Second Place Adult Short Story

Emerging From the Cold

By Aniko Albert

If she stood to the right of the kitchen window, squeezing between the sink and the cabinets, and looked sharply left, she could see part of the round driveway where the children were waiting for the school bus. Her daughter was standing there with the other middle schoolers—that was the word used here, middle school. It was early April, the trees were finally sprouting some pale green leaves or pinkish blossoms, and most of the kids were wearing T-shirts or thin hoodies. These American kids, Réka thought—the parents no doubt told them better, but they wouldn't listen. She saw some of them in shorts on the first of March, with snow still on the ground.

Still, she had to admit her daughter Emi was maybe going the other extreme. She had on the coat she got when they arrived back in January—Dan's sister was waiting for them at the airport, with emergency winter gear for everyone sourced from the back of her family's closet. It wasn't a real winter coat, but it was reasonably warm if you added a thick sweater under it and the requisite hat and scarf. Now that the weather was warming up, it was a bit too much. But Emi would still often feel cold. She seemed cold now, a tiny thing under the weight of her coat and backpack and the giant cello case she was lugging around. Cello was the instrument the music teacher gave her because they had more than enough violins already, and Emi practiced and worked extra hard and did not complain.

January was not a great time to move from Jamaica to Maryland, but they only had until March to enter on their newly won green card. March would have been worse—with January, at least, Emi started at her new school at the beginning of the spring semester. It was hard enough on her to leave everything back home and join a bunch of kids who'd known each other since kindergarten, probably, but the green card was an impressive stroke of luck, an amazing opportunity. Those were the words, at least, that everyone used, both in Réka's and Dan's family.

Réka herself was less enthusiastic. She had moved countries three times before, from Romania to Hungary, then to England for university, where she met Dan, and then back to his country after they both graduated. She loved Jamaica. She loved the people, the colors, the warmth, the way the messy complexities of her identity--ethnic Hungarian in Romania, Transylvanian immigrant in Hungary—just melted away. In Jamaica, she was that foreigner with the weird name who taught Spanish in the high school up the road, and then the simplest thing ever: Anna's and Emilia's mother.

But Dan had always dreamed of working at a bigger, more important company, in a place where things were happening, where the world's story was written. His sister, who was living in the United States, could file for him once she became a US citizen, but that process would take forever—siblings were in a low priority category. So when he found out that his Romania-born wife, unlike Jamaicans, qualified for the Diversity Visa lottery, he said it would be silly not to enter. So they did, year after year, without much expectation—until last year, when out of the blue their entry status said "selected" and now here they were, her daughter waiting for a yellow school bus to take her to an American school.

There were now more children with backpacks on the bit of sidewalk Réka could see from her lookout point, and even more heading in that direction, talking, laughing, playing some skipping game on the red and gray paving stones of the path connecting the buildings. Emi had insisted on going out early, worried about missing the bus. This was the first day she would take it—Réka drove her to school and back the first few months. She knew she was being overprotective, but everything was so different here, and Emi looked so alone, so lost, with her friends back in Jamaica and her big sister away at college, all the way up north, in an even colder place.

There were funny moments, of course, moments they would no doubt remember fondly in the future—like the first day of the term, with a slight dusting of snow on the ground, when they showed up to an empty school and giggling office staff (*Oh, right, you're the new Jamaican kid!).* Réka had grown up near the Carpathian Mountains, in a place with plenty of snow, and it never occurred to her that schools might be on a thing called two-hour delay here if any snow fell and you had to check online or sign up for alerts to find out when this was the case.

The bus was still nowhere to be seen, but suddenly there was a commotion, with everyone turning in the same direction and some of the kids running over to look at something on the ground a little distance from the bus stop. Réka couldn't see what it was because the children were now standing in a circle on the grassy area gently sloping down toward the pond, that mandatory patch of water that all these apartment complexes seemed to have. The children's postures varied between excitement and cautious awe, with Emi, who had left her cello back on the sidewalk, settling somewhere in between, with that quiet, half-amused smile on her face.

A yellow-haired boy in green pajama pants produced a stick from somewhere and seemed to position himself, with some hesitant steps back and forth, to poke at the thing in the middle of the circle. A woman walking a small, fluffy dog on a short lease stopped and yelled at him.

Réka pushed the kitchen window open a crack, hoping to hear what was going on. At the same moment, Emi looked up in her direction. She couldn't possibly hear the window open, could she? She probably knew her mother was watching the whole time. Réka waved and smiled sheepishly.

"Don't touch it! Those things bite!" yelled the woman, who had picked up her dog and was cradling it in her arms. She was the only adult around. At the same time, Emi held up both arms toward her mother and moved them wide apart, in that universal "this big!" gesture.

That was it. Réka pushed away from the window, grabbed her keys and ran out of the apartment in her slippered feet, down the outdoor stairs and across the mostly dead lawn toward the crowd of children gathered around something clearly huge and dangerous.

The thing was big indeed. Round, rugged, and gray, it looked like a rock, but with a small, wrinkled head sticking out on one end and an even smaller tail on the other. It wasn't moving at all, just standing or sitting there—Réka could see its curled-up, sharp-clawed feet now—seemingly unaware of all the fuss around it.

“It’s a turtle, it’s a turtle!” One of the younger kids said. She was jumping up and down, her braids bouncing around her thrilled face.

“A giant turtle!”

“Ninja turtle!” This was the boy with the stick. He held it in front of him like a sword but had stepped back a little, away from the creature.

“Maybe it’s a tortoise, not a turtle,” a girl who looked like she might be his sister told him.

“Like you know the difference!”

“Maybe it’s coming out of hibernation,” Emi said quietly. She had learned the word just recently, from a library book. Her accent was wavering, halfway between Jamaican and American.

“Or it’s dead!” the boy said.

“It’s not. Look at the eyes.”

The woman with the dog nodded at Réka, recognizing from her disheveled urgency that she was the mother of one of the kids. “Don’t let them touch it,” she said and turned to walk away. The fluffball in her arms was growling quietly, like a baby’s rattle.

And at that, the school bus finally pulled in. The children looked up but seemed reluctant to abandon their exciting find. The driver honked. She did not look like the patient kind.

“Let’s go, guys,” Réka said. “You need to get on the bus.” She wondered what her accent sounded like to the kids. She tried to flap the ‘t’ in ‘get on,’ but it didn’t come out right.

The bus had its stop signs out and the red lights flashing, and there were already cars stopped behind it on the driveway, waiting. The driver leaned out through the door and yelled.

“Leave that snapper alone! Last call if you’re going to school today.”

The children started up the slope one by one, gathering their scattered belongings on the way. Emi was the last one to move. Right before getting on, she turned around. Her hair had already started to escape from the bun that was her usual solution when her big sister wasn’t around to help style it, and she was smoothing it down distractedly.

“Mom,” she said, with that long American vowel. “What if the turtle needs help?”

“I’ll make sure it’s okay,” Réka said.

Just then she saw two neighbors walking toward her, Nkechi from 2C and Amy’s husband from the building on the other side of the pool. Felix. They must have seen the commotion.

“We’ll make sure it’s okay,” she said with more conviction, and Emi got on the bus, and the bus was finally off.

Nkechi was wrapped in a blanket and looked like she was half asleep. She was the pastor of a church, and Monday was her rest day, not a day when she should have new emergencies to deal with. She stared at the creature in disbelief.

“What on God’s green earth is this?

“A turtle, it looks like. The children found it,” Réka said.

“But why is it so big? It looks like an alligator with a shell! This is suburban America. There shouldn’t be anything this big here. Did it bite anyone?”

“No, it hasn’t moved at all. It just sits there.”

“Maybe it’s a box turtle,” Felix said. “I’ve seen an article about them. How to look out for them when they are crossing roads.”

“It doesn’t look like a box. More like a rock with a mean face!” Nkechi did not take her eyes of the animal and kept a safe distance.

“We have big turtles in the Philippines,” Felix said. “But I didn’t expect one here.”

“The bus driver called it a snapper,” Réka said.

“Snapple? Like the drink?”

They all burst out laughing. Here they were, three clueless foreigners faced with this prehistoric creature that emerged the swamps of America.

“I should call Amy,” Felix said. “She grew up around here. She’ll know what to do.”

But Nkechi was already typing on her phone.

“Common snapping turtle,” she read. “*Chelydra serpentina.* Ranges from southeastern Canada all the way down to Florida.”

She laughed. “Common, it says in its name. Yes, I think the natives know this creature well, at least on the East Coast.”

“But what is it doing? Emi said it’s probably coming out of hibernation. After the winter.”

“I’m sure that’s the case. It—she?—is warming up and getting ready to look for a mate to make even more very common snapping turtles to fill the continent. We should leave her to it.”

Nkechi's disposition toward the animal had gotten a lot friendlier now that she knew its name and decided on its gender, but she still kept a close watch on it, even as they started walking away. "Any luck with the job search?" she asked Felix, looking back and forth between the turtle and her neighbor.

Felix shook his head. He used to work for USAID as a South Asian language expert but was let go with everyone else when the agency was eliminated by the new administration. His wife Amy was at the NIH, still employed, but she went to work every morning with a stomachache and a feeling of utter pointlessness. She and Felix were talking about her quitting and the two of them moving to the Philippines to teach English.

"How about Dan?" he asked Réka.

"Still IT guy at the community college. But he's applying to a lot of places. I will start subbing for MCPS, I guess. They always need subs. Not sure they're short on Spanish teachers at this time, especially non-native speakers from Eastern Europe."

"I could use some coffee if you can make it," Nkechi sighed. "We could talk about what a great time you guys picked to come to this country.

Back in Réka's kitchen, holding coffee mugs, they poured out their hearts. Felix believed in progress and democracy and in helping them flourish around the world, but now he was sitting at home, trying to be supportive as he watched his American wife despair of her country. Nkechi was on a religious worker visa, and her twenty-year-old son, who was enrolled at the University of Maryland, was refusing to leave their apartment. He was in the process of switching from the dependent visa he had through his mother to an F-1 student visa, and he had heard of at least one person in that situation who was detained for being out of status.

"I think that's insane. They wouldn't do that. We're both legal. My extension was approved. His change of status is pending. That's an authorized stay, right?"

Felix and Réka both nodded: yes, of course. But who knows, these days?

“He says he’s keeping up with everything remotely. But he’s also talking about going back to Nigeria to finish there.”

Réka was starting to feel guilty about the green card, about not appreciating it as much as she should when so many people were without the safety her family could take for granted. “I’m sure the F1 will be approved soon,” she said, because she felt like she needed to say something.

“Wait, what’s that?” Nkechi pointed out the window. A large dark bulk lay on the sidewalk, not far from the school bus stop. “Not another creature!”

“Good grief. No, that’s Emi’s cello. I guess I’m driving to the school before fourth period,” Réka said.

“I’ll get it,” Felix laughed and set his coffee down.

“I can pick up some lunch for you and Chidi from the jollof place on the way,” Réka said. Nkechi nodded distractedly—she may or may not have heard. They watched through the window as Felix sprinted to the sidewalk and picked up the cello case. He gestured toward the turtle, smiling.

“Our friend Snappy is on the move,” Nkechi said. The turtle was walking, ever so slowly, down the slope toward the water.

“Perhaps she’s feeling warmer,” Réka said. “Spring is here, right?”