

Seeds of Forevermore

Ann Voelkel

“I’m too old for this,” Max groaned, shifting into a more comfortable position.

Ellie snorted at her twin. “Old at twenty?”

They were hiding under a table in the *Kiddie-Corner* of Old-Town Library, awaiting Dagmar’s return.

“You think anything will happen?”

Ellie sighed at him. “I only hope this brings her some closure.”

It had been two months since Dagmar’s mother’s fatal stroke. Katya had been a librarian here, and the sudden loss shocked everyone.

Dagmar was devastated.

Then Dagmar discovered the research notes for a book her mother was writing on the library’s history. Katya had focused on a legend claiming *strange and mystical* happenings on solstice nights. She had written, *seek solace in stories on nights such as these*, then underlined it, twice.

So, Ellie and Max were accompanying Dagmar on summer solstice night, to see if there was truth to this legend. If nothing happened, it was still a nice way to honor Katya.

“We’re locked in,” Dagmar confirmed, pausing to snatch a couple stray books from the floor.

Ellie had just helped Max up when the lights winked out. Before she could voice her dismay, they blinked back on. Except...

Ellie stared in astonishment. The library was gone, and they now stood in foggy desolation under a smog-bruised sky. Thin, desiccated tree stumps, awash in a sea of prickly, olive-colored grass stretched before them. Ahead, through the gloom, loomed a peculiar, lopsided tower. It spiraled upward, sprouting random balconies and turrets as it rose.

This certainly qualified as *strange*, although even stranger was that Ellie didn’t feel that discomfited by it. **“What the heck is this place, and how did we get here?”**

Max chimed in. **“It seems rather trippy ‘tho my mind’s still clear. But what’s with this rhyming? Sounds weird in my ear.”**

“I had picked up the book, *The Lorax!*” Dagmar exclaimed. She gestured toward the tower. **“Let’s go visit the Once-ler and see what he’ll say. Perhaps he’ll have answers for us three today.”**

Ellie and Max stared at each other, then shrugged.

Dagmar no longer held either library book, but Ellie wondered what the second one had been.

As they walked, Max amused himself by narrating the journey:

**“They crunched through the forest of truncated trunks,
and sniffed at the air, which was stinky, and stunk.**

**The land now bereft of cute *Brown Bar-ba-loots*,
and gunk began sticking to all their nice boots.**

**Each pinched shut their nose, passing green *glupp*-filled ponds,
where no *Humming-Fish* hummed, nor *Swomee-Swans* swum.**

...And finally arrived at the foot of the tower.”

Before Dagmar could knock, a long tube *slipped* down from a crack in a high, boarded-up window. Attached to the end was a cone, and through it floated a gravelly voice:

**“I’m glad you’ve come here,
as my end now draws near.**

You have all read my story, so if I may—

—I shall not repeat it, there’s no time today.

Your mother you’ve lost, through no fault of your own,

What I’ve lost is my fault, for this I atone.

I’ll give you a gift, two *Truffula* seeds.

The last of their kind; tis what you and *he* needs.

And with this last gift, I have paid for my greed...

When the time comes upon you, you’ll know what to do.

I wish you best luck; hope your skies remain blue.”

A fuzzy green arm snaked through the crack. Dagmar deftly caught the dropped seeds and slipped them into her pocket. Then the smogginess engulfed them, as the Once-ler spoke with a final, weary sigh.

**“Of all the things in the world one needs,
it’s never ever been a *Thneed*...”**

The darkness lessened by degrees.

They now found themselves in the foyer of a candle-lit room. Dusty shelves crammed with patinated books stood on either side of a somber stone hearth.

Crumpled, ink-stained papers lay scattered across a broad oaken desk.

The oppressive stillness was disturbed only by the susurrus of a slight breeze ruffling a curtain they could barely see. The flickering lights could not penetrate the shadows shrouding the room’s farthest corners.

Dagmar looked about. **“From one bleakness to another! Would return had I my druthers,**

To the sad polluted other—or to someplace neither nor.”

Max whispered, **“It appears to be a study, of some old worn fuddy-duddy. Someone’s long-forgotten buddy—”**

Ellie now knew what Dagmar’s second book had been. She elbowed her brother and pointed. **“—Look! Atop the chamber door!**

**Perched upon the bust of Pallas, 'tis the corvid of Poe's lore!
All it says is 'nevermore.'**"

The raven paused mid-preening to return their stares with glittering obsidian eyes reflecting crescent moons. It coyly hopped from foot-to-foot, gave a sly wink, then croaked, "Nevermore."

Max scowled. **"Now we're sounding old and musty, archaic, and just as dusty,
As this den and all within it, likewise bird above the door.
Why can't we just depart this room, and leave behind this gloomy doom?"**

As Max reached for the doorknob, the bird emitted a guttural, raucous growl which resonated throughout the room, startling them. Fixing its gaze upon Max, the raven slowly shook its head. Its eyes glowed an ominous sanguine.

Max pulled back. **"Well, damn you and your jet-black plumes, evil eyes, and grim rancor!"** He eyed a faint sliver of golden light glinting from under the door. **"I bet through there is our way home; see the glow upon the floor?
We must exit through this door."**

The raven extended a foot and curled its razor talons, daring them to try.

Ellie shivered. **"Nightmare of Stygian despair; it's entrapped us in its lair,
With demon's eyes it probes our souls, bleak and black above the door.
I'm with Poe, that's no mere raven; Poe ought know; he is the maven,
of grim and dreadful avians, tell-tale hearts and blood and gore!
It perches, preens, in silence schemes, with heart as cold as ice and hoar.
Our homes we'll see—"**

"—Nevermore," the raven smirked.

Max snatched up an ink bottle. **"I'll knock that damn bird off the bust, drive it away and end this fuss!"**

He raised his hand to lob the bottle, but Ellie grabbed his arm.

**"Wait! We mustn't act so hasty! Like that Ancient Mariner—
Who shot the albatross and learned, his error when that bird returned—
To hang about his neck and burn, while he drifted shore-to-shore."**

With reluctance, Max returned the bottle and addressed Dagmar. **"Why could you not have held instead, Poppins, Peter Rabbit or...
Pooh and Piglet, and Eeyore?"**

Dagmar motioned for them to step away from the door. **"Come on, let us not be craven. First *The Lorax*, now 'The Raven'?
A pair of works by happenstance, taken from library floor?
Old Once-ler spoke of loss and woe, bequeathed two seeds for us to sow,
And now we're here with Poe's sad crow, croaking always 'nevermore'?"**

Ellie nodded thoughtfully. **"Poe's the *he* that Once-ler spoke of; Poe too lost one he adored,
He still pines for his Lenore."**

Dagmar agreed. **“Helping Poe must be the ticket, to escape this sticky wicket,
Turn him from his dark despair and exorcise his chamber door.
The crux comes not from nepenthe, opium, or green absinthé,
Nor concoctions made by Circe. He ought not *forget* Lenore.”**

Ellie squeezed Dagmar’s shoulder and softly added, **“And as you must go on living, though you grieve your dear mother,
So too he, without Lenore.”**

Dagmar managed a smile.

Max squinted about. **“So, where’s the famous man himself? Or is he walled behind these shelves?
The hearth is cold; there is no sound—”**

“—Wait, I think I heard a snore!” Dagmar cupped her hand around her ear.

With Ellie holding a candle, they peered into the darkest corner of the study—where they could now see a mumbling figure slumped in an armchair by the window.

Ellie whispered, **“Let’s sneak over silent creeping, where he lies fitfully sleeping,
Lost in dreams—despondent, weeping—dreaming of his love, Lenore.”**

Max glanced back at the raven. **“It’s watching us with bad intent, glaring from above the door—
—And I think it’s getting sore.”**

The raven did seem more agitated; its ruffled feathers were starting to smolder alarmingly. They hurriedly crossed the room to where the poet tossed under a thin blanket. Max poked him.

Poe awoke with a strangled yelp and clutched the blanket to his chest. He stared at them with wild, feverish eyes.

Ellie smiled reassuringly. **“We wish to aid you with your grief, help you start a brand-new leaf...”** She trailed off, distracted by Dagmar, who had taken a clay flowerpot from the window ledge. Whatever had once bloomed within was long gone, leaving only dry soil.

Max stepped in with a sweep of his arm. **“—Look about, sir, at this study, all this dismal, bleak décor,
Dank and dark is most distressing, dusty tomes also depressing.
Dude, you’ve got to stop obsessing, stressing over this Lenore!”**

Ellie quickly cut in. **“Life’s too short to give up living; find another to adore,
In this way, *honor* Lenore.”**

Dagmar pulled a *Truffula* seed from her pocket when there came a tempestuous whirlwind of sulfurous smoke and ash, followed by a harrowing shriek. The raven was now perched above the window, black smoke curling from

its feathers. Its malevolent, crimson gaze swept about, coming to rest on the plant pot and seed in Dagmar's hands.

Max grabbed a hat rack from the corner and brandished it. **"Return to Hell, you evil bird; I'll send you there—you mark my word!"**

Dagmar winced. **"Its shrieking fills me with despair; flays my soul down to its core—"**

Poe abruptly cried out, **"—Demon-bird's eyes, sharp and gleaming, traps my soul in hellish dreaming—It needs me insane and screaming, screaming for my lost Lenore!"** Tears of anguish began rolling down his gaunt cheeks.

Ellie gestured at the raven, who was unfurling its smoldering wings. **"Hurry, Dagmar, plant that seed, and quickly water it before—"**

"—We're reduced to bloody gore!" Max finished, readying the hat rack.

Dagmar pushed the Truffula seed deep into the dry dirt, then thrust the pot under Poe's chin.

A single tear dripped into the hole.

With a fiendish screech the raven attacked, splintering the end of the hat rack with beak and talons.

Max yelled and bashed back, sending up a swirl of sparks and soot.

Despite the frenzied cacophony behind them, Dagmar and Ellie were mesmerized by the thick, green tendril that had suddenly sprung from the dirt. It twined upwards for six inches, paused, then—pop! A burst of color as a cottony-candy tuft sprouted.

It was a tiny, rose-colored Truffula tree.

Dagmar pressed the pot into Poe's trembling hands, and as he stared at the seedling in awe, shadows began to fade from his bruised eyes. His once pallid skin took on a pinkish glow, matching the tiny tuft.

A screech erupted into acrid smoke that rained ash and hot cinders.

The raven had become no more!

"Look! Look at the chamber door!" Max cried.

As the door creaked open, a warm, golden light began pouring in.

Without hesitation, Max grabbed Ellie and Dagmar, and pulled them into a run toward it. Before crossing the threshold, Ellie threw a last glance over her shoulder. Poe was still staring at the tree in wonder, a smile ghosting his lips.

In the library, the early morning sun streaked through the windows by the *Kiddie-Korner*.

"The legend is true, and that was wild!" Max exclaimed, then grinned. "Hey, no more rhyming!"

Dagmar stared down at the two books that suddenly reappeared in her hands. *The Lorax* and a collection of Poe's poems. She carefully placed both on the table. With Max and Ellie watching, Dagmar pulled the second Truffula seed out.

"What will you do with it," Ellie asked.

"On my mother's grave I'll plant it, where it shall grow..." and here Dagmar smiled, "...forevermore."