The Ransom of a Wild Thing

Adapted from the O. Henry story *Ransom of Red Chief*

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FIRST DRAFT

CAST

SEB, a kidnapper
GUS, a kidnapper
MR. FLETCHER, who likes pickles
MR. MERRIMAN
MRS. MERRIMAN
JESSIE, the maid
MIZ CHAMBERS, who runs the general store
GWENDOLYN , a sweet little girl
CECILY Merriman, the sweetest little girl
LETITIA Merriman, the wild middle child (but not the Wild Thing)

Scene 1

SEB: So, some time ago, my partner Gus and I were running a little short on money to run a…well, let's just call it a "business opportunity of questionable provenance." *(Pause)* Okay, it was a con. We were…businessmen of an alternate ethical code. *(Pause.)* Okay, we were crooks. Criminals. But we had big dreams. Big dreams that would go a lot farther with a bit more cash in our pockets.

GUS: Seb…are you telling THAT STORY?

SEB: It's what the people came to hear, Gus.

GUS: I don't like THAT STORY. It gives me nightmares.

SEB: Me too, Gus…me, too. But it made us what we are today.

GUS *(with a loud sigh)*: Let me know when you need me.

SEB: As I was saying, we were hoping to add a little bit more capital to the fund so we could pull a really big job. And sometimes, you're just in the right place at the right time for Opportunity to knock nice and loud…

*(***TOWNSFOLK** *start moving around behind him.)*

SEB: One day, having hopped first one train then another, just to save a little wear and tear on our wallets, we landed in the sweetest little town. White picket fences…pickles in the general store…

*(***MR. FLETCHER** *takes a pickle from a big jar in* **MIZ CHAMBERS'** *store and takes a bite.)*

MR. FLETCHER: That's a fine pickle!

SEB: …shiny happy faces and an air of prosperity everywhere.

MIZ CHAMBERS: Welcome to Tuppence, gentlemen! What can I provide you with today?

SEB: Well, my business partner and I were hoping to find out a bit about your town. Do you have a local newspaper?

MIZ CHAMBERS: We sure enough do…that'll be the Twopenny Gazette. Would you like a copy?

GUS: Sure would, ma'am. How much is it?

MIZ CHAMBERS: Well, that's be…three pennies.

GUS: That was unexpected.

MR. FLETCHER: Always is! Ever since Mr. Merriman…richest man in town, dontcha know, took over the paper, he managed to get the price down one whole cent!

SEB: Richest man in town, you say?

MIZ CHAMBERS: Oh, sure. Has the big old house, just down the road, over the hill, past the cow pasture, right at the end of the lane. Can't miss it…there's usually one or two of his girls running around outside.

SEB: Has kids, huh?

MIZ CHAMBERS: Three of 'em…just dotes on them, he does. He'd do ANYTHING for those girls of his.

SEB: Anything?

GUS: Seb, you got that scary look in your eye…

SEB: What? It's nice to see such a dedicated father is all!

MIZ CHAMBERS: Well, he certainly is that. Did you want the paper?

SEB: Naw, ma'am. I think we're good.

(They exit the store.)

GUS: You're not thinkin' what I think you're thinkin', are you?

SEB: Gus, my old friend… sometimes you're in the right place to hear Opportunity knock nice and loud.

GUS: I'm not sure that's Opportunity…

SEB: Well, all we're doing right now is taking a nice walk…just down the road, over the hill, past the cow pasture, and right to the end of the lane.

Scene 2

SEB *(to audience)***:** So we did exactly that…and there, we saw, like an angel from heaven, a little bundle of joy that looked pretty much exactly like a thousand dollars, all dressed in lace and tied up with a bow.

(We see **CECILY** and **GWENDOLYN**, *the oldest and youngest Merriman girls, playing nicely in the yard with dolls, all dressed up and sweet as can be.*)

CECILY *(the younger, dancing her doll around sweetly)*: La, la, la, look at me, I'm the prettiest princess at the ball!

GWENDOLYN *(the older, dancing HER doll around even more sweetly)***:** Tra la, la, I'm the *kindest* princess at the ball.

CECILY *(SOOOOO precious)***:** Oh, that's better, still! When I grow up, I want to be pretty AND kind!

GWENDOLYN: And gentle, and sweet!

CECILY: And absolutely ladylike!

GWENDOLYN: That would be absolutely the bestest!

*(***GWENDOLYN** *and* **CECILY** *go on playing, but we can only hear* **SEB** *and* **GUS** *now.)*

GUS: Aww, no, Seb…no.

SEB: But look at 'em, just playin' there like little lambies for the fleecing!

GWENDOLYN *(jumping up)***:** I'm going to go give Cook a big hug and then get a drink of water! Do you want to come?

CECILY: No, thank you. I will just stay here, far away from the house, and play all alone while you go in for a nice, long drink of water.

*(***GWENDOLYN** *exits.* **CECILY** *continues to play, completely helpless. Suddenly,* ***SEB*** *has a large cloth bag in his hand.)*

GUS: Where did you get that?

SEB: I brought it.

GUS: Why?

SEB: I thought it might come in handy. Maybe…maybe I could pick up litter while we were walking.

GUS: Litter…

SEB: Anything that needs to be picked up…

*(***SEB** *saunters up to* **CECILY***, bag behind his back.* **GUS** *hangs back, wanting no part of this.* **SEB** *holds the sack over* **CECILY***, ready to scoop her up.*

LAVINIA*, the middle sister, much dirtier, pops out from behind a tree.)*

LAVINIA *(loudly)***:** Hey, mister! Whatcha doing with that bag?

SEB *(oh-so-harmlessly)*: Why, I'm a…collector. I collect things I find in the wild!

LAVINIA: Like my sister?

*(***CECILY** *barely looks up during all of this, playing oh-so-adorably with her dolls.)*

SEB *(laughing jollily)***:** Why, no, what a funny, funny idea. Hahaha!

LAVINIA: Oh, that's too bad. Y'all camping out?

GUS: Well, yes, we are…just for the night. Not staying long in town, no sir.

LAVINIA: I like camping. I'm good at it. I can start fires and everything.

SEB: Well that's fine, just fine.

LAVINIA: So, if you *was* thinkin' about puttin' Cecily in that big old bag of yours, I'm thinking I could just go along with you instead. Mum and Pa would pay a bunch for you to bring me back, sure, and I wouldn't be near as much trouble as Cecily, 'cause Cecily doesn't like camping or getting dirty or being out after dark.

GUS: Well, that is a real gracious offer, miss, but we weren't thinking of doing anything so dastardly as kidnapping a child. That would be quite wrong.

LAVINIA *(kicking the dirt with one foot)***:** Well, shucks…nobody ever seems to wanna kidnap me. I thought it might be fun. But if y'all are a couple of sticks-in-the-mud, I'm gonna just go back to the house and see if Cook has any nice warm cookies. Y'wanna come, Cecily?

CECILY: No, thank you. I'm going to just stay here and play all on my own some.

LAVINIA *(shrugging)***:** Suit yourself. Cookies sound better than playin' with some dumb ol' dolls.

*(***LAVINIA** *exits.)*

*(***SEB** *waits a moment, then pops the bag over Cecily's head.)*

CECILY *(inside the bag)***:** But I don't *like* camping out!

*(***SEB** *lifts one end of the bag; after a moment,* **GUS** *takes the other. They walk off stage, with* **CECILY** *wriggling mightily in the bag.)*

CECILY: You're going to be *soooooo* sorry!

(Lights down.)

Scene 3

(We see a shabby camp, with a patched tent and a few logs for seats. **GUS** *is tending a campfire,* **SEB** *is standing next to the still-violently-active bag containing* **CECILY**.)

GUS: Now, there, miss, we'll have a nice fire going in a moment and then we'll make some nice…umm…tea. You like tea, don't you?

CECILY *(muffled by the bag)***:** I do. Do you have cookies, too?

*(***GUS** *looks at* **SEB***;* **SEB** *brings a crushed packet of saltines out of his pocket.)*

GUS: Not quite, miss. Might have something kinda almost nearly as nice, though. *(***SEB** *has just finished pouring the last of the saltine dust into his mouth.)* Maybe not. But I'm sure I can find something right quick.

*(***GUS** *puts a kettle to boil over the campfire.* **SEB** *gets up and brushes off his hands.)*

SEB: Well, I can take care of that. I'll go back into town and get something sweet, and maybe a newspaper…

GUS: What's the newspaper for?

SEB: Well, shucks…we're gonna have to make a ransom note.

(Lights down.)

Scene 4

SEB: I swear I was only gone long enough to buy a dozen cookies and a newspaper…then to read the paper and eat a couple of the cookies…and then go back to buy more cookies because I ate them all…and then to buy a bottle of glue for the ransom note…and then make the ransom note, and then leave it in the mailbox, and then get some more cookies, 'cause the walk made me hungry, but when I got back to camp, it was dark. Gus wasn't doing real well with the dark…

*(***GUS** *is huddled over the campfire, shivering and wide-eyed, with a stick of wood in his hand. He is alone.)*

SEB: Aww, did you put the little tyke to sleep in the tent?

GUS: I did not.

SEB: Then where is she?

(A wolf howls.)

GUS: I reckon that might be her, there.

SEB *(looking in the tent)***:** Aww, quit funnin'. What'd you do with her?

GUS: Well, you were taking so long, I thought I'd make her comfortable. She'd quieted down some, so I let her out of the bag and gave her a cup of tea and we were sittin' nice and quiet-like, talkin' about her dolls and her sisters and so on, and she likes her teacher real well, and then…well…the sun dropped behind the mountains and she looked at me and said, "well, now, you might be in for a spot of trouble." And she was right.

SEB: What? She got homesick and started crying?

GUS: I can't say it's anything as easy to explain as all that.

SEB: Well, how 'bout you try, and you make it good?

GUS: I am not sure I can. One moment it was light and she was a sweet little girl, and then it was dark and…well, I couldn't see very well what happened next.

SEB: So, it got dark and she ran away?

GUS: It got dark and *I* ran away.

SEB: You ran away from a little girl because it was dark?

GUS: Seb, if that's just a little girl, than I am Hercules.

SEB: Well, we all know *that's* not so. It's a big woods, and we're smack in the middle of it. I don't know where we'd look for her, but I betcha she'll come back when she gets cold or scared or somethin'. Let's just give her some time.

GUS: I hate to leave a little girl alone out there…*(wolf howls)* But I think she's gonna be just fine.

SCENE 5

SEB: Sure enough, when I got up in the morning…

*(***CECILY** *is sitting by the fire, drinking a cup of tea, eating a cookie.)*

CECILY: Hello. Is your friend all right?

SEB: I'm sure he is…he's just sleeping in a bit. You have a good night?

CECILY: I don't like camping out.

SEB: Yep, you mentioned that.

CECILY *(in as creepy a voice as she can manage)*: I do like the nighttime, though.

*(***SEB** *gives her a worried look, and then pours himself a cup of tea.)*

SCENE 6

GUS: I decided I'd had enough of playing babysitter, so I took the next turn to go into town. Seb's note had told the Merriman family to put an advertisement in the newspaper to agree to the ransom we were asking for their sweet little girl.

MIZ CHAMBERS: Well, hello there. Can I help you?

GUS: Oh, I just wanted to get the newspaper for today.

MIZ CHAMBERS: Oh, certainly. That'll be four cents.

GUS: I thought it was three.

MIZ CHAMBERS: Oh, that was yesterday. Today, there's more news.

*(***GUS** *takes the paper and scans for the ad he's looking for. When he finds it, he makes a startled face…)*

MR. Merriman *(dictating the ad)*: Kind sirs, we thank you for taking good care of our little girl. My wife and I are sure she is in good hands and will be

quite safe. We do believe your request for two thousand dollars to bring her home is much too high. Do feel free to keep her for another day.

GUS: Well, I'll be ding-danged.

MIZ CHAMBERS: Is there something the matter?

GUS: Well, no, not exactly…errr. Do you have a pencil and scrap of paper I can use?

MIZ CHAMBERS: Why, certainly. *(Gives* **GUS** *a torn-off edge of newspaper and a stubby pencil.* **GUS** *takes them and begins to write.)* That will be a nickel, please.

*(***GUS** *looks startled, but digs around in his pocket for five pennies and pays the lady.)*

(A young woman, **JESSIE***, comes along.* **GUS** *stops her.)*

GUS: Miss, can you take a note up to the Merriman' house for me?

JESSIE: Sure. That'll be a nickel.

*(***GUS** *digs in his pocket. He comes up with a piece of candy.)*

GUS: I got a mint…

SCENE 8

*(***JESSIE** *comes up to the fence outside the Merriman house. She gives a whistle.* **MRS. Merriman** *and* **MRS. JESSUP** *appear.)*

MRS. JESSUP: Oh, is it another note?

JESSIE: Yep. Fellow gave me a piece of candy to deliver it.

MRS. JESSUP: Oh, let's read it…

*(***MRS. Merriman** *takes the note and opens it.*)

MRS. Merriman: Oh, this one is just in pencil. I did *so* like the touch of the cut-out letters in the last one.

MRS. JESSUP: It was just like something out of the moving pictures.

MRS. MERRIMAN: Oh, well…let's see here. "Dear Mr. And Mrs. Merriman; it's been a real pleasure spending time with Sici…Cess…Cic..your daughter, and we would like to lower our suggested rate of repayment. A thousand dollars would be enough." Oh, that's cute. Well, I suppose we should put another notice in the evening paper…

SCENE 9

GUS: What with waiting for the evening paper to come out, and trying to convince the clerk in the store that she should let me return my morning paper and have the money to buy the evening paper, it was dark when I got back to camp…

(The campfire lights up and we see the tent, sadly torn on the side and a little bit off-kilter.)

GUS: Seb, you are never gonna believe what those Merrimans said when I wrote 'em again…you're never gonna agree to this…

*(***GUS** *realizes that nobody is answering him.)*

GUS: Seb? Seb, you here?

*(***GUS** *hunts around onstage, just finds a crushed canteen and some torn fabric. We hear whimpering noises (***SEB***) coming from the tent.* **GUS** *sticks his head in the tent.)*

GUS: Why, Seb. There you are. Whatcha doin' in the tent? Where's the little girl?

*(***SEB** *sticks his head out. His hair is mussed and he has a black eye.)*

SEB: I do not know, and I cannot say I am particularly concerned about the whereabouts of that…that…that..

(We hear crashing and crunching in the underbrush. There is a VERY close wolf howl. **SEB** *ducks back into the tent. There is a second wolf howl and* **GUS** *jumps in, too. We can see the tent shivering. There is more crashing and noises…and then* **CECILY** *appears, just* **CECILY***, nothing scary here. She looks around and then sits down by the fire.)*

CECILY: Well, shucks…I was hoping he'd brought more cookies.

SCENE 10

SEB: It takes a big man to know when he's lost. Well, me and Gus might not be big, but there's two of us, so that makes up for it. This kidnapping scheme was a a bust…and if we had to last another night with this…this…this…

CECILY: My name is Cecily.

GUS: Oh, we know.

SEB: Anyhow, we were ready to follow the directions that the town's richest man had put out in his newspaper ad. Somethings are worth paying for…

*(***SEB, GUS,** *and* **CECILY** *arrive in town. The townsfolk are all there, gathered around the General Store.* **MR. MERRIMAN** *steps forward.)*

MR. MERRIMAN: The gentlemen from the notes, I presume?

SEB: Mr. Merriman, I presume?

MR. MERRIMAN: Indeed. **CECILY:** I think I might like camping out now, Daddy. There were cookies.

MR. MERRIMAN: Now, gentlemen…shall we make the exchange?

GUS: Oh, yessir, thank you sir.

SEB: Now, we don't have much…but here's two hundred and fifty-one dollars, three nickels, and Gus's old copy of *Hamlet*.

MRS. MERRIMAN: Oh, a book! How nice!

GUS: Now, will you hold up your end of the bargain?

MR. MERRIMAN: Certainly. Come here, Cecily.

*(***CECILY** *comes over to her family. Her mother and sisters embrace her.)*

MR. MERRIMAN: Now, gentlemen, no hard feelings…but I would suggest it's time the two of you leave town.

GUS: Sir, I could not agree more.

*(***GUS** *and* **SEB** *shoulder their bags, hunch their shoulders, and start out of town.* **LAVINIA** *follows them.)*

LAVINIA: Hey, misters! Can I come along, too?

*(***SEB** *and* **GUS** *trade terrified looks.)*

SEB: Oh, gosh, no.

GUS: See, where we're goin' is no place for a sweet…little…girl like yourself…

LAVINIA: Well, gosh, where're you going?

SEB: I do believe we have…ummm…well…

*(***MR. MERRIMAN** *catches his daughter.)*

MR. MERRIMAN: I can hold her for about ten minutes, but I'm not as strong as I used to be. You two might want to speed it up a bit.

*(***SEB** *and* **GUS** *take off running, all the way out off the stage.)*

(As soon as the kidnappers are gone, all the townsfolk gather around **CECILY.** *They clap her on on back and cheer.)*

MR. FLETCHER: Jessie, I do believe your wolf howls are getting more realistic all the time!

JESSIE: Why, thank you, Mr. Fletcher. But I think we need to thank Mrs. Jessup for her idea of taking a garden rake to the side of their tent!

MRS. MERRIMAN: Two hundred and fifty one dollars and fifteen cents *and* a copy of Hamlet. On top of what we got last week, we are just two or three more criminals like these from being able to open that new public library!

LAVINIA: I just don't understand why nobody ever wants to kidnap ME.

EPILOGUE

SEB: And so, that is how we decided that Gus and I had a calling. Perhaps it is not glamorous to work at a leper colony in Panama…I mean, sure, there are mosquitos as big as my hand and man-eating snakes…

GUS: But it's a good sight safer than being around the Merrimans!