

## **The Little White House by the Cliff**

*by Sophie Shulman*

Once upon a time, there lived a little white house by the cliff. It faced west, surrounded by rolling hills of green and gold and a wrap-around porch on which one could sit and watch the sky turn from blue to purple, purple to orange, orange to yellow, and yellow to dark blue as the sun set on the distant horizon. The waves of the Pacific Ocean crashed gently and soothingly below, pacifying the precious white lilies in the little white house's northern garden and the blessed inhabitants who cooked and cleaned, sat and lay, slept and awoke within.

Now, this little white house by the cliff had quite a grandiose beginning. The location was chosen by a man called Sir Winter, who longed for a place to take his beloved and live happily ever after. He built the house by hand and spent long afternoons meticulously carving beams, carefully painting wooden slats, and determinedly hammering nails, all the while relishing in the elated expression his beloved's charming face would wear when he brought her here for the very first time. Away he worked for many, many months until it was finished at last.

On the eve of her planned arrival, Sir Winter's beloved fell very ill and doctors cautioned him to take care not to cause her undue stress or emotional frenzy. All night Sir Winter sat by his beloved and held her cold, moist, delicate hand. When she awoke, he looked into her dazzling but tired eyes and said, "I have something to show you, my darling, that I think will make you well." She smiled, nodded only slightly, and let her eyes lightly flutter shut once more.

When the sun was at its highest point in the sky, Sir Winter carefully and attentively carried her from her divan and to the bed he had arranged for her in the back of the carriage. All afternoon they traveled and the lady never made one peep, though she was quite ill. On and on the carriage rocked back and forth, back and forth, as it journeyed across fields, up hills, and down mountains, until at last it reached the little white house by the cliff.

Sir Winter gently lifted his beloved into his arms and turned towards the little white house. The sun had begun to set and the sea below mirrored the sky's exquisite blues, pinks, purples, and yellows. At the soft current of the fresh sea breeze, the lady's eyes fluttered open and she caught her breath as she absorbed the landscape before her. Sir Winter smiled as he beheld his beloved's expression he had envisioned on so many an afternoon under the hot sun. And oh! It was even more heavenly than in those daydreams. There they stood, Sir Winter delicately holding his beloved in his arms, outside their little white house by the cliff until the sky grew a rich, dark blue. Sir Winter carried her up the stairs and laid her on the cozy white bed with a view of the ocean and sky. All night he stayed by her side, holding her weak little hand.

When the sun rose brightly and magnificently, she awoke. She marveled at the

sight, but grew more ill yet.

“One more sunset, I shall see. I must see,” she whispered to her cavalier, for they both perceived that her time was coming to an end. All day they lay together and watched the sun rise, peak, and begin to fall.

That evening presented the most brilliant, majestic, transcendent sunset that ever existed. All shades of blue, yellow, red, orange, purple, green, and grey, all joined together to beget a breathtaking image. And when the last tip of the bright sun dipped below the horizon, the lady’s eyes fluttered one last time and never opened thereafter.

Sir Winter grievously but virtuously laid his beloved to rest in the northern garden of the little white house by the cliff. And on her grave planted dozens and dozens of white lilies, for her name had been Lily.

Sir Winter lived in the little white house by the cliff for the rest of his life, watching the sunset every night from the cozy white bed, thinking fondly of his departed lady, until one day he too laid his eyes to rest for the last time as the tip of the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

Thenceforward, the little white house by the cliff sheltered a multitude of people. But one of its tenants over these many years was particularly special. The little boy named Sam, a scrawny young lad who wore thick, round spectacles, cherished the little white house by the cliff perhaps as much as had Sir Winter. Having discovered the little white house during a time when it was empty and abandoned, little Sam found solace in its peaceful exterior and charming air. Little Sam had many brothers and sisters and when they became too much for him, he would run away to the little white house by the cliff and watch the beautiful sunset. He would grace his small fingers across the wooden beams on the porch and wonder who else had touched them. He would watch the sunset from the porch and query about who else in the world was watching it, too. When the growth of his siblings began to outgrow his family’s home, he told his Mum and Pa about the little white house by the cliff. They soon moved in and they, too, fell very much in love with it. But having been the first of his family to uncover its magic, little Sam secretly believed he was its true owner.

In the little white house by the cliff, little Sam grew and matured. His bedroom floor that was once home to his wooden spaceships and boats, comic books, and schoolbooks soon cleared of all such childhood belongings as he grew into adulthood. In his bed, he had been ill and well; in the kitchen he had eaten good and bad food, drank water and wine, experienced starvation and distention; in the garden he had planted new flowers and uprooted weeds; on the porch he watched the sun rise and the sun set; and in the grand room he had decorated Christmas trees, hung stockings, and eaten chocolates. The walls had been yellow with green stripes, blue with white flowers, and plain, dull white. The beams had been broken and repaired, many times by Sam himself. There were scuffs in the walls where he would play with his toy soldiers too roughly, cracks in the wooden floor from boots stomped too hard, and strips of wallpaper hanging from small

corners of the kitchen that were too high to be mended. His brother and his sisters had been born in the room in which the sun set most vibrantly; his eldest sister and mother had died in that very same room, too. Sam and the little house by the cliff had been witness to such happiness, tragedy, joy, loss, and gain.

Life, as usually happens during its course, sometimes takes us elsewhere, in a direction unexpected. And this being so, Sam was drawn away from the little white house by the cliff when he was a young man. He fell in love with a beautiful woman named Sarah and acquired a job as her father's apprentice. Many years passed without returning to the little white house, although it lay safely in his heart all the while.

A considerable time later, the house stood abandoned once again and received its first visitor in a long while – a man by the name of Bo. His truck rocked back and forth, back and forth, over the lumps of mud and weeds outside the house until it came to a stop. Bo hopped out and glanced wearily up at the little white house by the cliff. It was quite late - nearly sunset - and his wife and children would be angry if he did not make it home for dinner. He pulled out his clipboard and began jotting down notes as he leaned against the side of his truck that read *Bo Construction* in big black letters.

"Excuse me?"

Bo nearly fell over at the sound of the sweet, timid voice, for he thought himself very much alone and had been absorbed in his work. He glanced around suspiciously and after a few seconds, located the source. A small, very old man stood a few feet from the truck. He had white, thinning hair and was hunched over with age. His eyes, kind and wise, lay behind large, thick, round spectacles. Bo lowered his clipboard.

"My apologies, I did not mean to startle you, sir," the old man declared softly.

"Oh, n-no, all is well." Bo studied the old man. "Can I help you?"

"Why, yes, I believe you can," replied the old man, taking a step forward.

"What can I do for you?" Bo inquired hesitantly.

The old man took a few more slow but steady steps forward, his eyes transfixed upon the little white house by the cliff that was nearly silhouetted against the coming sunset.

"Lovely little house, isn't it?"

Bo glanced at the house with its broken window glass, shredded wooden porch beams, and peeling paint.

"You know," the old man continued without Bo's response, "this is a very special house." Bo looked at the old man with fatigue and noted apprehensively the sun low in the sky. They stared at the house in silence for a few moments, the old man captivated and enchanted, Bo indifferent and anxious. "Why are you tearing it down?" the old man asked with such innocent simplicity it was as if asked by a child.

"Well, sir. It's a nice piece of land here, and uh, there's people want to capitalize on it."

"But do you know what you are destroying?" The old man's eyes were still glued

to the little white house as he wore an expression of placidity and sadness. Bo once again looked at the house and saw only its decrepitude.

Bo sighed. "Sir..."

"I grew up in this here house." The old man's voice was a nostalgic whisper.

Bo sighed once more. "I am sorry sir, but there's nothing can be done."

"But you do not know what you are demolishing." The old man grew a little sterner but kept his voice low. "Do you not see its beauty?"

Bo looked at the house and still saw nothing special. "It is not my job to see beauty in the buildings I knock down." When the old man did not answer or move, Bo continued. "Sir, you are talking to the wrong man. I am just the contractor. I do not have the power to change anything."

"Don't you?" The old man reluctantly tore his eyes away from the little white house and gazed at Bo with bereaved eyes.

"No, sir, I do not."

A few more seconds did the old man stare at Bo, until he turned toward the house and began walking.

"Follow me," he said.

Bo stood by the truck. "Look, mister, I don't have time for games. I have a wife and children I must get home to. And as I said, I do not have the power..."

"Please." It was unclear whether this was an appeal or an order.

Reluctantly and with a sigh, Bo followed the old man into the house, the sun setting even lower in the sky. Perhaps I will humor this poor old man, albeit only briefly, Bo reasoned. After all, this was his childhood home.

The old man arduously climbed the broken boards that were the stairs leading to the wrap-around porch. He pushed open the front door gently but purposely, as if he knew the door would be unlocked and the house would be waiting for him. Bo followed, staring apprehensively at the cracked floorboards as he entered the front room.

"We put our Christmas tree here," the old man recounted, pointing to a spot in the corner collecting dust and maggots. "Always here." The old man chuckled softly. "One year, my father suggested we put it over there, in the far corner, so it would take up less room. More practical, he said. My father, always the sensible one. My mother, though, protested wildly at the proposal. She liked how the Christmas tree crowded our space, how the presents overflowed beside the fireplace so we would have no room to put our feet. Tradition was always so important to my mother."

Bo stared at the maggots worming around the dust motes in the corner. He wondered just how many years ago this Christmas had been. From the looks of it, he resolved it had been quite some time.

"Ah! The mantle." The old man turned to Bo with a blissful grin on his face before turning back to the fireplace. He lightly ran his wrinkled fingers along it, picking up a thick layer of grey dust. "This is where we hung our stockings. Mine was red with a

cloth truck stitched to the side. My mother stitched it herself. There were so many of us, all the stockings nearly didn't fit! On my 12<sup>th</sup> Christmas, I had to share my stocking with Thomas, my younger brother, because his fell in the fire."

Bo shifted his weight and glanced around the room impatiently. The sunset was not visible from this room and his ignorance of the time concerned him. Still, he did not want to rush this old and frustratingly wistful man.

The old man ambled through an archway into the kitchen. An old-fashioned refrigerator stood against the far wall next to a black stove, the floor tiled in black and white that one could see used to be shiny but was now dull and cracked.

"Apple-berry pie." The old man's soft voice was nearly inaudible. "That was my favorite, and my mother made it so well. Sometimes she let me help." He looked towards the breakfast nook that stood by a window facing the ocean that framed the beginnings of an incredible sunset beyond. "We would sit, my sisters and brothers and I, in that breakfast nook and eat our apple-berry pie. There used to hang yellow checkered curtains that set a gold glow about the room when the sun went down. It was glorious." The old man smiled. "Nearly as glorious as the apple-berry pie." The old man turned to exit the room. "Come. Let's move on."

Bo swayed in his direction. "Listen, mister, I appreciate the trip down memory lane, but I really do have to get going. My wife and kids..."

"We are almost done." The old man continued through the archway and disappeared.

Bo followed him into the entryway and watched tensely as the old man began ascending the creaking stairs, one foot at a time. He was hunched over and let out a reluctant gasp every time he painfully heaved himself up the next step. Bo shifted awkwardly.

"You, uh, need some help there, sir? Those stairs are awfully old and possibly dangerous." Bo glanced around at the cracked walls and chipped paint. "In fact, we really shouldn't be in here at all. It's been abandoned for quite some time and it's not safe."

The old man gasped again as he lifted himself to the fourth step. "It will be alright. It is a mighty strong house, and I am a mighty strong man." The old man smiled as he moved to the fifth step without a sound. Bo tried to stifle a smile.

When they reached the top of the staircase, the old man walked intently towards a half-open door off its hinge at the end of the narrow hall, an orange glow emanating from beyond it as if the sun itself was hiding inside the room. It squeaked as the old man carefully pushed it open. He drew in a sharp breath as he turned towards the window facing west. Bo, too, gasped slightly when he entered and beheld the magnanimous sunset flowing into the small bedroom. The walls were cracked, as they were in every other room in the house, the wallpaper was chipped and the floorboards were uneven. But somehow the sunset masked the room's dilapidation.

"Astounding, isn't it?"

“Yes, it really is,” Bo whispered, as if hesitant to disrupt the alluring glow.

“Do you mind if I sit?” the old man motioned to a bare bed, the presence of which Bo failed to recognize until now. “A bit tired. I am old, after all,” he said with a wink.

“Sure, sure. Please, sit.”

“Do you see it now?” the old man inquired, his eyes focused on the bright sunset.

“The sunset? Of course.”

“No. The sunset is incredible, yes. Always has been. But do you see that this little white house is even more marvelous than the sunset itself?”

“I can see that it used to be a grand house, indeed. But I believe it is safe to say that it has past its prime.”

“Oh, I very much doubt that.” They stood in silence for a few moments. “Do you believe in the power of the imagination, Bo?”

Bo hesitated, caught off guard. “How did you know my...”

“The imagination is a very exquisite gift. It can show us the past, the present, the future. Through it, we have the capacity to change the past and transform the present before our very eyes. What we see in this world isn’t always what is. And while we can take our imagination with us wherever we go, it performs at its best in portals, such as this little white house by the cliff where history, memory, age, and emotion merge to create an indescribable richness. In this age, we are so quick to destroy the old, the decrepit, the broken. If only we could look past those superficialities to the marvelous treasures they once were and could once again be. If only we could imagine. Of course, it takes much work if one is not familiar with it, but once achieved, one will be rewarded with an extraordinary gift. So I ask you, can you see it?”

Bo looked around the room with care. His eyes located the wooden bedstead, the crack in its center, the initials ineptly engraved on the side; the wavy wallpaper sprinkled with small white paper lilies; the dusty floorboards that looked worn and wise. Suddenly, Bo wondered whose feet had traveled these tired floorboards.

“What happened here, in this room?”

“Ah, you feel it, don’t you? In my lifetime, my sister and brother were born, my mother died; I played with my wooden boats endlessly; my littlest sister bumped her head on that there doorframe and I soothed her; my parents fought and made love; I cried and laughed. It was said that this was the favorite room in the house of its original owner, who built it by hand for his beloved. This room has seen much tragedy, but much, much more love. It’s nearly palpable, tangible.” The old man looked around the room in awe. “Tell me, what do you see?”

Bo blushed. He could feel something, whether it was the old man’s absurdity or nostalgia rubbing off on him he did not know. Yet he could not see except what was right before him – a ravishing sunset, an ancient bed, a room, and a house in need of extensive repair.

“Close your eyes,” said the old man.

Curious and quiet with trepidation, Bo let his eyelids flutter shut.

“Now, listen carefully and concentrate on what I say,” the old man said softly. Bo felt the bright warmth of the sunset on his eyelids. “Imagine two little girls playing happily on the smooth wooden floorboards in the room in which you stand right now.” Bo thought of his two young daughters, Clara and Emma, and smiled. “They are wearing the most beautiful white dresses, their curly blonde hair loosely pulled back so as to not disturb their play. They are laughing. One makes her porcelain doll ride a small wooden car while the other brushes her toy horses’ mane. The sun is beginning to set, an orange glow bouncing joyously off the clean, fresh wallpaper. A stunning young woman lies delicately on the bed as she knits a small pink sweater, her large round belly extending healthily from her dainty figure. She smiles at the sound of the little girls’ precious play on the floor beside her. A man enters carrying a pot of tea and a teacup. He hands it to the lady and she thanks him graciously.” Bo could have sworn he smelled a waft of warm, blueberry tea – his wife’s favorite. “The man sits beside her and places his large, gentle hand upon her stomach and they kiss. The two little girls, seeing their beloved father, jump upon the bed and playfully pounce on him. He lets out a jubilant guffaw and tickles them until their innocent laughter fills the room with such sweet bliss it might burst. The adorable family, collected in a cozy pile on the bed, turns toward the window and watches as the sun dips down below the distant horizon.”

The old man paused and there seemed not a sound in the room. Bo stood, his eyes still shut tight, mesmerized in this wondrous image. He could still feel the warmth of the setting sun upon his eyelids.

“Now open your eyes.”

Bo was so entranced it took a few moments for him to come to. Only then did he realize he was smiling and felt the soft tear roll down his cheek. He slowly opened his eyes, bracing himself for the blinding sunset. But the room was dark, the sun had set. He glanced around at the peeling wallpaper, uneven floorboards, and broken bedstead; and yet, even though the sun shone no longer, he felt such an intense affection about the room. He saw the dilapidation but no longer felt it. He looked past it to the angelic image of his family sitting on that bed together watching the sun set in the distance.

Suddenly, he noticed he was alone. Where had the old man gone, he thought? He had been standing by the door and was sure he would have noticed had he brushed past him. The bed didn’t even have a dent or any indication that there had been a living being sitting there.

Then, his eyes located a pair of large round spectacles standing on the bedside table. He walked to them cautiously and picked them up. They were covered in a thick layer of dust and rust had attacked its hinges. Bo looked about the room once more, perplexed and yet at ease, contented. He set the spectacles down carefully and walked out of the room and down the stairs, so deliberately he might have done it a thousand times.

Bo was late for dinner and his wife and children were angry and sad but were

quick to forgive when he brought them back to the little white house by the cliff and said, “welcome home.” The little girls ran happily and excitedly up the steps and the lady admired the northern garden of lilies and the astounding hills, sea, and sky.

Many months thereafter, Bo worked everyday, all afternoon, to repair the physical damages of the house, all the while relishing in the delighted faces of his two precious little daughters and lovely wife when they first laid eyes on the little white house.

And thus began a new generation of memories and happiness in the little white house by the cliff.