

# **THE STORYTELLER**

*By Laurisa White Reyes*

*“But, Charlotte,” said Wilbur, “I’m not terrific.”*  
*“That doesn’t make a particle of difference,” replied*  
*Charlotte. “Not a particle. People believe almost anything*  
*they see in print.”*

*From Charlotte’s Web, by E.B. White*

*Summer*

# 1

“Where’s Dad?”

Bea Bailey plopped down on the sofa and kicked the back of her heels against it. On her lap lay a worn copy of *Charlotte’s Web*, its pages yellowed and dog-eared from multiple readings.

“Don’t kick the couch, Bea,” said her mother from the kitchen where she was elbow-deep in dish suds. Beyond her, through the garden window, the fading light cast lacy shadows across the cornfields.

Bea tapped the cover of her book with her fingertips. “It *is* time for bed, isn’t it?” she asked impatiently.

Wanda Bailey came to the living room wiping her hands on a dishtowel and sat down beside Bea. She was a thin woman – some said too thin – with skin freckled from

the Idaho sun. Bea looked a lot like her mother, though she longed for milky white skin and curly brown hair instead of straight.

“I’ll read to you tonight,” said Wanda.

“But I want Dad to read to me,” Bea replied, adjusting her glasses on the bridge of her nose. “He always reads to me.”

“I know, but he doesn’t feel well tonight.”

Bea looked at the cover of her book. It had long since lost its luster, but she didn’t care. It was her favorite story, and she only wanted to share it with one person.

“Dad always reads to me,” she repeated.

Wanda lifted the book from Bea’s lap and opened to the page with the corner turned down. She put her arm around Bea’s shoulders and ran her fingers through her hair, but her voice was flat as she read, as though her mind were somewhere else.

Bea listened, but it wasn’t the same. No, mother didn’t do it right. She didn’t do voices, or whisper or giggle in all the right places. Bea listened, but her mind was somewhere else, too.

When Wanda finished she returned the book to Bea, kissed her good night, and went back to the kitchen to put away the dishes. Bea got up from the couch and walked down the hall that led from the living room to the bedrooms. She paused at the first room and peeked in. Her little brother Colt lay sprawled out over his bed, his thumb stuck firmly in his mouth. Then she walked past her own room toward the open door at the end of the hall. She was on tiptoes by the time she reached it, trying her best not to make a sound.

Placing her hand on the door, she gently pushed against it. The door creaked a little. Bea looked up to see if her mother would come out of the kitchen to scold her, but Wanda did not appear.

Bea opened the door a little further and slipped inside. The room was dark except for the narrow strip of light across her parents' bed that had snuck in behind her. Her father was there, sleeping. The sight of him brought unexpected tears to Bea's eyes. The man who she loved more than anything, the man who let her sit beside him on the tractor even when mother disapproved, who taught her to fly a kite and ride her bicycle, who had read to her every night of her life, lay in the middle of the bed with his knees and arms pulled tightly to his chest.

Bea backed out of the room and closed the door behind her. She ran to her own room and threw herself on her bed. The tears fell harder now, but she angrily wiped them away with the back of her hand. She bit her lip to prevent new tears from coming. Then she did something she thought she could never do. She tore the cover off her book. Then, without pausing to think, she opened the book to the very middle and tore it in half, right down the spine.

Bea heaved deep, agonizing sobs. She struggled to calm her breathing, to control the terrible thoughts racing through her brain. She looked at the mangled copy of *Charlotte's Web*, vulnerable and weak in her hands.

Suddenly, Bea jumped off the bed and hurried over to her desk. Fumbling through a drawer she found what she was looking for. She snapped off several lengths of scotch tape and bound the two halves of the book together. Then, using great care to get the edges just right, Bea re-attached the cover. She examined her work and realized with

dismay that no matter how much she tried to make things right again, the book would never be the same.

*Autumn*

## 2

The morning was scorching hot. Fingers of heat rose from the asphalt warping the air like ripples of water. Bea took off her glasses and wiped them with a tissue. Then she put them back on, adjusting them just so. No, it wasn't her glasses. The air really did seem to move. She had never seen that before, not in Idaho, not where September mornings were cool and crisp and crystal clear.

Bea stood with the toes of her shoes hanging over the curb. The street seemed as wide as the Grand Canyon, with cars speeding past from all directions. The noise alone made her want to cover her ears and run, run all the way back to the farm where she had spent her entire life until now. It wasn't fair, she told herself for the thousandth time. It wasn't fair that she was here in this dirty, noisy city instead of at home where she belonged.

It had been only a week since the Bailey family moved, yet somehow Idaho felt light years away. Despite the rigid smile that had been a permanent fixture on her mother's face for months now, Bea knew there was nothing good about coming to California.

Bea shifted her backpack from one shoulder to the other. She glanced up the street and down. The stream of cars was endless. *Will the light ever turn red*, she wondered? The neighborhood was nothing like the farm at all. She took a moment to observe her surroundings.

On her right was a bus stop with a concrete bench. Across the street there was a café with a red and white awning, and a flower shop with an array of colors in the window. On the corner opposite the florist was a drug store with a big sign over the door that read Don's Rx. Down the road a little Bea saw a park, though not a very big park, just a narrow grassy area between two old buildings.

Dozens of people hurried up and down the sidewalks: men wearing suits and ties carrying briefcases, and women in high heels dragging whimpering children behind them to school. That's where Bea was heading – to school – her new school with new friends, or so her mother told her. But Bea did not want to go to a new school or make new friends. She wanted her old school, her old friends.

Behind her stood an endless row of apartment complexes, each identical to the next. An old woman sat on the front steps of the complex beside her own. Her skin was the darkest shade of brown Bea had ever seen on a person, but her hair was perfectly white and reminded Bea of soap bubbles. In her hands yellow yarn twitched between two

long metal needles. Bea wondered what the old woman could be making. Mittens? A sweater? *Not in this heat*, she thought.

The woman glanced up from her knitting. Her wrinkled face scrunched as she sized up Bea. Her knitting needles clicked against each other, beating out an awkward tempo.

“Ain’t you the Bailey girl?” the woman called out. “I heard a new family was movin’ in. You off to school?”

Bea glanced in the woman’s direction then quickly returned her gaze to the street. This was California after all, and one couldn’t be too careful about strangers. The woman spoke again, a little louder than before.

“I said are you headin’ off to school?”

The light turned red. The cars stopped. Their engines grumbled and growled like animals restrained on invisible leashes.

Bea reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a plastic tube the length of her palm. She held it to her lips and pressed the button. A cool mist filled her lungs. She felt a little better, but the cars still snarled at her and the black street loomed before her like a gaping black chasm that could swallow her whole.

She glanced to her right and to her left. She knew she should cross. If she didn’t, she would be late to school. But the longer she waited, the harder it was to pry her feet from the curb.

“What you skeered of?” The old woman stopped knitting. Bea felt the weight of her eyes on the back of her neck. “Cars don’t bite, y’know. The way you jus’ standin’ there, you’d think they was a pack of crocodiles.”

Bea stared straight ahead willing herself to step off the curb. She was about to, when all of a sudden the blacktop beneath her feet rippled. Bea leaned forward to get a closer look, not certain of what she had just seen. Then it happened again. The black tar that coated the street swelled and sloshed as if it was water, and then Bea realized it wasn't black at all, but a sickly shade of green.

Bea jumped back with a start. She heard a strange noise, like the call of – could it be monkeys in the distance? In a flicker of an instant the city transformed into a thickly foliated jungle. The intersection became a muddy swamp that smelled of damp moss. Bea swatted away a mosquito buzzing in her ear. And the cars – in their places were the ridged backs of crocodiles half submerged beneath the murky water.

Bea was so astonished by the scene before her that for a single moment, she forgot about the cars and the city and school. She lifted her left foot and slowly dipped her toe into the water. Suddenly, a monstrous gray crocodile sprung up like a giant mousetrap and snapped its tooth-filled jaws missing her by only inches. Bea threw her arms in front of her face and screamed.

The monkey sounds and the mossy smell disappeared, and the now familiar smell of exhaust fumes filled her nose. Bea lowered her arms. She was back on the corner of Foothill and Vine, the old woman's knitting needles clicking away.

The signal turned green and the cars at the intersection lurched forward. Bea turned away, her heart pounding in her chest. She ran as fast as she could up the flight of stairs in front of her complex. She hurried through the door, down the hall to her apartment, and slammed the door shut behind her.