SHORT STORY

The Dump Dwellers

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"New Age" by Alexey Adonin

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The dump is not the best place to tell a fairy-tale, but Carmen's seven-year old sister doesn't care. Rosario listens to the intruder's story as if it is the only thing that'll save them. With his scruffy hand on her shoulder, the boy begins his tale, but as dwellers of the garbage heaps, they have no time for doll stories.

Earlier that morning, Carmen said to her little sister, "We need to find a really big box."

To plan their day, the girls climb atop a loose garbage heap which is harder to climb but safer. They sit cross-legged, deciding where to pick, counting on an early start to get ahead of the swarm of pickers the day will bring.

It's just before dawn, too dark to survey the dump's vastness which stretches five city blocks in length and three across and produces enough stench to choke a planet.

The dump is chaotic. Dirt roads, nestled between piles of trash, line its paths. Many people live and work in the dump; some have erected cardboard or galvanized steel structures that serve as shelter. A permanent filigree of flies coats the dump, like lace curtains, and the constant squawking of birds and vultures traps the dump's fumes like a floppy sombrero.

Tying a rag over her sister's nose and mouth, Carmen says, "Let's go. The box gotta be strong. Ours won't last long."

Carmen is confident her sister will find what they need. Rosario knows the dump's geography like she knows her sister's features. She was born a few rows down, and she runs like the wind, covering the jumbled territory quickly. When people in the dump need something, they know Rosario's their go-to picker and Carmen knows her sister will always find what they need.

The girls wrap additional layers of rags over their body; to protect their faces from dust and flies, their feet from broken glass and scorpions, and their hands from sharp needles and razors mixed in the refuse.

The garbage mound shifts under Carmen's bare feet. She grasps for Rosario, but before she knows it, there's a stranger next to her and his hand is on her sister's tiny shoulder. Carmen doesn't pounce on him as this might endanger Rosario further, so she says nothing. Stares like a fawn caught in the headlights.

With a small crooked smile, the boy says, "You look like scrawny mummies. That's how you all dress in this dump?"

"Get. Your hand. Off her." Carmen puffs her chest and cocks her head, staring the boy straight in the eye.

He doesn't let go and he runs his other hand over his black slicked hair.

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“I didn’t come to discuss fashion—” his voice squeaks as if in protest of its changing range.

Carmen nears the boy saying, “What you need?” but when the boy scoops Rosario off the mound, Carmen backs off. The garbage shifts, and the boy nearly loses his balance. “I said, who are you and leave my sister out of it. If you’ve got something, you deal with me.”

The boy laughs. “Save your attitude for another time. Like I said, it’s your sister I’m after. I’ve come to tell you a story ‘bout a magical doll.”

Carmen smells cologne on the boy as if he just showered.

“We don’t need stories. What we need is huge box.”

The boy grabs Rosario’s neck and then sinks a hand deep into his pocket. Carmen’s eyes follow the whisper of his fingers, and notices something hard he carries in there. Despite smelling good, his clothes are tattered and show signs of wear.

“What kinda magic story?” Rosario says in a small voice, excitement swimming in her brown eyes. “I like dolls a lot.”

Opening his palms wide to the sky as if praying to the gods, he says, “That’s what I like to see, some cooperation around here. It’s a fairy-tale, and it friggin’ goes like this: Once upon a time, there was a magic doll and it was got lost. Some jerk left her in this dump, and I hear you really good at finding things so you gonna find the friggin’ doll and bring her to me. End of story, get it?”

Rosario’s eyes are round as tortillas and she’s raring to chase this new adventure.

“What’s in it for us?” Carmen says, sizing up the intruder, looking him up and down.

“Are you friggin’ kidding me? Find the doll first and then we talk.” He shoves Rosario back to her sister. When his jacket pulls up, Carmen sees the bulge in his pants pocket.

The intruder hunches low and tells Rosario, “The doll’s real big; she gotta come up to my knees. She’s a *Juanita Perez.* You don’t know what she looks like ‘cause she’s a doll for friggin’ rich kids, but you’re gonna find her anyways, ‘cause she’s magic.” He cocks his head like someone he might have seen do in the movies.

Rosario hangs on to every word he says. The boy seems dangerous, but she’s not scared. Ever since their Mama disappeared, Rosario had been afraid of everything, but not of this boy who came from who knew where, full of magical tales.

Carmen doesn’t trust him. She lets him finish his story, to see where it goes but one false turn and she’s ready to scoop Rosario and be gone.

The boy lights up a joint and the smoke seems to soften his features.

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“You ain’t legal age, otherwise I’d share,” his voice squeals again, making him sound as if he’s not a day past thirteen. “You kinda small to be a good picker, but maybe that’s what makes ya so good, eh? Are you strong enough to pull the big doll when you find her?”

Rosario nods vigorously.

“*Excelente.* You've gotta save the magic doll, kid, ‘cause she’s gone through some real bad times.”

Carmen pushes her head up and says, “Like what? Our Mama disappeared, and we live here. Does your doll have it this bad? I don’t think so!”

The boy focuses on the youngest sister. “A starving coyote ripped the doll’s head off, and without it, she’s got no magic at all. We got to get her to a hospital for help."

It isn’t Rosario’s fault for falling for his story; the boy’s easy manner, the glint in his eye, his crooked smile, make him likeable even though Carmen knows he’s trouble.

Rosario’s face is aglow. “Where’s the magic doll?”

His voice cracks, “Here! In *El Bordo de Xochiaca.*” In Carmen’s mind, it is sealed; he’s no older than she is, thirteen. He tries to continue his story but can’t because Rosario is giggling. Nobody calls the dump by its real name. Mostly, nobody calls it anything at all, but if someone need to call it something, they call it, *Buena Vista* — the Good View — because that’s what the neighbourhood is called.

“What’s so friggin’ funny. *Basta*!” His hand goes up in the air; he is holding a gun.

The laughter dies.

He points the gun at Carmen’s forehead, and says to Rosario, “Kid, find the magic doll… or your sister’s gone. Run!”

Rosario freezes. Carmen nods, giving her sister silent permission to go, and the lithe girl, wrapped in rags, charges in search of the magical doll. The mound of garbage on which they stand shifts again.

“Stay within sight,” he tells Rosario, but she doesn’t hear him above the din of the dump. He doesn’t lower the gun from Carmen’s head. Time doesn’t move. Only the flies do as Carmen and the boy wait, the early morning sun already radiating unrelenting heat. If he expects this to be fast, he’s dead wrong.

“A fine place you live in,” he says, pressing the gun’s barrel harder into Carmen’s forehead. He swishes a fly off his eye and spits.

She says, “Yeah, we got birds chirping all day and we live off the land. So much fun.”

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He grabs her neck. “This ain’t no friggin’ joke, kid! One more word—” he doesn’t finish because he has lost sight of Rosario. The dump’s residents begin to scurry about, like ants over sticky honey, ready for their daily chores. Carmen hopes that someone notices them on the top of the heap although guns are commonplace.

Pigeons, gulls and vultures circle above them in search of what the bulldozers will expose as they transform the landscape. There is a precise rhythm to the dump. Every ten minutes a truck full of mixed refuse — household, commercial, pharmaceutical, and toxic — backs into the dump’s entrance and unloads its cargo. Pickers scavenge the lot, quickly separating it into like items and stacking them into heaps. Those piles are then separated by colour and material until they become mounds of the same product, like taking a painting and splitting it into its individual hues.

Recyclables are sold, and what remains goes to incinerators or compactors. The ground rumbles as the machines inch toward Carmen and the boy. Every time a pile is reshaped, the birds and flies multiply. There are so many you can hear their wings flutter.

“Ain’t it nice,” the boy shades his eyes, his crooked smile showing he means something different. “You’ve got seagulls. Tell me something; why do we have friggin’ seagulls in the middle of México City? Hm? Is there an ocean ‘round here? No, but we got seagulls and their shit.” He glances around the dump and a dark layer veils his face. “Time to find that little sister of yours. Is she really as good as they say she is?”

“If you crack my head, you’ll never find out,” Carmen says. "She’s better picking on her own. It’s hard to catch up even if you know this place, and yeah, the damn seagulls sing us a lullaby; what can I do about it?”

He considers and slips the gun back into his pocket. “Guess it could drive someone crazy, all that squawking and them friggin’ flies. Tell you something. If she finds the doll, I’ll leave a few pesos for you. It ain’t gonna help you get outta here, though.”

“How much?”

“Enough for the task done. You think she gonna find it?” He taps his foot on the dusty ground.

“Probably. We’re born here. This is all we know. She’s been picking since before she could crawl.”

“How friggin’ old is she? Like four?”

Carmen is about to say, *nah, seven*, but she waits; it could be to their advantage if the boy believes she’s a little kid.

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“She’s big enough to find your darn doll, but it won’t be fast.”

“Why? She likes playing with dolls, right?”

His question stings. The other day, Rosario had found a Teddy bear missing legs and arms. Its head had hung only by a few threads, most of the stuffing was gone, and the plush was so dirty it was hard to tell what colour it had once been. She cuddled that soft log and sang to it like to a baby. Her sweet voice clashed with the rumble of the machines, still her notes wafted and waltzed with the dump’s cacophony and toxic fumes.

“Of course, my sister likes to play,” Carmen says. “That’s how come she accepted your offer so quick, because you said something about a magic doll. She’ll pick for days searching for a doll, but if you need it so much, you’ll have to help us.”

“I didn’t come to bargain, I told you. What kinda help, anyway? I already said I’d leave some pesos behind.”

“That won’t last.”

With a cackle he says, “What you want that lasts? A friggin’ castle?” He scans the dump trying to spot Rosario.

“For starters,” Carmen says, “you can help us bring a big heavy box we need for shelter. My sister said she saw one at the far end of the dump and we need it here. You’re strong.”

He regards her, serious as the plague. “I ain’t no donkey.”

“If you don’t help us with the box, you don’t get the doll. We know the dump, you don’t.”

“What’s friggin’ taking her, anyhow? You see her anywhere?”

“She knows what she’s doing but she picks slow because she likes to play make-believe and she doesn’t *eat much.*” Carmen says this last part louder, testing to see if this brute has any empathy in his bones.

“She’s slow ‘cause of her imagination?” He ruffles his hair so slick that it’s as if he combed margarine on it.

“No, because she’s hungry; we’re all hungry in *Buena Vista.* You could also bring food from outside. That’s how you could help us.”

“That’s what you call this place, *Buena Vista*? All I see is mountains of garbage, friggin’ birds circling over our heads, and flies. You live like rats. Where do you sleep?”

“None of your business... Different parts.”

“Stop being so clever. Where?”

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Before he pulls his gun out again, Carmen says, “Mostly, under new mounds of trash because they’re not so stinky.” She doesn’t tell him it’s not so hard to find a bulldozer where the driver forgot to lock the cabin for the night. If it’s rainy, they climb inside, but the workers always know they’ve been there because of the stench.

“Sad, you live like friggin’ urchins.” He spits but Carmen senses a drop of compassion in his voice. “Hope she don’t spend all day finding the doll. I’m sick of this place already.”

“The dump’s huge. The biggest in the world, they say. You wouldn’t understand the first thing about it.”

“So? I don’t need to know ‘bout the dump. All I know is your sister better find the friggin’ doll.” He pulls the gun out and, this time, points it at Carmen’s heart.

Taking the chance the boy might have a bit of empathy, she says, “How’s killing me going to help? Who sent you anyway?”

Carmen knows he isn’t acting on his own because his jeans are faded and have holes in them. Big holes. A string of sweat starts to travel from his forehead. He shuffles and hums to himself.

After some time, lowering the gun he says, “The doll’s loaded.”

“With what?”

“Something that’s gotta be returned, or lots of heads are gonna roll, mine first.”

“Yeah? Who else’s?”

He smacks Carmen’s cheek with the side of the gun. Defiant, she offers the other.

“Man, you’re stubborn. Heads! Best not to know.”

“You with the cartels?”

Spitting something out, he says, “Enough with the questions ‘bout the cartel.”

“Then tell me something else — like, do you have any brothers and sisters?”

The question startles him. He grew up on the streets. His brothers and sisters are the gangsters living on them and he has no recollection of his parents. Nobody had ever asked him about his family.

"Where's your friggin’ sister, anyway? Time to find her."

They stride through the dump’s narrow valleys, between the hills of broken furniture and rubber tires, torn clothes and blankets, busted plastic by the tons. Shards of nylon bags catch on tree branches and flutter in the dusty wind like farewell handkerchiefs. Dirty flattened

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cardboard boxes take flight every time there's a light breeze picking up dust and vermin as the maggots crawl between former utensils, bowls and straws. Feral dogs compete with the dump's residents for scraps of food, and they all battle the birds. Carmen leads the way when the earth rumbles under their feet. He shoves the gun harder into her back.

"What's that? We're having a friggin' earthquake?"

Carmen can't help giggling. "It's bulldozers! They remove old trash and make a new mountain from today's junk. It's like that all day long."

He spits out a fly, says, *fuck* and lowers the gun. "Had it with this place. Don't know how you can stand it. What's your name anyway?"

"Carmen, and my sister is Rosario."

"I didn't friggin' ask your sister's name. Just yours."

He tries to roughen up his stance but seems ridiculous to Carmen. When he rubs a fly from his eye with the hand holding the gun, he strikes his forehead. Her face goes red.

"Find your sister. I need my fucking doll."

"Let's climb to the top of mountain Number Seven. It's really stinky though."

Carmen likes the trash of number seven, it's old, compacted, and makes for better footings.

"The smell here's already making me puke."

"We have to climb to get a better view of the place. That's the only way we're going to find Rosario."

"What the fuck did I say 'bout her name? I ain't climbing no rotten mountain. You do it and I'll wait down below."

Carmen scrambles to the top of the rubbish and spots her sister picking near the new deposits.

Hoping to buy some time, she says, "I can't see her."

"Fucking find her. Now."

With no other way to stall the boy, she says, "Let's go find her, then." Carmen slides off the heap of garbage.

"Which way?" he says.

"To the entrance."

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Before she's off the pile of shit, the boy sprints. Carmen panics. She knows the boy's all puff and no huff, but she gets scared for Rosario. If she's found the doll and doesn't hand it over, he'd be desperate enough to shoot her. Carmen is glad she told him her sister's name; it's easier to shoot a stranger with no name than a small kid called Rosario.

When Carmen catches up to the boy, he's already found her sister.

Rosario's on top of a small mound of trash holding on to a brand-new Teddy. From the bottom of the pile, the boy shouts for her to get down, but it's like he's talking to a wall. Rosario is mesmerized with the golden plush in her hands. The bear's spotless; his eyes still bright and the red felt of his tongue intact. Rosario can't hear the boy's shouts because the bulldozers are nearly on top of them.

"That's not the fucking doll. Can't you see that's a teddy bear?"

Sitting on top of her world, Rosario holds the bear like she's always done, like if it's her own little baby. She starts to rock it to sleep. Her small lips are moving, but the sweetness of her lullaby is swallowed by the gnashing war song of the machines.

"The doll. Get the—"

His shouts are overpowered by the rumbling of yellow bulldozers bludgeoning their way to where they stand. He climbs the mound. Slips several times before reaching Rosario who's swarmed in flies, singing, oblivious even when the boy points the gun at her. He loses his footing, and the gun flies out of his hand. Carmen dashes to get it when a wall of rubbish pours over their head and buries all three.

Swimming through trash, Carmen feels as if she's drowned in a sea of plastic. Panicked, she waves as she emerges, trash still raining on her head, but nobody notices. The operators don't expect people to be near the bulldozers, and when they see something scurrying in the trash, they assume rats or dogs. When the cascade of garbage ceases, her heart's pounding. She sees only wet stinky trash around her. Half a tortilla sticks to her cheek but slips off before she can eat it.

Scattered notes of a lullaby register in Carmen's ears; Rosario is nearby hugging her teddy. The noise is ear-splitting as Bobcats replace the bulldozers. The Bobs will scoop the garbage and dump the chunks into compactors. When done, the junk shrunk into cubes is hauled away. Carmen shoves Rosario from the metal claw that comes down hard, right next to them, crumbling the mound apart. Scooping soggy waste into the compactor, the claw returns for more.

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The shaking of the ground so fierce, even the flies scatter. In one arm, Carmen hugs her sister who clutches on to her teddy, and in the other, she still has the boy's gun. They scuttle from the claws' path, barely making it. Mixed in the next scoop, Carmen sees the boy's leg. The bottom part of his jeans is torn, and he's lost his sneaker. The rest of his body is drowned in the trash. Shielding Rosario from the carnage, Carmen picks her up when a gray lump rolls on to her toes.

With a curious expression, Carmen inspects the object. It's a mangled *Juanita Perez,* right under her foot. The doll's heavy, solid full, even though she's lost her head.

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