

THE SCARLET YARN

Micah James

To put it simply, Elizabeth could not stand her younger sister. They just couldn't seem to peacefully coexist. As a matter of fact, she was doing just fine before June came along; she had been the warm glow at the centre of the little grey house on the farm, like the hearth that their family gathered around at the end of each day. She had her own bed, her own chair, her own toys, and even a beautiful china teacup reserved for very special occasions, carefully packed away in a shoebox. Above all, she treasured her keepsakes and relished her parent's attention.

She hadn't noticed at first, as children seldom do, but it wasn't long until Mother's tired sighs and tightening apron gave the notion that something was changing. When Mother explained that by spring she would have a new brother or sister, Elizabeth was ecstatic! She doted on Mother all through those months, brewing her cups of tea (though often forgetting to strain out the leaves), and doing extra chores. She was nervous, but terribly excited to have someone to play with and look up to her. She planned out the games they'd play and the places they'd explore as she sat by Mother's feet while she rocked in her chair, knitting away. There was a tremendous amount of knitting, and sewing, and building all sorts of things to prepare for the baby.

Although she was small, she wanted to help, so she asked Mother to teach her to knit. She carefully watched Mother's nimble fingers, stumbling with her own stubby ones. Click, click, click: Mother's needles resonated as she slowed to show Elizabeth the stitches, pausing frequently to adjust her daughter's small hands. Despite her best efforts, Elizabeth could only make a bunched, twisted string. She didn't mind this however, since Mother praised her and examined her work as she would her own. She was making a scarf in a brilliant red. Elizabeth savoured its cranberry hues as it turned in the firelight on Mother's round stomach. 'It seems very long for a baby,' she thought.

The mystery was solved when the succulent scarf was found folded neatly on her bed. She hadn't imagined that it was for her, but now took great pride in showing it to everyone she met. It wasn't long after that that the snow drops came up and the sun beamed too warmly to wear a woolen scarf, so she was told to roll it up and stow it away.

Then one day there was a commotion in the little grey house. Elizabeth was told to get out of the adults' way and was shooed outside. By the time she returned, everything was quiet and still, nothing but the short cries of a baby in the doctor's arms could be heard. Father was solemn and took her aside. She had a new little sister, he explained, but her Mother had died. She couldn't recall anything else, only that where Mother's rocking chair had been there was now a bassinet. She couldn't forgive her sister, even years later, for taking away her dear Mother.

To make matters worse, she was incredibly annoying! As soon as June could crawl, she was always underfoot. When she could walk, she followed Elizabeth wherever she went, touching her things and ruining her favourite toys. Nothing was safe from those grasping hands, and she had to share *everything*. The only thing she could keep to herself was that scarlet scarf safely tucked away, only to be taken out on the coldest days.

It was on one of those biting days that Elizabeth came home wrapped up in her scarf. On her arrival, Father took up his hat and told her he was going into town for a while. Unwinding her scarf and hanging it up, she glared at her sister, who was gleefully scribbling in *her* schoolbooks. Snatching them up, she escaped into the bedroom and slammed the door behind her. Her homework took twice as long due to tedious erasing. The minutes ticked by as she sat bent over her books.

The air grew colder, and her fingers were getting stiff when suddenly she heard a sharp crash. She opened the door and was met with a massacre of tiny white shards littering the floor, her sister sheepishly smiling in the midst of it. Elizabeth's eyes darted to the empty spot on top of the pantry, the overturned box on the table, then back to the mess on the floor. Her face, ears, even her fingers grew hot, forgetting their chill just moments before. She shouted and pounced on the pile. Her shaking hands grasped at the little pieces of delicate china as she bellowed at her sister "get out and never come back!" The small girl ran out into the yard, leaving Elizabeth there in the remains of her beloved teacup.

Sitting on the kitchen floor crying in her rage and sadness, she was unable to hear the winds squealing louder outside, and she hadn't noticed the snow swirling past the window panes. It wasn't until a branch hit the roof that she snapped out of her sobs. Elizabeth gazed out the window but couldn't see past it. "A blizzard!" she yelled, and ran to the other windows, shuttering them tight. She went into the bedroom to shutter those too, and found that her sister wasn't there. Elizabeth dashed to the kitchen and looked around frantically, her heartbeat so loud in her ears it almost blocked out the sound of the howling winds. It was then that she remembered the bang of the back door as June had run away.

Her face was cold as she ran to the door, flinging it open. It promptly swung and slammed back in her face. She grabbed her coat and slipped on her boots, fumbling to tie up the laces. Pressing on the door with all her might, she peered out again through the gap. White. No fence posts, no garden, no pathway; just white, swirling snow. A hollow pit grew in her stomach as she turned in the direction the barn should have been. "June must be out there," she thought desperately. Elizabeth whirled back inside and pulled open drawers and cupboards, searching for a ball of string or a rope. She found a small spiral of twine, but it only stretched from one hand to the other. Her eyes turned to her scarf hanging on the hook.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and gently pulled it down. Her beautiful scarf. Her lovely, 'only-hers' scarf. She pictured Mother's hands as they knit it together and squeezed the little mass in her arms. She winced as she snipped one of the small loops at the end of the scarf. Pulling a thread loose, she tied it tightly around the handle of the door and flung the rest over her neck. Bracing for the wind, she pushed open the door and stumbled outside. The cold air stung her skin as ice blasted her eyes like sand. Pulling gently on the strand of yarn clamped in the door, Elizabeth stepped out into the blizzard. She could barely walk against the fierce winds, and it took all her strength just to step through the snow. Still, she pushed on ahead, making her way in the direction—she hoped—of the barn.

It felt like hours had passed before her boot hit a board. She pulled herself along the wall with numbing fingers until she felt the doorframe. A whirl of sparkling snow blew into the barn as she squeezed herself in and shut the door behind her. Her eyes adjusted to the faint glow of a small lamp, the light dancing around her sister's huddled form. She shot towards her and shook her awake. As June rubbed her eyes and shivered, Elizabeth pulled a blanket from her coat and wrapped it around her sister's shoulders. Back on their feet, the girls returned to the door and faced the blizzard outside.

“How will we ever find our way back?” June cried over the winds. Elizabeth said nothing but wrapped her arms around her sister and tied the last bit of the damp yarn around her waist. She gave it a tug and it flung free from the snow, a faint line of scarlet heading out before them. She held her sister close and, closing her eyes, trudged through the storm, following the yarn in her hand. After ages of walking towards nothing but white, the grey door appeared, the yarn pulled taut through the door. The girls tumbled onto the floor, snow shaking off in clumps. Elizabeth pushed herself to the hearth and lit a small match, reigniting the embers that glowed in the ashes. Before long, the fire was flickering brightly on their huddled, sleeping faces, a pile of wet, unraveled yarn at their sides.

The girls' Father could hardly believe his eyes when he opened the door and saw them sitting together at the kitchen table. June's hands were twisted up in a mess of yarn as Elizabeth laid down a pair of needles and untangled her sister. Two short, scarlet scarves tumbled onto each of their laps as they click, click, clicked away in the kitchen of their little grey house.