

BECOMING REAL

A.N.D.

Mary shivered and pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders. The tunnels seemed to be particularly cold today, despite the fact that spring was coming to the world Above.

She picked up her needle once more and took a few stitches in the patch on Gregory's pants, then stopped again to rub her eyes. It was terribly dark; had one of her candles gone out? A quick glance showed her that they were all still brightly blazing, but when she looked down at her sewing it was dim and unfocused. Maybe it was just that she was - she scarcely dared even think the words -- getting old?

Impossible. Flatly impossible. Mary got up, lit another candelabra, and brought it over to her chair to keep the darkness and fear at bay.

Once Gregory's knee was patched, she turned to darn up the elbow of Samantha's dress. Samantha was growing like a weed, bless her, and wouldn't be able to fit into this much longer. Still, it needed to be fixed. When Samantha had outgrown it, there would be another little girl along who needed warm clothing. There were always more children.

When the mending was finished, Mary got stiffly to her feet. Her joints ached all the time now, perhaps -- no, she wouldn't think about it. Mary put the half-formed thought resolutely away and shuffled off to Father's study, where Catherine was entertaining the children while Mary worked. As she approached, she could hear the sound of a page turning, and Catherine's voice reading.

"Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly ... "

Inside the study all of the children and many of the adults were gathered, listening with pleasure to the classic tale of *the Velveteen Rabbit*. Father looked at Mary and smiled, beckoning her over to an empty space beside them.

"Did you get your work finished?" he asked as she sat down. "Or do you want us to keep them busy a little while longer?"

"I'm finished," she whispered back, "but don't stop on my account." Mary leaned back and closed her eyes, but she could feel Father's concerned gaze all the same.

"You look tired," he said. "Perhaps you should take a break for the rest of the day ... "

"Don't be ridiculous!" Mary whispered sharply. "I'm fine! Now hush; I want to hear the story."

" 'Can you hop on your hind legs?' asked the furry rabbit. That was a dreadful question, for the Velveteen Rabbit had no hind legs at all! He sat still in the bracken, and hoped that the other rabbits wouldn't notice."

Mary looked lovingly over her brood. Christopher was leaning forward, his eyes shining, Samantha and Lizzie were smiling, and little Bobby was biting his lip, completely caught up in the tension. They were all riveted to Catherine, adoring her, fascinated with her story. And Mary was suddenly, horribly, irrationally jealous.

It wasn't fair! Catherine had so much -- youth, wealth, beauty. One manicured hand lifted from the book to brush a shining strand of hair out of her eyes as she read.

Mary's hands twisted in her lap, withered and knotted from age and work. Her hair was coarse and colorless, unlike Catherine's sleek chestnut glory. And it had been a very, very long time indeed since anyone had looked at Mary with the pride and love that radiated from Vincent as he looked at his Catherine. Mary had given her life, her youth, to the children of the tunnels, and now they repaid her by sitting in a circle worshipping this -- this *Topsider!*

The thoughts shamed Mary even as they came. She knew full well that Catherine had a kind and generous heart, and that the younger woman was as devoted to the children as Mary was herself. But Catherine walked in an air of glamor and romance; in comparison, Mary felt shabby, unwanted, unlovable -- old. What would she do if they told her that she was too old to take care of the children?

"Mary?" Father asked tentatively. "Are you all right?"

Mary suddenly realized that tears were running slowly down her cheeks. "...I'm fine," she stammered. "I always cry at the end of this book." She smiled insincerely, and Father patted her hand and turned away, apparently satisfied.

Mary wiped her face and sat quietly then, but as soon as she could she stole silently away. Perhaps a walk Above would clear the cobwebs from her soul.

It was the flutter of cloth in the evening breeze that first caught Mary's attention as she slowly walked back to the tunnel entrance. Mildly curious, she wandered over to the dumpster and pulled on the little bit of fabric. Perhaps it was a shirt or a dress; new clothing was always welcome Below.

It was a dress, but not the sort that Mary was expecting. This was a tiny dress, wrapped around a tinier rag doll. One arm was torn loose, one button eye missing, and what little was left of the hair was one matted knot. But a stitched smile shone bravely through

pencil shavings, and the remaining eye seemed to wink knowingly in the light from the corner lamppost.

No one from Above could have given the tattered toy a second glance, but Mary smoothed the fraying hair and ripped clothing gently. She knew the look of a plaything that had been loved roughly and long.

"You were real to someone, weren't you?" she crooned to it. Poor thing -- it would have been so easy to fix, but instead it had been thrown out. "Of what use is it to be loved and lose one's beauty and become Real if it all ended like this?" Mary quoted to it. "Come with me, little one, and I'll find you a new home and a new mommy."

Mary couldn't say just what it was about this doll that was so important. Maybe it was because she identified with it, because she, too, had been cast aside from the world Above. Maybe it was the satisfaction that came in knowing that she had the skill to make it beautiful again. But restoring it took a long time, for materials were scarce Below, and there was always someone who needed things more. Yet, slowly but surely, Mary made her repairs.

A sweater, too badly torn to be repaired, was unraveled and used as new hair. Tiny snips and scraps of cloth leftover from repairing the children's clothes made the basis of a new wardrobe. And Mary put ties on one of her own dresses so that she could use its buttons for new eyes.

Finally, just the week before Winterfest, the doll was ready. It looked like a miniature tunnel child, and Mary was proud of it -- until she saw the gifts that the helpers brought down. Despite the new clothes and hair, the little doll seemed terribly shabby and makeshift next to the pretty new toys and brightly colored books brought from Above. To make matters worse, Catherine had, in all innocence, brought down several dolls.

Mary put her offering in the stack of children's toys with a heavy heart. She had done her best with the materials she had, but she felt she should have known better than to think that anything she made could compete with anyone else's presents.

The children were brought in and lined up, and told that they could each pick one thing from the stack. Kipper deliberated for a while before choosing a wooden train Cullen had carved. Samantha, anxious to show that she was now a young woman, passed right by the toys and picked out a hair ribbon donated by Peter. And so it went, until it was finally little Melissa's turn.

Melissa had obviously had her eye on something -- she had been biting a knuckle every time someone approached the stack, and heaving an exaggerated sigh of relief when they left. Now she ran forward and snatched something desperately, and curled protectively around it as if she was afraid that someone would try to take it from her. Then she darted sideways, and transferred her strangling affection to Mary's knees.

"Thank you," said the small voice, muffled by Mary's skirts. But before Mary could regain her balance and poise, Melissa was gone again, over to Catherine, where she held up her new rag doll.

"See my dolly?" she demanded. "Isn't it pretty? Mary made it -- I saw her."

Catherine knelt and touched the tiny dress.

"It's perfect. It looks just like you." She smiled at the child, who beamed back.

"I'm gonna name her Mary too," Melissa confided loudly. "And I'll take good care of her, just as good as Mary takes care of us."

"Then you'll be the best mommy in the world," Catherine told her seriously, before rising and coming over to the doll's namesake. "Mary, I've never seen such tiny, even stitching. You must have put a lot of work into that. "

"But it wasn't even new!" Mary blurted. "The toys you brought--"

Catherine shrugged. "I only spent money, Mary. You spent love and time. That automatically makes things beautiful." She waved her hand at the glamorous things she had brought. "I put thought into the presents I brought, because I wanted the children to have what they really wanted. But I'm not here all the time, like you are. I don't know the children as well as you do. It's as if I'm a fairy godmother, who brings nice things when she comes -- but you're real, Mary. You're the one who's sat up with them when they're sick, helped them with their work, played with them; you've always been there for them. I envy that. I only wish I could be as good to the children as you are."

In her voice was an echo of the same envy that Mary had felt toward her, and suddenly Mary understood, and was able to forgive Catherine for being what she was. And Mary could forgive herself for growing old and shopworn, for that was the price she had willingly paid to give her love to the children. The young woman and the old woman smiled at each other with compassion, while in the background Vincent's soft voice read once again the timeless story of the price and rewards of love.

"When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. Once you are real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

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