

1991 Brookie and D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest Winner

IN A SUMMER SKY

By Afton L. Pettegrew

“A FAIRY TOLD ME WHERE A SECRET TREASURE is,” the big neighbor girl, Coralee, said over her shoulder.

I quickened my step to hear more. I was into fairies and elves and Saturday morning's *Let's Pretend* stories on the radio.

Great cloud puffs sailed high, their shadows drifting across the corn fields and fluttering wild roses. Oats grew thick and tall, grey-green, rippling smoothly in the wind. The shade of the Potawatomi plum trees was thin. Sunshine flickered between their round leaves, and dozens of grasshoppers jumped, crackling, away from our footsteps.

“What's the secret treasure?”

Coralee said nothing. She only paid me attention when there wasn't anything else to do. It didn't matter, as I had my very own tiny-winged friend. Her name was Priscella.

No bigger than a hummingbird, my fairy was beautiful. Instead of straight brown hair and drab hazel eyes, she had pink, glistening curls and not one freckle on her nose. She never wore flour-sack bloomers or hand-me-down clothes. She only liked rose-colored petal skirts with matching gauzy blouses. And Priscella hated big brown oxfords. She flitted about in tiny golden slippers. My fairy and I played together when I was alone.

“What is the secret treasure?” I asked again.

“Jewels,” Coralee said. “Emeralds and diamonds and rubies.”

“Where is it?”

“Down.”

“Down where?”

“Down the cross lanes in Uncle Iver's apple orchard.”

I liked Uncle Iver. He had an elf living in his back yard. Uncle Iver and his wife lived uptown. However, his apple orchard was down the cross lanes west of town, past my house. Each morning while the sky was still milky blue and dew drops twinkled in the grass, he passed on the other side of the road in blue bib overalls and straw hat. With a willow whip in hand, he herded his half dozen Guernseys down the cross lanes to graze for the day.

Uncle Iver wasn't really my uncle. Back in the days of Brigham Young and polygamy, my great-grandfather, the first bishop in our Mormon town, also had plural wives. So we all

were now kissing cousins of sorts. Most of my playmates called him Uncle Iver, as I did.

I knew, and all my friends knew, Uncle Iver and his wife had an elf living in their backyard. The famous poplar tree where the elf lived had a wicked, gaping hole in its trunk. It stood gigantic, several feet from their kitchen door. Its spreading branches of deep green shaded their entire house.

I never knew what had happened to the tree. It was as though someone had tried to rip its heart out. Or perhaps caterpillars or disease had nearly killed it. But the hardy poplar struggled on, long surviving its wounds. The result was a healed scar, a gaping oval hole, a dark hidden home for Uncle Iver's elf.

I wasn't sure if Coralee or even Uncle Iver's wife was aware of the elf. His wife hardly seemed like the kind. She was tall and queenly and made lovely quilts. Her house felt cool and sterile. Uncle Iver was a smiling, small man. The top of his head barely came up to his wife's shoulder. I never saw them walking, dancing, or even talking together.

I looked up into Coralee's round face framed with straw-colored hair. “Did the fairy tell you exactly where the secret treasure is?”

“Mmmm, it's a secret,” she said, blue eyes sparkling.

“Please, can I see the secret treasure?”

“Well, being you are my best friend, maybe I'll tell you.”

I held my head proudly. I wanted to be Coralee's best friend more than anything else. She was so grown-up and smart, and no one ever, absolutely ever, bossed her around.

We came to the flat, grassy ditch bank in front of Coralee's house. Crystal water sparkled over clean stones and white-washed sand. She sat down. We watched a pair of pale violet butterflies as they hovered, then alighted. Their gilt-edged wings pumped as they sipped.

My feet felt hot and thirsty. I took off my oxfords. Mud squeezed up between my toes. Like swirls of smoke, my footprints would not stay. The toes smoothed out. The heel dwindled to a small hollow, then melted away. The wind made a wild, lonely sound in the willows. I waded in. Gurgling cold mountain water washed between my toes and circled my ankles.

“I'll tell you about the secret treasure first,” Coralee said. “Then, after you have climbed the silo, we'll go down to Uncle Iver's orchard and see the treasure of jewels.”

AFTON L. PETTEGREW lives in Salt Lake City.



LANE MITCHELL

I couldn't remember my name or where I was. Nor did I care. My former world had become nothingness. I was conscious only of a hand gripping the instep of my free foot.

My heart stopped. The word *silo* startled me. It represented something exceedingly high.

Suddenly a great black cloud of birds rose up and whirled above us. The noise of their wings was almost louder than Coralee's voice.

Still, I could hear her telling about a little golden chest hidden within an apple tree stump, as if in a cave. It lay glittering upon a bed of dried apple leaves and was filled with emeralds, diamonds, and rubies. The tree stump, between two vibrant apple trees, was overgrown with ground-cherry bushes and twining green vines of wild morning glory. She said the morning glory was like a grotto of red, blue, rosy pink, and striped white flowers. Their throats were open as if shouting a protest to trespassers, protecting the small golden coffin.

The flock of crows passed swiftly over the corn tops and settled at a distance.

I turned and looked beyond Coralee's house. The silo, the mile-high concrete cylinder, was in the center of a barnyard that surrounded it like a festering sore. Old haystacks and manure piles rotted around pig sheds. Brown horses stood side by side, head to end, flicking their coarse black tails to keep the flies from eating at the corners of their eyes. Within a pole fence, white-faced range cattle stood on sturdy legs. First one, then another, bawled. Tongues licked flat noses. Black and

white Holstein cows munched through slits in wooden stalls. And the jutting stacker pole, tall and naked, would soon now be lifting forkfuls of fresh hay into loaf-like stacks.

I looked at Coralee. She was running her hand through the shadows of the grass. I stepped out of the water, crushing some slender green blades. The warm breeze dried my feet. Coralee didn't seem to be in any hurry. I wasn't either.

My thoughts turned back to Uncle Iver's elf. One time my fairy, Priscella, and I went uptown to get the mail and buy a yeast cake and a few gumdrops from the General Store. We decided to pay a visit to Uncle Iver's elf. We crossed the street and stood in front of Uncle Iver's gate. I had always gone there with my friends, the twins, whose uncle he truly was. I had never before gone inside Uncle Iver's yard alone.

Uncle Iver's house looked quiet and scary. I was taking a chance that Uncle Iver was out and about with his farming business. And I hoped his wife was bent over the usual quilt frame.

I "ssshhed" the wire gate as it squeaked on its hinges. I knew I was where I ought not to be, and I made my brown shoes step as lightly as possible. I followed the concrete walk around to the back of the house. The windows were shiny clean, the lace curtains slightly ajar. There, close to the kitchen door, stood the huge poplar with the gaping cavity in its belly. Its great

roots had grown slowly, breaking the walk, causing it to shove upward.

The tree's oval opening was large enough for me to crawl into. I peeked inside the pitch-black hole and softly called, "Hello." It smelled musky. I thought I heard squeaky sounds like those of disturbed, sleeping bats.

"Anybody home?"

I didn't expect an answer, but a tiny yellow light winked in the gloom. I opened my little brown paper sack and set one red, sugar-coated gumdrop on the lip of the oval hole. Quickly I retraced my steps and, quietly as possible, reclosed the wire gate.

The town was very quiet. Priscella and I walked down the middle of Main Street. I told her that Uncle Iver's elf was probably east of town at Sweet Pea Hollow. She flitted around my head twice, meaning she agreed.

I'd learned from *Let's Pretend* that elves don't like to be seen by humans. But I knew he was a cute little fellow with a mop of green curls and pointy ears. On his brown suit, over his round belly, were four large buttons. His leggings covered his feet and turned up at the end where a single bell jingled above each foot.

Priscella and I laughed to ourselves. We could just see him lolling among the pink, white, and blue pea vine blossoms and drinking creek water from a leaf. We knew he also rode the big saw mill wheel—when no one was looking, of course.

"Well, do you want to see that secret treasure or not?" Coralee asked, sounding annoyed.

My stomach jumped a little. "Yes, yes, I do."

Besides being anxious to see the secret treasure, I wanted to stay on Coralee's good side. Once when she had been annoyed at me, she and her cousins had locked me in the lavatory at church. Giggling, howling, they'd held the door for a long time. I was glad Priscella was with me because when I cried, she understood. When they finally released the door, I came out fighting. The cousins were still laughing. But Coralee was nowhere to be seen.

At Sunday School that day our teacher told us about heavenly beings, guardian angels. In times of great danger, our angel would be with and protect us. Guardian angels sounded good to me. I envisioned mine with shining silver curls.

Coralee's voice nudged me. "Come on. Let's go climb the silo."

We walked in silence. No one appeared as we passed Coralee's house. A speckled chicken was taking a dust bath under a lilac bush. A fat, velvety black and yellow bumblebee aimed at a mauve hollyhock. Clumsily it jarred the powdery center, and golden flower dust sprinkled to earth.

The silo was tall and round. A small diagonal half tube covered the iron rungs forming a ladder to the top. The area close to the silo was neat and clean. I felt very small there. I put my hand on the silo's concrete shell. It was cool. I shivered.

Coralee said she would wait right there at the bottom of the silo until I came down.

Clearing my thickening throat, I asked, "Do you promise?"

When she squared her shoulders, I noted her chest was not

flat like mine but had two little peaks. Her hand made a big, sweeping X. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

More confident, I stood under the diagonal tube. My heart quickened. Down in the bottom, last year's silage had spoiled into a brownish, pungent mass, ready to seep away. Above, the silo was tall, round, and hollow inside. The rungs were wide apart. I began to heave myself up.

"Hello!" I yelled after a few fruitful pulls.

"Helloo, hello-o-o, hello-o-o-o," came the echo, sharp at first, then soft and mournful.

Forced, vibrant laughter bounced higher and higher around the concrete cylinder until it exhausted into the spot of blue above.

Coralee's voice came from far down on the ground. "Only scaredy cats scoot around the top on their seats!"

Her words stopped me cold.

"Big kids stand up and walk the silo rim!" she shouted.

I jumped in my skin. I felt I might lose the lunch I hadn't had. I tightly closed my eyes but beads of fear oozed out anyway.

At the very top, the thin, high sky was too hot to look at. I thought heaven, where God and my guardian angel lived, couldn't be far away. My feet still rested two rungs down. My knees sagged. With stiff knuckles, I forced them upright.

I could see our house next door, with poplars half way around. Dad's peach orchard and garden between the rows were there. The long, yellow-green, sweet corn leaves fluttered and the melon vines uncurled beyond patches of big spreading leaves. Yellow wax bean and carrot rows were feathery green, and the beets thrust up dark leaves on red stems. Taking a deep breath, I smelled Dad's pink-cheeked peaches fevering in the sun.

My sister had told me that several years ago she'd climbed this very silo. She'd looked to the northwest and watched one of the first Diesel streamliners going from Chicago to California. It was so tiny and faraway the yellow engine and silver body looked like a little worm inching across the country. Trains didn't pass through our mountain town, but in my bed at night, I could faintly hear big black steam engines bellowing black clouds into the air.

Glancing eastward, I felt as lofty as the faraway mountains. Through a silvery sheen, I saw our whole town, trees, shimmering housetops, the town hall, the church belfry, and other silos towering here and there.

"Are you going to stand up there and daydream all day?"

I was too high for her crossness to affect me. Still, I did want to please her. And be considered one of the big kids.

I knelt, then stood erect on the silo rim. The wind ruffled my skirt. Somewhere I had heard someone say, "Never look down at the ground." So, looking neither right nor left, I glued my eyes on my brown oxfords. For balance, I stretched out both arms. Hardly daring to breathe, I took my first tiny step. At a snail's pace I crept half way around the silo's rim.

Then, for some strange reason, I stopped. I couldn't control my eyes any more. My glance slid off my feet, off the narrow ledge, and miles down to earth. The ground began to move. It

went slowly back and forth at first, then faster. My head felt woozy. I swayed. I could hardly see. The ground blurred as it whipped faster and faster.

I was too frightened to cry out. Who could hear me? Who could help? Blood hammered in my ears. My quaking insides said if I fell within the silo, maybe the slimy brown mess at the bottom would save me. I knew if I tumbled outside, I would land like an egg, in a broken splat.

Mother's face flashed into my mind. Darkness like black smoke swirled around. I felt myself teetering. Then I felt as though someone had turned a key and locked me, balanced on one leg, like a frozen ballet dancer, on the brink of death.

Slowly a dark, almost pleasant, numbness closed around me. I couldn't remember my name or where I was. Nor did I care. My former world had become nothingness. I was conscious only of a hand gripping the instep of my free foot. It felt as if my brown oxfords weren't even there. Comforting and warm, the hand brought that foot back to the silo's rim. Then the hand guided both feet, one step at a time, around to the iron-rung ladder back to earth.

Shaking, tottering, I eased myself down and grasped the top metal bar. Still in an awkward position, I could topple either way. The last memory I have of the miracle hand was its diminishing touch on my descending feet. My brown oxfords were stepping downward, downward to safety. I trembled as I struggled to hang on. My teeth chattered like woodpeckers and echoed about the cold, empty, near-tomb. My vision was still blurred, yet I sensed I was near the bottom. Letting go, I tumbled, hard, to the ground.

I don't know how long I lay curled below the ladder. I only know the ground felt warm and safe. I wanted to hug and tell it I loved it.

Finally gathering myself up, I crawled to the silo and leaned back against it. The blessed sunshine soaked into my small frame and gradually stilled the chattering. Sitting, I pulled my legs up, wrapped my arms round them, and rested my forehead on my kneecaps.

Coralee had disappeared, was long, long gone, of course.

Late summer, my favorite time of year was ending. Waving corn fields, taller than farmers' heads, were ready for harvest and to be stored in the silo. The sun was hot and the earth dry. Soon, two men will walk beside a flatbed pulled by a team of workhorses. Each will take two rows and with a short-handled hoe, chop! chop! chop! will cut two or three corn stalks at a time. Pheasants will fly up and now and then a rabbit will jump and bound away. High in the sky, meadowlarks will sing.

The men will hold the bundle of stalks under their arms and close to their bodies. After cutting several hills and making the bundles heavy, they will slip the hoe underneath and flip the lower end of the stalks to the center of the flatbed. Tassels will bounce on the edge of the wagon. The men and wagon will leave a wide path of stubble behind. Four or five wagons and crews will work in relays from the corn fields to the silo.

A power-driven tractor and a corn chopper will be there. A farmer will feed corn stalks into the sharp blades of the noisy, greedy chopper. Then, forced by the tractor's power belt, the

corn pieces will be sent up, up through a large pipe that curves over the rim of the silo. Pitchfork in hand, a man inside the silo will evenly distribute and tromp the silage. As the silo fills, he will put boards inside the iron rungs to hold the sweet smelling corn. Cattle will eat the slightly fermented silage during winter months.

One day Priscella and I will walk down the cross lanes by ourselves. It will be late summer, the growing season over. We will search for the hidden rubies, diamonds, and emeralds in Uncle Iver's apple orchard. Among the trees heavy with crisp red globes, we'll search for a stump.

Within that stump, as in a small hollow, will be the secret treasure. On leafy bushes hovering above, thick on stems under large leaves, will dangle the six-cornered bells, pale grey and thinner than paper, that hold the plump, golden ground-cherries.

The twining morning glory will have grown weary, twisted tight over the alcove where the little golden chest lies. Priscella and I will not be one bit surprised to see the lid open and Uncle Iver's elf sitting Indian style on those glittering jewels, eating a yellow ground-cherry.

AT church this coming Sunday, I knew Coralee and her cousins would put their heads together. She would whisper to them. Then they would all look at me and laugh. It wouldn't matter. I was bigger than Coralee. I felt very grown up. I had received a miracle. The hand of my guardian angel had guided my feet as I had tottered on the silo's rim. As long as I lived, even when I was old and gray, I would remember that warm hand helping and preserving me.

I felt sad as the cattle moved restlessly, wanting to be fed. Day had become dusk. Mama would be wondering where I was. Uncle Iver would soon be driving his Guernseys past our house. At home, he would pull up his stool and milk. Then with full, frothy pails, he would walk toward the kitchen door and past the big spreading poplar where his elf lived.

The breeze dropped with the sun and whispered softly among the trees. The earth below the summer sky breathed gently in the fading day. It was time for Priscella and me to go home. ☞



PARADISE

*You found your way in,
you find your way out.*

*A path of purple flowers
in the snow, the dead
leaves hanging on:*

*we're not going anywhere
and it's later all the time.*

—TIMOTHY LIU