rito starts the countdown, "Ten...nine...eight...seven...six".

Elmie holds on to her Children tight, "On the count of one we are going to jump onto the hay. Jump high now, okay? Five...four...three...two...one!" Rito yells at the top of his lungs, "Jump High! Go! Poof. Elmie, Telbert, and Toriah land safely into the extra thick but soft pile of hay. It is sticky with morning dew and very wet. "Mommy, we did it!", screams Toriah happily. Rito catches up to the pile just as they slowly pick themselves up. Rito catches his breath, "Holy Cow. That was a great landing. The sun will rise very soon. We need to get moving."

Elmie brushes the leftovers of hay off her belongings and the children. Elmie says, "Mr., where is this Swamp Town that you are talking about?" Rito responds, "Mam, it's this way if you would follow me?" An orange glow seeps into the landscape like honey draining down a wall. This night was the last of its kind for Elmie and her children. The sun indeed was the usher and Elmie the audience.

A long path of soft dirt leads them to Swamp Town. Time travels by fast and the children are tired. The Sun is above the Horizon and a sweet yellow glow covers the land and morning sky. The Sun has risen and the day is new.

The path is ending now and a very curious town approaches on the swamps edge. "Is this the fabled Swamp Town?", Elmie asks. As Rito approached the downtown area of Swamp Town, he turns around and continues to walk slowly backwards with a smile on his face.

He sings a song with a sweet low voice and rhyme,
 "Mmmshuummm, You Always make smile a lot, Mmmehumm, you always make me think so much, Mmmehuummm, Welcome to our Town...oh yeahheeyahh, Mmmehuummm, Our Town beyond the outside world, Mmmehuummm, No one knows where we are, Mmmehuummm, we plan to keep it that way...Welcome to Swamp Town...Here we are! Mmmehuummm."

Toriah says with little energy she has left, "Mommy, I'm really hungry. My stomach hurts." Rito kneels down to her, "See the building ahead of you to the right? That is Zuna's Cafe and Grocery. Let's fix this problem right now, what do you say? I am hungry too!"

Chapter 2: Welcome to Swamp Town

The four arrive in the downtown section of Swamp Town. In front of them is the center square. It is made of light orange and brown dirt. The ground is not mushy like most swamp lands. It is extremely powdery and a major reason the town was founded here. The road intersection in which they stand goes three directions, south, west, and east.

If you walk to the north, you will return to the train tracks where we started. The sun rises above the

beautiful blue swamp trees. "Let me introduce you to the downtown area.", Rito says. "To the northwest stands the town grocery and our only Cafe, run by the happy but the ever so lively Ms. Zuna May."

Rito speaks strongly, "Buena's Dias Ustedes! !Despierte a mis muchachos y muchachas, ahora por favor!" Elmie replies, "What are you saying Rito?" "Ms. Elmie, I'm telling them good morning and to hurry up. I'm kind of like the town rooster."

He continues, "The last time I checked we had one around here somewhere, but it stopped making rooster sounds over a month ago. I don't know where he is? We get all kinds of visitors here that's for sure!", smiles Rito.

"If you look to the northwest over there, you will see Mr. Ted Guntherman's Steel Workshop. If there is a machine or iron work to be made, Ted can do it. Over to the southwest you will notice the town Carpenter Shop run by Mr. Roy Tumal. His specialties are pine wood cabinets and cedar beds. If your kitchen stinks, those cabinets will make it smell just fine. If your bedrooms stinks, well, you get the picture." Rito laughs along with Elmie, Toriah, and Telbert.

Rito continues his introduction, "Over to the southeast you will see the town Martial station run by Mr. Arturo Quartiro. He was a prior Marine who came here five years ago and on his first night was christened the town protector by Mayor Mariña Tequalu."

He continues, "If you are scared of Martials, don't be. He comes from the new school breed of Martials. Kind, forward thinking, and honest. A bit stubborn, but aren't we all just a bit? A person should be that way in his line of work!"

A small red door on Ms. Zuna May's front porch opens with a creek. Yellow sunflowers and red roses sit inside tall flower pots in a row next to the door. A sign above the doors reads, "Ms. Zuna's Cafe and Grocery". There in the doorway stands a woman stretching her hands and arms out sideways. She yawns loudly, "Good Morning Rito. Oh my gosh. Never a day late or early, so they made it indeed. We heard you were coming Elmie."

Elmie tired from the trip thinks she hears her name, but is not sure. Toriah smiles with excitement. "Hello Ms. Zuna May, it is nice to meet you.", Elmie says. Elmie walks her two children up to the porch steps to meet Zuna and says, "These are my two children and I love them very much. Toriah and Telbert."

Zuna replies, "Hello young ones. You are so cute. How old are you, Toriah?" "I'm nine and little brother is five.", says Toriah. Zuna smiles and yawns, "I bet you are all hungry. Right? Come in please, and you too Rito."

They enter into Zuna's Cafe and Grocery. Inside the room are smooth amber brown wooden walls. Two rustic silver lanterns hang by wire from the ceiling top. The light warms the small room. A short counter sits in back of the store while three medium tables sit in unison at the front of the store.

Zuna says, "Alright people. What would you like for breakfast Elmie? It's on me today and every day. Ha! We are cashless and credit less here."

"We find it easier to keep track of things that way. And your order is?", giggles Zuna. Elmie replies, "Well. Thank you for the offer. How about we order three egg sandwiches, a fruit bowl, and three glasses of water?" "Do you like ham, eggs well done, and

American Cheese on a Croissant?", Zuna asks them. Toriah and Telbert hum with a pleasing "Mmmmmm!".

Elmie says, "That would be great. Sounds perfect." "Please sit down at the table here and your order will be right up.", Zuna says as she walks past the counter to her kitchen. Two windows stand between the front porch. Elmie, Rito, and the kids sit at the table. Covering the windows are thin dark forest green curtains.

The tables are set with a spoon, fork, and knife. A small box on the table holds paper napkins. Sitting down at the table, the four allow their tired feet to rest. An old dusty clock on the wall gives a time of six eleven A.M. Elmie asked Rito, "How long were we walking after the train left us?"

"I would say about an hour. That's the usual trip time. Alone, no one is able to go in or out of Swamp Town. You will get lost and we cannot help you then. Anytime you want a transport out or to go back in, just ask us ok?", Rito says. "I understand you Mister.", Toriah says to Rito. "Good! Let me bring Ted over her to meet you all before you take a rest.", says Rito with a hurry in his voice.

Rito leaves the Cafe and walks across the dirt path to the neighboring building, the Iron Workshop. He knocks on the door of Ted Guntherman, which is painted a dark blue. The building is brownish red. In this small building Ted makes gates, house hold appliances, fences, and other metal parts. Anything you need in Swamp Town, he can make it. Knock, Knock, Knock. The door opens and there stands Ted in his brown work jeans and corn yellow shirt.

Ted answers with a rusty morning voice, "Howdy Rito, how are you today?" Rito replies, "Good Morning Ted. Zuna has someone new who just arrived this morning."

Rito continues, "They pulled in around five in the A.M. Nice day for it, seeing how it's Saturday. We have so much to celebrate today that I need to set up our farm house for the town lunch. Can you help lookout for our new family while I go to work for the day? Come meet her and the two children. They are really nice people."

"Alright Rito. Let me go meet them now.", says Ted with a soft mellow voice. Ted is a single man, with no relations of any kind. With no family of his own, his parents live far from Swamp Town.

He lost communication with them years ago. Ted is a lonely but kind soul. You hear it in his voice. Shy and quiet, he is a man of few words. He and Rito walk over to the Cafe Grocery and enter inside.

Elmie and her children quickly eat their hot meal and fruit bowl. Zuna sits at the table and is quiet. "Good Morning Swamp Town Shoppers!", Zuna says as Ted and Rito enter the door. Everyone at the table giggles. "Hello all. My name is Ted Guntherman." Ted says to Elmie and the young ones.

The family replies, "Good Morning Mr. Guntherman." Elmie with a curious tone asks what he does in town. "I'm an Iron Worker. If we have a Deal, I have the Steel Mam!", Ted says with a cloaked confidence.

Ted continues, "I have lived here for six years. So far it has been a wonderful change. People are good to each other here. It is not heaven by any means. But we strive to understand each other each day. With such a meaning, we find progress."

"Where did you and your family come from Ms. Elmie?", Ted asks. "I do not want to remember Mr. Guntherman. It is for my children that I left, because it was dangerous in the outer world. All love in the cities has vanished. We needed a new place to breathe the air,

fresh. We need help if you have room in your town. To carry our weight, I will work while the children go to school. You do have a school for my two children I hope?", Elmie says.

"Of course we do. We all work together to make things happen.", says Luna. Elmie, Rito, and the children finish breakfast and their water. "Ted, we will meet you around noon at the barn for the Town festival!", Zuna says. Ted replies with a glimmer of smile, "No problem. I'll see you at noon. Enjoy your stay now. Goodbye."

Ted exits the Cafe. Rito standing outside the doorway says, "I better go too. I have to be in the Barn in ten minutes for dinner setup. (Help: Dinner equals lunch and supper equal dinner in Swamp Town.) "Bye everyone and see you later!", Elmie and the children wave goodbye.

Zuna tells the new town members that it is time to clean up and ready themselves for rest. "Children, come with me. I will show you where your room is for tonight. Elmie, right this way." Zuna takes them through a small skirt covered opening next to the counter and leads them to a small bedroom in the back of the Cafe.

This small room has three nice beds, good enough for all of them to sleep in. Covered with coffee color blankets, these beds feel cozy and warm. Two clear windows stand against the corner of the room. Outside you can see large and wavering trees. Wind pushes their leaves back and forth like a small stream in spring. The other side of the room has a large bathtub and antique sink.

"There are three towels on the bed for you to use for your baths. If you look out the west windows, you will see the outhouse next to the tree. Rest up now and I

will wake you all for dinner time in a few hours.", says Luna. "I really appreciate your kindness and help Mam. This means a lot to me.", Elmie says.

"Elmie, you mean a great deal to us. In fact, today will be the start of your new life. You may not know it girl, but it's true. Just you wait and see. Clean up and sleep. Yesterday is over with!", Zuna says.

"Dream your way to a new day.", as she leaves the room to clean up her serving table. Elmie and the children take a nice hot bath drawn by Zuna. After, a well-deserved sleep in the beds is had by all. In our sleep we dream of tomorrow.

Chapter 3: Town Hall Meeting

It is eleven A.M. and the town is bustling with movement. The end of the work week approaches in exactly one hour. Just to the south of where Elmie and the children are sleeping is the Town Hall. This is where Mayor Mariña Tequalu lives.

She has been the Mayor of Swamp Town for six years. Having no children of her own, she is no lonely woman. Her life calling has taken a different path and a rewarding one to her delight.

The west end of building is the mayor's home. Connected by an old-style swinging saloon door is the Town Hall meeting room. At eleven fifteen this morning the monthly town hall meeting is scheduled. She requires attendance be on time for the simple reason there is so much to be done today.

It is also the monthly celebration day, the first Saturday of the month. Mayor Tequalu is setting up the large room with thirty black sitting stools. Facing toward the room of chairs is a short oak wood table

about two and a half feet tall. Behind it sits the mayor's chair, also a sitting stool.

Today's agenda has been written and she is prepared. Using her ink pen, Mayor Tequalu writes only with black ink. This ink stands the test of time, requiring everlasting attention of its reader and withstands the challenge of the elements.

Thirty little paper cups filled with fresh sweet lemonade sit atop her table. She has two healthy lemon trees in front of the Town Hall that she juices every day. A good lemon tree that delivers is tough to find these days. Wouldn't you agree?

Knock! Knock! The front door sounds. Mayor Tequalu swiftly moves to the front door and opens it. There in the entry way are exactly twenty-eight people. These are the women of the town: Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives, Workers, Protectors, City Officials, and Single Women. All of them are here to discuss the monthly agenda and to speak their concerns, good or bad to each other.

If any fathers, Sons, Brothers, Workers, Protectors, City Officials, or Single Men have any questions or issues with Swamp Town Government: Those issues are to be brought directly to the women first for representation. Mayor Tequalu welcomes all the waiting women inside to take their chairs.

"Good morning, Mayor!", the crowd of women say as they swiftly move into the Hall. "Good morning, everyone. Please come in and take a glass of lemonade if you so choose.", the mayor says. "We have much to discuss today. I have some new issues that revealed themselves yesterday."

Mayor Tequalu continues, "I will begin today's meeting with a most important issue. It has been brought to my

attention from a letter delivered by the Zaltoy Express Mail Service that our friends from the town in the hills have a big problem on their hands. It seems they have been given away by the Outer World and their location has been exposed by an intruder. In addition, the town has turned over to chaos and they need my help badly." The whole room gasps with terror and disbelief.

A woman in the third row, fifth seat from the right side drops her lemonade. "My second sister Kathy May Jones lives there! We have got to do something to help them.", the woman pronounces. The mayor interjects, "Lee Tow Mi, you must not worry. Remember, we live here by strength. Not by panic. There is a solution I have, but you all need to listen to my idea first before you decide. Are you ready? Here is my plan..."

"Mommy. Wake up, wake up! It is time for lunch. Telbert and I are really hungry.", says Toriah as she pushes on her mom's shoulder. She shrugs Elmie for another minute before she awakens from her deep sleep.

Telbert just woke up and is already hopping on the bed across from Elmie. Boing, Boing, Boing, goes the springs underneath the worn-out mattress. Zuna walks into the room as Elmie slowly rises.

"Elmie dear, it is time to get up. Just like the U.S. Army, four hours is all you get on your first day! Ha ha! Oh Yes. Welcome to Swamp Town on a busy day. If you think we are busy when we work, you have no idea how crazy we get when we play!", Zuna says.

She walks over to a purple candle sitting on the ground at the foot of the bathtub and lights it up. "This lavender candle should get you going", Zuna says brightly.

Elmie sits up slowly and stretches. "Toriah and Telbert, how are you feeling? I bet you two are hungry

again. Come over and give me a hug please.", she says. Telbert stops jumping on the bed and goes over to his Mom. Together Toriah and Telbert give their mom a big bear hug. Zuna puts down three pairs of new clean clothes for them on the bed.

"You all can change up and get ready to go with your shoes on. Lunch is in thirty minutes at noon. Come out to the front porch when you are ready Elmie. I will lead you over to the Barn for lunch. On the way we will be stopping by the Mayor's Town Hall for the end of her meeting. You must meet Mayor Tequalu, she is waiting for you. Hurry now, I get upset with myself if I am late!", Zuna says with passion.

Elmie, Toriah, Telbert, and Zuna walk together towards the Town Hall. As they pass the Town Martial Building on the left, Mr. Arturo Quartiro is standing on the front porch steps. "Good morning Zuna. You all must be the new arrivals. Welcome to Swamp Town. I am very proud to meet the future of our town. Please call me Arturo, I am the Protector of Swamp Town.", says Mr. Quartiro.

Elmie replies, "It is nice to meet you, Arturo. Thank You for allowing us to stay here. I don't know how to pay you back for all the kindness." To this Arturo replies, "Oh now. There is no need for anything in return. Just being here is half the fun. The other half is enjoying what you have, you know? We appreciate people here. So, enjoy your day, ok?" Zuna moves the family along to the Town Hall to catch the end of the meeting.

They open the front door and walk into the large meeting room. "I believe this is my best decision yet and will be my last. I hope you understand what I must do.", the mayor says with sadness. She looks up to Zuna, Elmie, and her Children as they approach the

front of the room. Zuna introduces the room to the family and the mayor.

"Everyone, please welcome our newest members of Swamp Town...Elmie, her daughter Toriah, and her son Telbert. I wanted them to catch the last of the meeting today. Is that alright with you Ms. Mayor?" With this Mayor Tequalu responds, "Absolutely, we have about ten minutes until lunch hour."

The mayor walks over to Elmie and shakes each family members hand. "It is an honor Ms. Elmie to have you and your children in our Town. We want to make your visit as peaceful as possible. If you have any questions for me or any one of us, please ask. No question is too rash nor too simple. Please have a seat for a few minutes while we wrap up the meeting.", the mayor says sturdily.

Elmie and Toriah sit in the remaining two chairs in the front right row. Telbert who is bustling with energy hops on his mother's lap and is fascinated with the mayor. A woman in the eighth row raises her hand up high for the mayor. "Yes Ms. Gilbero, please stand up for us all to hear.", says the mayor. A studious woman arises and says, "Ms. Mayor, can you tell me the status of the one-ton Cider order we put in with Hill Town?"

"Yes Mam. The order was stalled due to the stern valley inspection depot. Our contract with General Thompson lifted the stop and they were able to pass. The order was stalled for two days but it should arrive this afternoon. Don't worry. It will all work out just fine and we have what is need for tonight's supper.", says the mayor. "What is our Motto everyone, altogether please?" The meeting replies, "Rather Different, Always Lucky.", as they laugh in bitter truth.

Elmie smiles as she hasn't seen this much positive energy in years. She thinks to herself, "Wow. These

people are seriously different. They seem nice, but is it real? Maybe this place is all that I have dreamed of for my loved ones. Wouldn't that be great to have a place where we are accepted?" The mayor smiles at Elmie and says, "Elmie, we have a few minutes left. Please tell us where you came from?".

Elmie stands up and hands Telbert over to Toriah to hold. She walks over to the table where the two lemonades remain and turn to face the new crowd of seated faces. "Hello everyone. My name is Elmie and I am nervous to be up here. I have never spoken to such a large crowd before, it makes me very nervous.", Elmie says. "We are family here. You don't need to be nervous. So, try to let go and be yourself Elmie.", the mayor lovingly says.

What comes out of Elmie's reply is that of a song:

"Hello my friends. I don't know you too well. All my fears put in a basket, and sent down a stream. The real me comes out and talks to you. Everything yesterday, I never knew. All sadness I became, just faded away. The outer world used to be my friend. The outer world has forgotten where it was made. Out there the people hated each other. My life was in danger. How could I put my kids through that. All that matters is this, would you love me still? No matter how far and high I ran, the Outer World has taken its last stand. Teach me how to love, again...I hope you understand...?"

"This is me." Elmie says as she holds her head high for her children. She doesn't believe or know it yet, but they are really proud of her. Without expecting any response from her reply the meeting hall erupts into a loud applause. All the Women in the room clap their hands with sheer might. The echoes of clapping swirl like a whirlwind inside the large room. Elmie stands in awe of the Swamp town people giving her praise. She gives a smile to her children and try return it

clapping. "Thank You Everyone!", Elmie says as she walks back to her children.

"I have no more questions of Elmie. I know where you come from. All of us know that place too. This is why Swamp Town exists. To challenge how life can be lived. Here we fight for peace, love, and happiness. This is no rose garden, but we keep our grass green and berry patches alive.", the Mayor says.

A gray metal clock on the wall rings a loud bonging sound. A total of twelve chimes count the arrival of lunch time. The Mayor says, "Thank You All. This month's meeting is adjourned. Great job. Let's go to lunch, what do you say?" Tomorrow at last.

Chapter 4: A Green Grass Filled and Rustic Orange Barn

The women leave the town hall in a hurried pace. Mayor Tequalu gives a hug to Elmie, Toriah, and Telbert. Elmie has a few tears in her eyes and wipes them away with her fingers. "That was a happy moment for me to express myself Ms. Mayor. I promise I am not sad by any means.", she says.

The mayor replies, "It is good to let go of those feelings, whatever they mean. If you hold them in, they will eat you alive! Children, are you ready for lunch? I know I am starving and hope you enjoy what we have in store for you all. Let's go! I cannot stand to wait any longer." Elmie and the children exit the town hall with Mayor Tequalu as she secures the building's front door.

Elmie, Toriah, Telbert, and the Mayor Walk together southward around the Town Hall along a very thin trail. It twists and turns as it winds into the swamp forest. Beautiful large umbrella trees with soft light green leaves hang down like a mummy who has just awoken from its tomb. You see, these trees are alive. Some folks in Swamp Town are known to have the ability to actually

talk to the trees and have a normal conversation like you and I would have.

The fairy tales you have read before are correct; Trees can and do talk. If you know how to listen. Toriah hums a little tune to herself as she strolls along the trail. Telbert watches the sunlight as it glitters through the tree tops. A few minutes pass by as a bright clearing in the forest shows itself and the sun covers its grass in all of its glory.

"What a beautiful place this is.", says Elmie. To the west end of the bright green grassy field stands a rather gigantic barn house. The barn sits exactly nine yards tall and has two large open doors. Looking inside the barn, you see twenty tables. The everlasting sunlight beams directly past the barn doors and melts upon the table tops.

People are bustling to and from the barn. Ted, Roy and Arturo have been working this morning to set up the serving table, all the place settings, preparing the food, and last but not least, milling through cranberries and apple juice for the lunch drinks.

Mayor Tequalu and Elmie approach the large entrance to the Barn House. Toriah and Telbert are just behind them staring in awe at all the happenings going on. Outside the barn are three families playing jump rope. Toriah jumps with joy, "Mom, can we go over there and join the jump? It looks like fun!"

Elmie replies, "Only if you promise to take your brother over and show him how it's done. Do you promise to watch out for him? This is a big forest. I don't want you or him getting lost alright? And don't spend too much time, you need to eat dinner in a few minutes."

"I will Mom, I promise." Toriah replies as she takes a hold of Telbert's hand. "Here we go Telbert. Let's go jump rope!", Toriah says as she and her brother run over to the jump rope line. As they approach the families playing jump rope, they ask permission to join.

"Of course you can. Who are you and is that your mom over there with the mayor?", one of the mothers asks the children. "Yes Mam. Our mom's name is Elmie. I am Toriah and this is my little brother, Telbert. He is five and I am nine.", Toriah says proudly.

"It is very nice to meet you both. I am Misses Rethers and these are my children. Todd, Jaimie, and Cindy...say hello.", Miss Rethers says to Toriah and Telbert. The young children close to Telbert's age wave hello in return. Todd Rethers, age seven says to Telbert "Would you like to go first?"

Telbert smiles with excitement of having the first chance before his sister to jump rope. Toriah replies, "Go on in there Telbert. You remember how we learned that a few years ago in break time out on the school yard? Just do it like we remember."

Telbert without hesitation sets himself up next to the rather large yellow string jump rope that lays on the ground. "Ready Telbert? Here we go!" Miss Rethers says. The arms of Miss Telbert and her daughter Cindy begin spinning the jump rope at a nice steady tempo.

Swing one. Swing two. Swing three. Swing four. Telbert screams, "Yeh! Here I go.", as he jumps into the rope stream. "Yeah Telbert. Up and down, you can do it.", responds his sister as she watches her brother jump up and down.

The jump rope song goes like this: "One says high. A two says low. A there to four, now drop it and go. Five

too high. And six down low. Seven get on up. Eight and oh. Nine says maybe you better think about 10." Telbert jumps out of the count of ten to let his sister take part in the jump rope.

"Elmie, let me take you over to Roy to meet him. He is the best Carpenter in the world, hands down." The mayor says. Elmie follows her over to Roy standing by a table. The barn smells sweet with hay piled over the floor. Most of the hay is a finished yellow, with patches of new green hay mixed inside. Roy is pouring all of the freshly squeezed Cranberry Apple Juice into small tin cups with handles.

"Hello Miss Mayor. Good afternoon and happy Saturday to you all. Hello Mam, my name is Roy Tumul.", as Roy extends his handshake out to Elmie. "Nice to meet you, Roy. I hear you are the best carpenter around, is that true?",

Elmie replies. "Well, everyone seems to think so. I think it is because I am the only one in town, what else can they say right? Ha!" Roy jokes with a loud laugh.

"I built this barn and painted it too. What do you think of the paint job? The color is flat rustic orange. It's a good color for all times of the year I think.", he continues saying. Elmie replies with pride, "I love the color. And these bench tables are really lovely."

Roy replies, "Thank You. Thank You. Hey you two. Ted should be here in a second with the main course. Arturo is over there tossing the salad. I am working on the cheese rice broccoli at home and I have to go pick it up. We will be ready in about ten minutes." "Sounds great Roy. Elmie, where do you want to sit?", the mayor asks.

Elmie picks a table nearest to the main course serving pan and they sit down together. Roy exits the barn as Ted arrives with the main course in an extra-large wheel barrow. He wheels it to the main serving table and begins placing each Burrito onto a pan in pyramid formation.

He finishes placing them perfectly as Roy returns with his specialty rice. He sets the large Bowl next to the pan of fresh wrapped Burritos. Arturo says to Ted, "Did you make every one of those from scratch Ted?"

"Of course. It's my favorite way to make a Burrito. The recipe was passed on to me long ago by a wonderful cook, may he rest in peace. No one has created such a masterpiece of food since my friend. I try to my best to recreate it the way it used to taste.", Ted says. "Ted and Roy, I finished the big bowl of salad.

It is all ready to go. The cranberry apple juice is ready for serving. Are we ready to go? Looks like it.", Arturo says. Elmie and the Mayor watch in delight over the alignment of this food serving process. Elmie glances over at Ted with a smidgen of curiosity. She can tell he is a leader today and is doing a pretty good job at it.

Ted says, "Everyone can I have your attention please? We need all families, teenagers, and children to line up for dinner time. Families, please call your children in from the field. We are ready to eat. Members of Swamp Town I present this Saturday's Lunch Menu: Here we go! First for the main course we have fresh refried beans, green olives from Spain, and graded mozzarella cheese wrapped inside a large hot flour tortilla."

From Arturo comes a salad with fresh cut greens, chopped salary and carrots, bits of blue cheese with your choice of Vinegar Oil or Ranch dressing. Next is fresh baked cheese rice with Broccoli made by Roy. We

have cranberry apple juice for your thirst. Dessert is a surprise today; I will share that with you at one o'clock. Enjoy, eat up, and thank you for attending!", Ted says to the citizens. Everyone yells with excitement.

Elmie gets up from her table to call her children in for eating time. She walks over just beyond the barn doors and calls to them, "Toriah and Telbert, it's time to eat, come and get it!" Toriah now having passed a record eight minutes on the jump rope moves off to the side and takes her brother's hand.

The two run together over to Elmie as fast as possible. All three return to their table with mayor Tequalu. Ted is sitting down at the table with a full metal plate of food. Elmie and the children bring to bring their plates to pick up their food from the serving table.

Elmie returns and sits down next to the Mayor and Ted. No seconds are allowed at dinner time. This is and has been a rule for years in Swamp Town. Roy and Arturo sit across from the serving table with hawk eyes making sure no one takes two rounds of food. The kids sit at the table across from their mom.

The mayor stands up and makes an announcement, "Hello everyone. I am glad you all could make it today. This is our first Saturday of the month dinner. Please welcome our newest members of Swamp Town, Ms. Elmie, her daughter Toriah, and her son Telbert. We feel lucky to have them here. This is their new home for some time to come. Thank you. Let's eat!"

"Ted, would you lead us in prayer please?", the mayor asks. Ted bows his head in prayer, "Dear King Jesus Christ, we thank you for this food and for this day. Also, we appreciate you bringing us together on such a pretty day. In your name we pray. Amen."

Toriah and Telbert open their paper wrapped Burritos and begin to eat. Elmie says to Ted, "You all did an excellent job. The food tastes very good. I love it all. The cheese rice is so rich and creamy."

Toriah bites in the burrito and says, "Mmmm. This is so awesome. The best Mom." Telbert eats what he can of the burrito as it is a big meal for him. "That salad is excellent today, Ted. Once again, a home run for the team here.", says the mayor.

Ted asks Elmie, "Did you like the cranberry juice with apple? I think we got it right today." She replies, "Actually I have never had this before Ted. It is really great. Did you add sugar to this at all?" The mayor replies, "Elmie, in Swamp Town we don't allow sugar for cooking purposes. Only honey. We found it to be the safest sweetener to cook with."

Ted then says, "It sounds like we have a few strange rules. They are meant to better our small community of about a hundred." Elmie and the children finish the most they can of their meals.

"You don't have to finish the food if you are full. Stop when your stomach tells you to.", Elmie tells them. The mayor leans over to Ted and says, "She is a natural. What can I say? I have a great feeling about her. Things will be alright."

Time slips away as the day turns to one o'clock. All the families have eaten their meals and are full with delight. What the crowd doesn't know is that the entire meal was planned by Ted. He created the menu especially for Elmie and the children. His hopes were that they would like his food. He was too shy to tell them it truly was a special meal made with heart.

Roy the Carpenter stands up from his bench and addresses the crowd as dinner comes to a close,

"Members of Swamp Town, here is the Dessert Announcement. Are you ready? This is for children and teenagers only. No adults are allowed because they get dessert after supper tonight."

Chapter 5: The Great Berry Patch Race

Toriah and Telbert finish the last of their rice, burrito, and salad on their plates. "Woah Mom! This is it. The great berry patch race. I can't wait.", says Todd Rethers two tables across from Elmie.

Misses Rethers replies, "Let Roy tell us the instructions first." Cindy and Jaimie Rethers are antsy with anticipation. "Moma, did you hear that? It's a race for dessert!", says Toriah to her mother. Telbert bounces back up and down on his bench seat.

Roy says to everyone, "This is for all kids, big and small up to age eighteen. Get ready for directions."

"Outside the barn house to the south edge of the field is the berry patch forest. At the beginning of Summer, we hold this race for you to win the berries of your choice. No one is allowed to touch the berry patch until today. After winter ends the patch blooms fresh with new berries."

"They are ripe now and it is the right time to pick them. I want all the youth to choose a running partner. The two of you will be a team. Together you will push a wheel barrow and carry two small buckets along the way."

Roy continues, "You will begin the race by entering a grass maze we have made that surrounds the berry patch. You must bring a wheel barrow along with you into the berry patch and return it to the starting point. The entrance and exit of the grass maze are the same."

When you reach the center of the maze, park your wheel barrow and fill your bucket with the berries of your choice. Be careful not to overfill your buckets. The first wheel barrow team to exit the maze wins a special prize to add to your buckets. The two of you will share it with one another."

Roy finishes with a question, "Does anyone have a question about the Great Berry Patch Race rules? I warn you not to cheat, for the teams that do so will risk losing the special prize. We will now exit the barn and meet at the south end of the field. Here we go!"

"Mom, can we race for the berries? I don't know what kind they are but it sure sounds fun. Can Telbert and I run the race together please?", Toriah says with anticipation. Elmie looks down to her two children and she nods yes to them. "Yes. I want you both to follow the rules though if you plan to make it all the way to the berry patch."

Toriah, be careful with your brother because it can get rough in there. Bring him back safely alright?" Telbert looks up to his big sister and gives a trusting smile. "Yes Mom. You can count on us to bring back the dessert. May we go now?", Toriah says to her mother. Elmie and the children stand from the bench table and walk out the barn door.

Mayor Tequalu asks Ted and Roy to guard the entrance and exit of the grass maze. Ted replies, "Roy I think this is going to be really fun. I am dying to see who wins this year's berry patch race. Mayor, who is your pick?" Ted, Roy, and the mayor make their exit out of the barn as the mayor replies, "My odds are on Elmie's children. Toriah has a spark in her that wants to win. I can feel it. Telbert has the energy to carry those buckets. Together they make a great team."

Elmie, Toriah, and Telbert arrive at the south edge of the Barn field. In front of them are all the families and children of Swamp Town preparing for the race. Arturo has brought ten-wheel barrows and lined them up in a row in front of the entrance.

Sitting atop each wheel barrow are two coffee cup sized aluminum buckets. The buckets are similar to those tiny ice cream buckets they have at big parties in the outer world.

Arturo announces to the ten teams of two, "Attention to all: Welcome to the yearly Great Berry Patch Race of Swamp Town. You all know the rules and hope you respect them for your benefit. Teams, please line up in front of your wheel barrow now!"

Elmie says to her children, "Toriah and Telbert, I wish you good luck. Be fast and careful alright? "Toriah and Telbert approach the large wheel barrow painted a bright bumble bee yellow.

Arturo looks over to Roy and Ted, and gives a nod that he is now going into the grass maze. Mayor Tequalu says to Arturo, "Be careful in there. Scream if you need rescuing. Ha Ha!". Arturo laughs and disappears into the grass maze. Scattered throughout the maze are swamp trees and eucalyptus trees.

The maze was cut ahead of time in spring with a hand pushed mower. The grass walls are seven feet tall and impossible to see into unless you stick your head through it. This act is not safe considering what little animals or bugs might pop out if you were to do such a thing.

Sunlight pours into the grass maze like a glistening corn field at noon. The afternoon heat is nice and soothing. The teams are set and the Mayor walks up next to Ted at the entrance. She raises her left hand high

and says to the teams of racers, "Youth of Swamp Town, prepare yourselves.

You have thirty seconds until I say Go. Ready? Here is the countdown. Good luck! Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight..." Toriah takes charge and is in full decision-making lock down. She leans down to Telbert and says with excitement, "Okay Telbert. This is how we do it."

"Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three, twenty-two...", the mayor continues. Toriah says to Telbert, "I want you to hold on to both of our buckets. Do not let them go. I will push the wheel barrow for both of us and we will run together to find the berry patch. Are you ready Telbert?" "Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven", counts the mayor.

Telbert replies yes by nodding to his sister. Telbert is a very serious young child. But as he hears the following numbers, "Ten...nine...eight...seven...", coming from Mayor Tequalu, a big grin of competition opens up on his face. Sister like brother indeed.

"Here we go Telbert!", Toriah says as she lifts up the wheel barrow into position off the ground. "Six...five...four...three...two...one...Go!", the mayor screams as her hand swoops down. The children's scream and holler as they push their wheel barrows toward the entrance of the maze.

The parents and families scream loud as they cheer for their nominated teams. With two small buckets grasped tightly by Telbert, he becomes frantic with energy and experiences the rush of competition for the first time. He runs alongside of his big sister as they enter the grass maze.

The brother and sister team are the fourth team into the maze and are moving through a long southern corridor. They are heading due south to a dead-end wall

with big open hallways, one to the west and one to the east. Behind them are Todd and Cindy Rethers with their wheel barrow.

Both teams stand at the dead-end wall and look to one another for a decision. Toriah looks over to the Rethers team and said, "My brother and I are making a left turn. How about you?"

Todd and Cindy Rethers reply, "You won't win because we will beat you." Out of nowhere Telbert screams to the top of his lungs, "Not if I can help it! We are faster and you will lose. Let's go big sister. Run!"

The Rethers turn west with all their might as Toriah and Telbert run east down the hallway. The other children quickly approach as sounds become louder and laughter is heard all over the maze.

Toriah and Telbert run with their wheel barrow and buckets, and reach a dead-end wall with an open hallway to the right. "Keep going Telbert, we are doing great." They make a complete U-turn around the hallway and redirect running west. Sounds of other people screaming across the maze fly through the air.

A dead end with a hallway open to the south approaches, "Left turn!" Toriah says. They make a complete U-turn around the corner wall and continue running east.

Approaching a dead-end wall with a right turn opening, Toriah and Telbert make a sharp right turn and continue running south. As they turn the corner another team appears out of nowhere and they bump into them. Bam! The front tip of the wheel barrow scratches the other and it startles both teams into a panic.

Toriah looks to her right and sees a dead-end turn. She looks ahead to the south and continues down the longest hallway so far. "Let's go! Hurry.", she screams to

Telbert. The other team continues north past Toriah and Telbert.

Faster and faster, they run down the long corridor. Above them to the left is a tall Swamp Tree. This tree is a beautiful willow with long thin stringy branches and leaves. Telbert eyes the tree of beauty but doesn't let it distract him from running. Quickly approaching to the right is an open hallway.

Just that is another open hallway to the right. Toriah stops with the wheelbarrow in her hands. "Telbert, where do we go? I want you to decide. Point to the hallways we should run into!", Toriah asks. Telbert closes his eyes and raises his right arm out to point at his choice.

"There they are. Follow them, I think they know the way!" Cindy Rethers says alongside her brother Todd at the north end of the hallway. "Hurry up!", Todd says in response. Telbert points to the first right turn and together they run towards it. "We have to move fast Telbert, or they will catch up to us.", Toriah exclaims.

At the speed of light, the brother and sister team turn right. They make a right turn north up the grass hallway. Approaching them is a dead end with a left U-Turn turning south. They make a quick left and then south into the u-turn and continue down the hallway.

They approach a dead end with a hallway open to the right as Telbert screams, "Keep going Toriah. Keep going, we can make it!" To the right they turn around the corner and continue west down the hallway.

Sun beams show along the grass floor as they stop at a dead end with a left and right hallway. Around the corner the Todd and Rethers team approaches and stops in front of Toriah and Telbert.

"Turn to the right twice Telbert, now!", Toriah screams as she makes a sharp turn with the wheel barrow. Telbert follows her lead making two rights until they run down the hallway traveling east. "Go! Go! Cindy!", Todd Rethers says he pushes the wheel barrow northward.

"I think we can make it this way.", he says. A dead end approaches Telbert and Toriah with an open hallway to the left. They make the sharp turn left and in front of them to the west is a large clearing surrounded by the inner walls of the maze. "We did it Telbert. We did it together!", Toriah says with a happy face.

Standing in front of them are three berry patches which are each three feet tall. All three patches hold onto each other tightly as though they were sitting there for a family photo. All have dark green leaves and spiny branches that swivel in and out. The first patch on the left is a Blueberry patch.

The blueberries are one inch round, extremely tart, and perfectly sweet. The second patch in the middle is a Raspberry patch. This raspberry is firm, red as a setting sun, sour as pine cones, and sweet like honey. The last patch on the right is of course a Strawberry patch. This strawberry is a bright pink red color with nice strong form, sweet to the taste, and watery like a waterfall should be.

Would you like to know a secret? Not only do these berries share the same last five letter their names, but they also have the same base flavor of tartness that allows them to be eaten together on chorus or along with chocolate and apple if you dare enough to do so. It is very similar to how Cocoa, Coffee, and Carob beans all share the same base flavor.

Toriah puts down her wheel barrow and takes a bucket from Telbert's hands. The two walk over to the berry

patch and begin picking the plump ripe berries. Telbert begins picking the blueberries, which he loves the most. He picks a few strawberries and some raspberries. Toriah says to Telbert, "I think I will pick some raspberries for our mother and a few strawberries for myself."

She picks the plumpest strawberries from the patch and fills her bucket half full. The other half of the bucket she fills with raspberries. "I'm done Toriah.", Telbert says with a smile. Both he and his sister are happier than anyone else on earth.

"Surprise! We made it.", says the Rethers Team of Todd and Cindy. Standing at the entrance of the center maze they inch their way over to the berry patch. "Telbert, put your bucket gently into the wheel barrow. We must leave quickly!", Toriah says in a hurry.

Both of them drop their buckets of berries into the wheel barrow as Toriah lifts up her handles into position. Toriah exclaims, "Off we go Telbert, follow me. Let's go backwards to the way we got here." In a fast motion she and Telbert run to the exit.

At full speed Toriah's wheel barrow flies along the green grass past the corners of the tall walls. "Turn right. Turn right again and go west down the hallway. Turn left and make a U-turn as we move east. Go left as we turn north. Then make a big U-turn south.", Toriah shouts.

"Ooohhh! Wehooo!", Telbert laughs as they make a complete curve around the corner heading south. "At the end of this hallway make a left, then go north.", Toriah says. Making a left turn they run along the big hallway. They turn left and make a big right they U-turn going eastward.

They then turn left and make a U-turn heading west down the hallway. Running west Toriah and Teller find a hallway that goes north and continues west. They make a sharp right and continue down the hall. Toriah shouts, "Keep going, we are almost there Telbert!" At the end of the hallway, they hear the roar of the awaiting parents and youth at the exit.

The exit approaches as they arrive at the Rustic Orange Barn. Elmie, excited beyond belief, jumps up into the air and is very proud of her two children. "You did it! You did it! I could not be prouder of you both, Toriah and Telbert. Amazing job.", Elmie says as she runs over to hug her children.

Toriah puts the wheel barrow down next to Telbert. Out of breath the two children remove their two buckets full of berries from the wheel barrow.

The mayor happy with joy jumps up and down for the winning team. She walks over to Toriah and Telbert and says, "Congratulations to both of you. You should be proud of yourselves, it seems your work paid off." From her pocket she pulls out one extremely large chocolate bar and hands it to them.

This is not your ordinary chocolate bar. To be exact it is sixty four percent Swamp Town cocoa, twenty six percent whole milk, and ten percent sugar cane. The mayor says to them, "Remember, you must share it together." Toriah and Telbert reply, "Yes Mom. We will."

One by one the remaining nine teams appear from the grass maze exit and join the gathered crowd. All the racing teams take their buckets filled with berries and are welcomed to return to the barn for fresh milk and honey. Elmie and her children return to the barn. She sits down on a table bench. Toriah and Telbert go over to the serving table to fill their buckets with fresh

milk and a drop of honey from the honey bucket. With buckets and chocolate in hand the children bring their winnings to Elmie and sit down.

Elmie, Toriah, and Telbert sample the homemade chocolate bar and eat up their berry mixes. "Mom, these berries are so good. You should try them.", Telbert says confidently to his mother. "A berry race will get you to talk my sweetie? Well, that is a good thing to hear you speak."

Toriah responds, "Momma, he was talking all the time in the Maze. You would not believe it!" Elmie delights in the dark chocolate and doesn't say a word to interrupt the moment. I love these strawberries with honey and milk.", says Toriah. Elmie says, "We all can agree, this is the best dessert ever."

"Exactly.", Telbert says. A quiet breeze sifts through the barn from the outside. The air smells like a sweet ocean breeze, soothing the sitting passengers inside. What a pretty day this ended up to be. Dinner time was over. Tummies of the town members were full and not one remained hungry.

Chapter 6: Golden Afternoon

Zuna, Ted, Elmie, and the children walk north from the Rustic Orange Barn to the town square. The time is three o'clock. The end of the afternoon is nearing and the sky is a brown orange color.

Toriah and Telbert are tired from the busy dessert race and need to have an afternoon nap. Toriah and Telbert not only had the best batch of berries on earth, but in addition they shared a chocolate bar together.

The brother and sister yawn without a care, nor wondering if anyone is paying attention. Elmie says to her children, "I think you two need a nap. It will give

you more energy for supper time." They both yawn at the same time and reply, "Mmm ok mom."

Ted walking next to Zuna says, "That was a great afternoon. The food was perfect, the kids had fun. What better of a day could you ask for?" Zuna says to the group, "I agree totally Ted. I am not in line for a nap myself as I had a big sleep last night. My energy level is high today."

She looks over to Elmie as she walks, "Elmie, I can watch the kids and put them in bed for two hours. That should be the perfect amount of time for a power nap. I will wake them at five o'clock and will have them prepared for supper. Don't worry about a thing!"

Ted says to Elmie, "Elmie, would you like to sit on the porch and have a cup of tea while the sun goes down?" "That sounds nice to me.", Elmie replies. Elmie who is relaxed and centered says, "Sure. Why not? That would be lovely of you Ted. All of you are amazing to me. Just very kind."

Zuna hugs on Elmie's shoulder as they walk along. "That is how we go things in Swamp town. I will draw baths before it's time for supper.", Zuna says to Elmie and the children.

The group arrives at Zuna's Cafe and Grocery on the front porch. "Toriah and Telbert, you go with Zuna and take a nap. It will be right here on the porch if you need anything. Just call me.", Elmie says. "Yes Mom.", Toriah says to her mother.

Zuna opens the front door for the children and all three disappear into the Cafe. On the south side of the porch is an old swinging chair made of rose grant wood. The soft brownish red color makes the wood soft and comfortable to sit in.

Elmie sits down on the far side of the chair. She is exhausted and needs a nap herself! "Come sit down Mr. Guntherman, there is room for two people.", she says to Ted. "Sure thing. Let me get our tea first. I will go get it from my porch across the way.", Ted says.

Ted walks over to his porch at the steel workshop and picks up a large round capped container filled with fresh sun tea. He enters his front door. A minute later he emerges from the door carrying two glasses and a large dipping handle.

Ted sets the tea container down on the front porch of the Cafe. He loosens the cap on the tea container and holds one empty glass in his hand. With the other hand he drops the dripping handle into the sun tea and pours Elmie a nice tall glass. He hands her the glass and she nods thank you to Ted. He then pours himself a glass and sits down on the swinging chair.

"It was a very nice day and my kids had so much fun. It is so nice to see them happy.", Elmie says to Ted. "Our lives actually live the expression, From Night to Day." Ted replies, "It seems whoever wants it most will get it I suppose. They sure were fast running in to the maze. That maze has been the same for years but it tricks them the same every year. Mazes are fun."

"Are we allowed to talk about personal issues here or is that too dangerous for us now Elmie?", Ted says. Elmie responds with a grin, "I don't have a problem with it, sure. But since you are asking, you go first." "Ha, ok. Let's see, where do I start?", Ted asks himself. He pauses as he stares at the crimson sun setting slowly to the east.

Elmie sips her tea as she looks over to Ted. His eyes wander over to his workshop across the street. "I'm not sure where to start. I can tell you the reason I am here and what I would like in my future.", Ted says.

"It was only four years ago when I was living in Texas town named Freetonia. I had a girlfriend named Kullo and a dog named Ricky. I lived with Kullo for a long time, but our relationship was too complicated to figure out. We both were unhappy even though we liked each other."

Ted continues, "We rarely had any arguments, but we ended our dating because we had nothing in common. I do not have any children but I do like them. They are fun and always bring something new to the table you know?"

Elmie then says, "Yes, they do. They keep me going every day. Ted, what happened to your dog Ricky." Ted replies, "On the way to Swamp Town I was taking the train. Over the night time as I was sleeping. Ricky disappeared from the train car. I do not know where he went. My stop was coming and Rito was calling me."

"I miss my dog Ricky very much; he was my only family back then.", Ted says with a frown on this face. Elmie puts her left arm on Ted's shoulder and gives him a hug. "Maybe we should find you a new dog?" That can be arranged possibly. What do you think Ted? Elmie asks. "Nothing is impossible right? I like your way of thinking. No impossibility as everything is possible!", Ted responds.

"That's the way I have to see it. Otherwise, my spirit will lose hope. Here is what I have learned Ted. If the world is set on destroying your joy in life, you need to fight against it with everything you have to keep your spirit happy. If you don't have the power to do it yourself, you better ask the one who sent you here. Right? Ask the one who sent you!", she says with a smile to Ted.

"I Hear you Elmie. I will remember that.", Ted says before he pauses again. "Elmie, before our sun

disappears and the children wake up, it is your turn to spill the beans.", Ted says. "Oh, it is all depressing but true. I will try my best and make it brief for you.", Elmie responds. "I was up north six years ago in Tarnick, Minnesota."

"Toriah was just three years old. I was with a man named John Backstyle. We were not married but he was the father of my little Toriah. One night I was home and fell asleep with Toriah on my lap. John returned from a night at the Rodeo in town and he was drunk."

Elmie says, "He started to drink a year after we moved in together. He was never mean to myself or Toriah, so I was not worried about it. That night changed everything for us. It is too painful to say what happened but I can tell you that my daughter and son no longer have a father."

"In the past it was ok if you crossed my line. That night however was different because I would not allow anyone to cross the line of my children. Toriah and Telbert no longer have a father because he was too dangerous to live with. I refused to allow the unthinkable to happen.", Elmie says in a somber voice.

"They are my life and I won't let any person hurt them.", she says. Ted has been focused on her voice the whole time and has not looked away once. "Phew. That was one heck of a story Elmie. What did you think of the train ride? It's crazy isn't it when they try to get you off the train? Really it is very funny. If you miss the hay stack it can be rough on your butt or face, whichever one you land on first!", Ted says.

Elmie laughs and replies, "Really? The children and I made it just fine, thanks to Rito. He is a cool character." Ted says, "Between you and I, the morning I arrived into Swamp Town was Rito's first day on the Scout job. See what I mean? That's life. You have to

learn somewhere I guess." Ted and Elmie smile and chuckle together.

"Bring a pillow and tie it to your body next time!", Elmie says. Ted responds with a grin, "Alright, I will Elmie. Are you considering living here with your family? You might consider it a second start at life. What is that you want from place?" Elmie says, "I do not want to be hurt again. What are you looking for in life Ted?"

Ted replies, "I am looking for a kind, understanding, and loving woman to spend my life with. My personality is fairly shy, but bold when I need to be. I am not a show off. I am a great kisser too!", he states with a smile.

"I love to get hugs and love to give hugs.", Elmie says seriously to Ted. "I speak my mind when I need to." Ted replies, "I am a good listener when I need to be. I did have many girlfriends' years ago. But never found one that is close to personality or similar to me in many ways."

Elmie continues expressing her desires, "The Children need a father who will not give up on them and love for who they are inside." A quiet comes over Elmie and Ted as the sun begins to set. Both take a sip from their tea.

Ted holds his glass up high for a toast to Elmie, "Here is to a New Life and for a Great Night." Elmie raises her glass against Ted's as it makes a cling sound, "Thanks for the Talk Ted. I enjoyed it very much."

"Not a problem Elmie. I enjoyed it too.", Ted says. The sky turns a deep dark red as the sun sets and goes to bed. The beautiful night sky creeps over the land like a vapor of fog moving across the ocean. "I need to get ready for tonight's events."

We are having a special supper and a dance afterwards for the adults. We have another surprise for the children. Will I see you for supper maybe?", Ted asks Elmie.

Ted stands up from the chair and Elmie replies, "I don't think I would miss it for the world Ted. Miss Zuna May will be taking the children and I over to the Supper. We will see you there. Bye now." Elmie stands from the chair and enters the front of the Cafe through the door.

Ted still watching her turns around and walks past his workshop to his backyard. It is dark outside and difficult to see what is here. To the east end of his yard sits a small outhouse. Ted walks to the middle of his yard and reaches down to a small bush of roses.

In full bloom there are ten flowers he can pick from. Ted plucks one of the nicest red roses he sees from the rose bush. He returns to his workshop to take a bath before tonight's festivities. Inside Zuna's Cafe and Grocery the children are finished preparing for the night as Elmie walks into the bedroom.

"Mommy, look at Telbert and I! We are ultra clean and are both wearing clean clothes. Do you like?", Toriah says. Zuna walks into the room and smiles. "My oh my children, you both look amazing and you smell good too."

Elmie responds with happiness, "Zuna, I cannot thank you enough for watching over them and getting them ready. I sure owe you one." Zuna says, "Don't need to pay me for anything. They are a joy to watch over. Plus, they sleep like angels."

Zuna, Toriah, and Telbert are ready for the night. "Child, you need to get ready. Take a bath and here is

a new dress for tonight. We are having our monthly Jamboree supper and you are going to love it. Hurry now, we don't have much time.", Zuna says in a hurry.

"Yes Mam, Ms. Zuna May.", Elmie says as she takes a tub bath. Zuna says, "Elmie, when you are finished cleaning up, try on your new dress and show it to us when you are ready, ok?"

Ted finishes getting ready for tonight. He is dressed in flat black pants, dark green dress shoes, a coffee color button up dress shirt, a brown tie, and has his hair cut to impress. On his bed sits the rose he had picked from the rose bush.

It is a pure bright red rose with a green stem. Ted takes the rose and places it gently into his inner breast pocket inside his dress jacket. He slowly slips his jacket into place and checks for accuracy of his attire.

His outfit for the night looks great as he exists out the front door of the workshop. To the west sky of night, a large moon makes its entrance to the sky stage. Ted makes his way south to the town center square and walks westward along the dirt path.

Elmie, Zuna, and the children leave the Cafe and exit to the front porch. "Here we go y'all to the Swamp Town Jamboree!" Zuna says proudly. They walk south to the town square center and then turn due west into the swamp forest. Zuna says as she walks along, "Elmie, Toriah, and Telbert, if you think today was fun, just wait until tonight. The fun has just begun!"

Chapter 7: Supper Time Jamboree

Elmie, Zuna, Toriah, and Telbert arrive to supper and are speechless by the amazing supper table setup. They have entered an open space underneath a large group of

swamp trees. The green trees tower above the large outdoor celebration like umbrellas.

Ten square tables painted burgundy have been cleaned and sit aligned as two rows in the center of the event. Small tin oil lamps are lit on the tables center. The flames inside the round glass covers dance with the small breeze flowing through the air.

The tables are covered with black and red checker pattern table cloths. The supper service was set up by the band in the late afternoon. The setting includes a tray with a medium wooden bowl, a small sized dinner plate, a silver fork and spoon, and lastly a blue napkin sits folded on the upper right corner of the tray.

On the center of the table is a honey container shaped like a large honey bee. Sadly, no bears exist in Swamp Town so we came up with an alternative way to pour honey onto food.

Swamp Town's own southern blues band is tuning up their five-piece instruments on the dirt stage to the left. The stage is on ground level so that the audience can feel the rhythm as they dance to the music. The band's leader starts off the night as they finish warming up.

"Hello all. My name is Julie Strouse and this is our five-piece Swamp Town band. We have Mark on bass, Joe on Trumpet, Frank on Fiddle, Sam on Banjo, and I am on Guitar. We hope you have fun and let yourself cut loose, ya' hear? This is Supper Time Jamboree!", she says.

"Aaahahhhwww!", Julie screams as she starts off the music. "Alright children listen to me. Where do you want to sit Elmie? It is your turn to pick." Zuna asks her. Elmie looks around and decides where to sit.

"Follow me everyone! I have the perfect place."

Elmie replies as she walks over to a table in front of the band. The band plays at full force with the fiddle strings flying and the bass sounds a tapping for the first dance song of the night. Elmie, Zuna, and the children take their seat on the bench table.

Ted finishes bringing in the last of the fresh apple cider. He places a case of paper cups onto the food serving table next to the cider pot. He finishes setting up the food table just to the south of Elmie's table. Ted walks over to join Elmie, Zuna, and the children.

With a smile Ted speaks to them, "Hi everyone. What do you think of tonight's party? Amazing Right? Can I eat with you all tonight Elmie? I will be back in a few minutes." Elmie responds, "Of course you can. We wouldn't have it any other way." To the north is an opening atop the trees where the moon light comes down to brighten the tables.

Ted walks over to the dance floor area in front of the band and turns to the crowd. "Attention: The Mayor will make an announcement after I tell you about tonight's menu. This menu is special because it is one of our mayor's very own recipes.", Ted says.

Ted continues, "Listen up and here it is: Tonight, on the menu is chicken shrimp gumbo with brown rice, okra, corn, and tomato broth. We have hot corn bread topped with melted butter. We have a pot of steamed green beans and a large pot of freshly delivered hot Cider with cinnamon sticks floating around inside. I hope you enjoy the night's meal and please have fun. Thank You."

Mayor Tequalu appears from behind the band and enjoys Ted to greet the people of Swamp Town. "Good evening to All. Ted, Roy, and Arturo have again created a splendid meal for us tonight. I won't be able to eat for month after tonight."

"Help! Alright, we can't the food get cold. Supper is served so come and get it. Let's hear it for the Julie Strouse Swamp Town Band. Thank you for all being here."

Elmie says to her children, "Toriah and Telbert, stand up now. I am sure hungry, how about you two?" Toriah and Telbert together say, "We are always hungry!" Toriah says to Telbert. "I can't wait to taste some cornbread and gumbo."

"Do you like green beans?" Telbert without hesitation nods his head yes. Elmie and the children walk to the serving table and bring their trays with them.

Toriah helps her little brother by pouring gumbo into his wooden bowl. She takes a few green beans with a small square of corn bread and puts them onto his plate. Lastly, she pours him a small cup of hot cider.

"Thank You Toriah.", he says to his big sister. "You are welcome Telbert." Toriah smiles at her brother. Elmie, Zuna May, and Toriah then serve themselves a tray of food. The four return to their table and sit down.

Elmie tastes the shrimp gumbo and says, "This is the best gumbo. The green beans are excellent and the cornbread is very sweet. How do you like the hot cider, Toriah?" Toriah sipping her cider replies, "It tastes better than the kind you get at the store. This is the real stuff and it's very fresh tasting."

Ted arrives at the table with a tray of food. "I am so hungry, how about you all?", he asks the group. Zuna May says, "We are so hungry we don't have time to speak! The corn bread and gumbo hit the spot for me." Then Elmie says to Ted, "You and the guys did a great job tonight on the food. You can cook for myself and the children anytime you want to!"

"We appreciate your kindness about the food. The gumbo was cooking since this morning at Roy's carpenter shop and the cornbread took all afternoon. Ted answers, "Arturo does the best job on cornbread."

Ted answers. He begins to eat his food as the group eats their meal and the band plays a fast song. The Swamp Town band lead speaks up loudly to the crowd, "Weheww everyone. How is that gumbo anyways? I had two bowels earlier and I am stuffed."

Julie Strouse says loudly, "Are you ready for the firefly two step song?" The crowd screams and hollers in excitement. She continues, "If anyone wants to dance, join in at any time. Here we go! A one, two, three, and four."

The fiddle revs up the band as the bass follows, then the guitar jumps in for the lead as the trumpet brings the highs to the lows. "Mom, can we dance with you please? Toriah says to her mother. Elmie replies, "Sure, come on Toriah and Telbert. Let's go dance!"

How about we learn a new song together?", Elmie says as she takes her children to the front of the stage. Ted and Zuna watch with joy as the family enters the dance floor and everyone watches. The banjo enters in to complete the song:

"Firefly Two Step, Let's Go! Well...you know it's got to be alright when your feet jump to your knees. Every gal and guy standing in the line will bring your dance to me, Alright. All the fireflies in the night will sing this song to us, and the fire under feet will bring us swiftly to swamp land beyond the sea. Yeah..."

"Firefly, go and go, around me and down the wind. Well, you sure can't beat the firefly two step if you bring it up to thee. Ladies you roll and fellas you stroll,

as you take a bow. Spin your head anyhow, for this is how you know."

Julie continues her song, "For the Firefly two step is the only way to go. Alright Firefly Two Step Ohh...! Alright everybody. That was great. I can see ware going to have a fun night of dancing ahead of us."

Out of breath Elmie, Toriah, and Telbert walk back to the table and sit back down with Ted and Zuna. "We will return in thirty minutes, enjoy your supper." Julie Strouse says. The Mayor of Swamp town walks to the front of the dance floor to make an announcement.

The mayor says, "First of all, we want to thank our Town Band for the night's perfect music and dancing. To our fine cooks who created this lovely supper, Roy, Ted, and Arturo, you are the best! I would like to announce tonight's surprise for the children. Tonight is the yearly Hide and Seek Competition."

She continues, "The rules go as follows: You must be paired together with an adult to become a team. You will hide behind the adult and find your way together to the Great Tree in the swamp lands to the north. I will be standing in front of the Great Tree and waiting for you to touch the tree.

If I touch you before you touch the tree, you will be sent out of the race. The prize for the winner is a secret but you will be very happy when you find out what it is!"

Elmie looks over to her children, "Toriah and Telbert, do you want to compete in the race? It sounds like a lot of fun." "Only if Ted goes with me.", Telbert says. "That forest looks really scary from here." Telbert blurts out. Toriah replies to her mother, "Mom, can you go with me as my team member. I think it looks fun. Will you mom?"

"Ted, how about it?", Elmie says. "That sounds fine with me Telbert, let's go.", Ted says. Elmie responds, "Alright Toriah, put on your thinking cap. We are going to find our mayor first!" "No, Ted and I will find the mayor first. You just wait.", Telbert says. The mayor requests all adult and youth teams pair up and meet at the edge of the northern swamp forest.

Chapter 8: Hide, Seek, and the Great Tree

Telbert walks over to start the race with Ted. Elmie and Toriah stand next to them in the race lineup. Mayor Tequalu says, "Remember, you children must stay behind your adult and hide yourselves. They will cover you as you make your way to the Great Tree that stands behind me. Only the smartest will win! Alright teams, line up in a straight line in front of me now please."

Next to Toriah and Elmie stands Cindy Rethers with her mother. Cindy pokes her head out and says to Toriah, "Good luck Toriah. May the fastest team win!". Toriah pokes her head out in response and says, "Don't worry about my mom and I, we have already won."

You just don't know it yet! Rugged and ready." Telbert hearing all the conversation between the two girls looks up to Ted and says, "Mr. Guntherman, let's run like the wind, ok? I want to win for once." Ted replies, "No problem. Like the wind it is my friend."

A total of twenty teams is lined up as Mayor Tequalu says, "All teams must now close your eyes. Arturo, please wind up your stop watch for sixty seconds. When the stop watch ends, you may open your eyes again and begin the race to find me at the Great Tree."

No peaking people, no exceptions. Arturo, start the clock now please." Arturo punches the top of his silver stop watch as it begins to countdown from sixty

seconds, tick, tick, tick. He winks at the mayor and mouths silently the word "Go!" on his lips.

Mayor Tequalu does a complete turn on her feet by one hundred eighty degrees leftward. Completely faced toward the northern swamp forest she bolts into the night darkness running quickly.

Telbert with his eyes shut faces Ted and says, "Ted, did you hear the mayor? She went straight north I think." Ted responds, "Yes Telbert. I heard her go that way too." Arturo announces to the teams, "Forty-five seconds remain everyone. Hang on..."

Running through the trees swiftly with her small burning lamp, the mayor makes her way to the end of the Swamp Forest. Out of the darkness her lamp casts light up the base of a large tree. The bark is rigid and the length is taller than any other tree nearby.

She aims the lamp to the top of the tree as long dark green leaves hang by their bending branches. She reaches the Great Tree and sits her lamp down at its base. The light illuminates the base of the tree. She guards the tree and waits in anticipation for the teams.

Arturo alerts the crowd to prepare, "Five, four, three, two, one, Make your way to the Great Tree. Go!" Screams of fun explode from the teams as they run their way to find the tree. Telbert and Ted begin moving northwest into the forest.

As a small child it is fun and very tricky to mimic an adult walking in front of you. These are the rules of the race and make it very interesting indeed. Telbert with his small size and feet follows naturally behind Ted's tall legs and big feet.

"Hey Telbert. You are doing good. Do you want to speed up or stay the same speed?", Ted asks. "Uh. I think this is just right. If we go any faster, I think we might crash and fall down!", Telbert responds.

Ted then says, "No problem, where should we go next Telbert?" Telbert replies, "Let's go a little to the west." The duo team shifts west into the forest. They pass through the dark night as the fire flies hover inside the tree tops.

Meanwhile on the northwest corner of the forest, Toriah and Elmie have stopped in place. "Mom, where should we go to now?" Toriah says to her mother. In front of them by a foot is a firefly hovering in place. Elmie dazzled by the firefly's bright neon green glow says to Toriah, "I don't know. Look at this firefly, isn't it beautiful and pretty?"

Toriah replies, "Yes Mom. It is. Do you think the Creator has blue and red fireflies in Heaven?" Elmie responds "I sure hope so. Could you imagine them being as pretty as these are? We will have to wait and see, I guess. Toriah, lead us to the Great Tree. Where should we go next?" Toriah says, "East Mom!" Toriah says as the team heads due east.

A large boulder appears as Telbert and Ted arrive in the middle of the forest. At a moment's notice, in the same place from the west appears Toriah and Elmie. From the south also appears Ms. Rethers and Cindy. In shock all three teams look at each other and scream, "Ahhhhh. What are you doing here? Telbert looks up at Ted, "Hurry, let's go north!"

Telbert and Ted immediately run northward. "Follow Telbert, I think he knows the way!" Toriah says to Elmie. The two follow close behind Telbert and Ted. Ms. Rethers and Cindy laugh in excitement. "He is going to

win! Let's go!" The Rethers team trails behind Toriah and Elmie's team.

With Telbert and Ted in the lead moving north. Telbert notices a small glowing light coming from the east. "Ted, turn east. Quickly!", Telbert says frantically. The two in unison turn directly east and continue running.

Toriah and Elmie follow Telbert while believing he knows the way. Ms. Rethers and Cindy catch up alongside Toriah and Elmie and scream out, "Mom, there is the Great Tree. We must hurry!" The light to the east is growing brighter as they are just a few yards to reaching it.

"There it is Ted; the Great Tree and the Mayor is right in front of it! Hurry.", Telbert shouts as he and Ted run in tandem to the base of a large tree. The two reach the area just across from the Mayor and Ted whispers to Telbert, "Shhhhshhh. Be very quiet now Telbert. She cannot know you are here, okay? We will move our way to the back side of the tree so you can touch it and we will win. Here we go..."

Other teams in the dark night are approaching. Two teams suddenly run into the opening just to the west of the Great Tree and Mayor. Elmie sees Telbert and says, "Telbert, don't get tagged by the mayor or you are out." Ms. Rethers and her daughter appear from the darkness and edge slowly towards the mayor.

All the children are hiding behind their respective adults, and the mayor asks the question, "Where have you all come from? Who is that behind your backs that you are protecting?"

The mayor doesn't see that Ted and Telbert have nearly reached the Great Tree just to the north of her. Elmie and Toriah make a run for it and attempt to touch the

tree. The mayor jumps out from the tree and touches Toriah on the shoulder. "No! No! Oh gosh.", Toriah says in a panic.

Mayor Tequalu laughs and says, "You are out. Meet us back at the Jamboree Elmie and Toriah." Then Ms. Rethers and Cindy make a run for the tree from the west side. By a near miss Cindy is touched by the mayor as she gets kicked out of the race. "Mom, we tried so hard. It was fun though while it lasted.", Cindy says to her mother. "Yes, it was dear!", Ms. Rethers says.

Only two feet from the base of the Great Tree, Ted bends down to his side and picks up Telbert. The Mayor runs towards Telbert and Ted, attempting to touch Telbert on the shoulder. Ted lifts Telbert up towards the tree and Telbert taps the bark with all his might.

"We did it Ted! We won the Hide and Seek race.", Telbert says with excitement in his voice. Ted gives him a high five as he smiles, "That is correct. We did it together, great job Telbert! The mayor happy that Telbert won says, "Telbert, I want to wish you and Ted a Congratulations. You ran a wonderful race tonight. The prize for you and Ted is waiting back at the Jamboree. Follow me and I will take you back there."

"The race has ended everyone! Please return back to the Jamboree.", the mayor shouts so everyone in the forest will hear. The teams all return safely to the Jamboree and line up waiting for the winner to receive their prize. The mayor having nothing in her hands to give to anyone approaches the band.

The mayor says, "Alright everyone. You all did a great job and I want to thank you for running the race. The truth for young and old is this: the race you were running is just like living your life. The Great Tree represents the dreams in your life. You are protected

by the One Creator. The same One who created you as you run or walk through life."

"No matter how much darkness or light there may be as you go, you are always protected. Remember this as you go through life and while touching the trees. Wherever they may be! Peace be with you Children. I love you all very much. Goodnight to all of you!"

She continues, "Telbert and Ted, you did a wonderful job touching the tree without being tagged by me. Your reward tonight is that you get to taste the first hot cocoa with whip cream. In her hands are two cocoa cups filled with fresh hot cocoa, milk, and sugar."

"Mayor Tequalu hands the cup of cocoa to Telbert and the second cup to Toriah. "Everyone competed in the race, so you all deserve a reward as well. Hot Cocoa is served.", the mayor says to the crowd.

"Thank you, Ms. Mayor and Ted.", Telbert says. The mayor responds, "You are the one who wanted it most right?" Ted looks over to Telbert and says, "See, you did it." Telbert looks up at Ted and nods yes with a big grin.

Chapter 9: Dance Beneath the Moonlight

Telbert and Toriah are tired, and the night is coming to a close for the children of Swamp Town. Elmie looks at her children and says, "You children are tired. What a big day for everyone!" Zuna May comes over and congratulates Telbert, "Great job Telbert. Ms. Elmie, would you like to me to take them home to the Cafe and see them to bed?"

Toriah yawns as she finishes her hot cocoa. Elmie answers, "That would be nice Zuna. Thank You." Elmie hugs her children goodnight as she says to them,

"Toriah and Telbert, you mind Ms. Zuna May alright? You sleep well. I will be home in an hour or so."

"Good night, Mom. See you in the morning." Toriah says as she holds onto her brother's hands. "Let's go children, see you in a while Elmie. Good night, Ted.", Zuna says as she led the children back to her Cafe. Ms. Rethers bids everyone good night as she takes her children home.

All the remaining youth at the party leave for home as it is past their bedtime. The remaining adults are served hot cocoa with whip cream and Cajun pepper powder sprinkled on top.

The small lanterns on the tables are blown out one after another. All that remains is the light next to the band's stage. The band makes an announcement, "Ladies and Gentlemen: I want to thank you for attending this year's, Supper Time Jamboree."

"We enjoyed playing music for you and hope to see you again next year. In a few minutes we will be playing the last call song, Dance Beneath the Moonlight. We are going to finish our cocoa before we finish. Good night and peace be with you all!"

Ted sips his cup of hot cocoa as Elmie does the same. "This is the greatest Cocoa. Who thought of the idea of putting pepper on top of it?", Elmie asks Ted.

He responds, "That was my idea. I tested it on everyone for last year's Jamboree and it received a positive reaction. No one got mad at me!" Elmie laughs in response and says, "Well, it turned out just fine. Don't change a thing."

"You are the boss!" Ted says with a smile. Ted places his cup of cocoa down on the table and reaches inside his dress jacket. He pulls out the beautiful rose he

had picked for Elmie and hands it to her. "This is for you Elmie. I picked it from my Garden for you.", Ted says to Elmie. She takes the Rose and pins it to the neck flap of her dress.

"It is so very pretty Ted. Thank You. Never in my life have I had so many surprises in one day. It sure is nice to finally make up for all the lost fun over the years. I can get used to this!", Elmie says with a smile.

Ted and Elmie finish their cocoa. Ted then asks Elmie, "Would you like to dance with me? I promise I won't get too forward and will respect your boundaries." Elmie then responds, "As long as you do keep your boundaries, that sounds nice to me. I haven't been asked to dance in a long time and would be honored to dance with you Ted."

The band begins a slow ballad of fiddle, bass, and banjo. Ted takes Elmie's hand and leads her to the center of the dance floor. He embraces her for a waltz as the two begin to sway to the left and right. No words come between Ted and Elmie as they dance alongside other couples on the floor. An interlude of trumpets enters from the band. Ted and Elmie lean on each other shoulders at the same time and stare into the sky.

He says in a low voice, "Look at the sky Elmie. The moon is so pretty tonight. Lucky for me though, I'm dancing with one of the stars from out there." He lifts his head away from Elmie to face her closely, "Did you know that Elmie? You are a beautiful star to me."

Elmie lifts her head from his shoulders and says, "Thank You Ted. I don't think I have heard anything so nice before. You are a kind man. I hope this new friendship between you and I lasts forever."

Ted nods his head yes, "Yes, me too. Getting to know each other will be a great experience. We can take our time with it, alright?" She smiles and says, "Absolutely. We have all the time in the world." The Ballad song they dance to fades away with a slow muffle of the trumpet.

Ted and Elmie lean apart and raise their hands to clap for the band. The remaining couples in the crowd join to thank the band for their music. Roy walks up to the stage and faces the dancing couples saying, "Elmie, will you join us here please? We, the citizens of Swamp Town have an announcement to make. On this evening, we have made a final decision to elect a new Mayor of Swamp Town."

Elmie looks over at Ted as her eyes open wide. She puts her hand up on her head in disbelief. Roy looks over to the mayor now standing next to Elmie, "Mayor Tequalu, we thank you for your service. You generated this life we have in Swamp Town and created this peaceful land to live in. We will always be grateful. All of us here wish you hope and joy in your travel to a new life beyond the outer world."

Mayor Tequalu turns to face Elmie and says, "Ms. Elmie, when I saw you come into Swamp Town this morning, I knew that you were going to be different. Difference is Swamp Town's way of life. You are a perfect choice to govern our people and continue this great way of life.

I am giving you the keys to my home, the Town Hall. Inside my home is enough room for you and your children. It has a kitchen and everything you need to make a good home for your loved ones."

"Ms. Mariña Tequalu, I don't deserve this, Mam.", Elmie says nervously. Ted intervenes by saying, "Who says you don't deserve it? We say you deserve it. You have made it this far, why quit moving forward now?"

The mayor hugs Elmie and says kindly to her, "Elmie, you are going to be great. Your new life is in front of you. On this day, the twenty ninth of May, I declare you Elmie, the Mayor of Swamp Town. Mayor Elmie, best of days to you. With love, good night."

Mariña Tequalu gives Mayor Elmie a handshake and turns around one last time to wave goodbye to the crowd. "Thank You people of Swamp Town. I love you. Good night and good tomorrow to you all.", the mayor says. She walks south along the path returning to the Town Square. Within a minute she vanishes into the darkness of the night.

Elmie faces the remaining couples on the dance floor and says thank you to them, "I will not let you down, people of Swamp Town. You can expect great new things from my children and I. Thank You for putting your trust in me and giving me this chance. The citizens of Swamp Town applaud as the sound escapes the tree tops.

"Elmie, may I walk you home to the Cafe?", Ted asks Elmie. He holds his looped arm open to her as she accepts. The two walk swiftly to the downtown square. Ted says, "Thank You Elmie for the dance and the wonderful night."

Elmie opens the door to the cafe and says to Ted behind her, "Good night, Ted, I will see you tomorrow." Ted responds, "Good night and don't let the bed bugs bite!" Elmie laughs as her door shuts with a small thud. Ted opens his door and walks into his shop to retire for the night.

Chapter 10: Beautiful Day N°. 7

The sun is waking up as the moon falls into bed over the horizon. The blue quiet sky is turning a light red hue. The time is five A.M. and Mariña Tequalu has

finished packing her bags. She opens her front door and places her two bags on the front porch of the Town Hall.

Rito stands in front of the Cafe Grocery and drinks some fresh early morning lemon tea. He stares at the arriving day time above him. He just arrived and is waiting to transport Mariña to the train pickup point.

The morning air is briskly cold and sharp. Mariña closes her door and takes one last look at her beloved Town Hall. She dares not mention that she was a mayor to anyone on this trip. Once a mayor she thinks, always a mayor. Mariña Tequalu will keep her past secret until she reaches the next Town.

She picks up her two bags and walks north towards Rito. "Good morning Rito. It is going to be a beautiful Sunday I think?", she says to Rito. "I think so too. Let me take a bag from you.", Rito says as he takes a bag from her hand.

Together Rito and Mariña walk uphill towards the train tracks. Along the way the sun has risen to peak out above the horizon line. Rays of yellow and orange splat across the morning sky. They approach the train tracks and reach the familiar hay pile.

Mariña looks at Rito and quietly gives him a big hug. "Thank You Rito for all the years of great work. I cannot thank you enough. Take care of Swamp Town and watch over Elmie. See that she and her children are protected.", Mariña says to Rito. "No problem Mariña. I wish you peace and hope on your trip.", Rito replies.

Just then a train howl calls in the north east. "Wooo! Wooo!", the train sounds. The train is approaching quickly and will arrive around the bend at any moment. "Ms. Tequalu, the train is arriving shortly. I need you to stand on the top end of the hay pile.

Be prepared to jump into the second train car door. I will throw your bags in for you first, then you hop inside.", Rito exclaims. The train appears around the corner moving at a high rate of speed. Rito takes Mariña's second bag and walks up next to her on the hay pile.

"Thank You Rito, good bye!", Mariña says as she stands up tall and prepares to jump. The second train car door is open and Rito throws the two bags inside with one complete swoop of the arms. "Hop in Mariña!", Rito screams.

She leaps into the train car and grabs onto the side of the door. Mariña stands up and gathers her bags to the inside of the train car. She reappears and waves goodbye to Rito as the train revs up the track to the north west.

As the third car door passes by the pile of hay, a small chihuahua dog only two years old jumps off the train. The little dog runs over to Rito and looks up at him with a look of expectation. Shocked and happy to see the little dog, Rito laughs for two seconds and says, "Where did you come from?"

The little dog wags its tail with happiness. It does answer Rito with real words, but Rito doesn't speak dog. Therefore, Rito does not understand what the dog says to him. "Well little one? Follow me. We always welcome new friends in Swamp Town. It is nice to meet you. My name is Rito.", he says to the dog.

"Wooo! Wooo!", the train sounds as it fades away into the distance. Rito smiles in happiness as he and the new found dog walk down the path to Swamp Town. The sun rises once again and a new day begins. Some folks are walking up and getting ready for Church.

Other folks are sleeping in to get extra rest. Many people in Swamp Town are taking a morning walk with their families. A few people are going to work for the day. Today will be a great day for all indeed. The End.

Riddle of the Apple Tree:

As the train chugs away down the track, Mariña Tequalu thinks strongly about what exactly she might say. For a town beyond the south and to the north awaits her by minutes and hours. This place whose specialty serves all three, Mariña Tequalu will send her life to be. Where the mountains are tall and the rain must fall. Where clouds sit as a blanket for every occasion. The days are cold and the nights are under cover. By an apple tree will this town be named. For this place only will Johnny state his claim. Where to next might she go?