

The Half-crown

by Claudia Murray

winner of the Elsie Locke Writing Prize 2010

I could see my breath clearly in the cold Canterbury air. The frozen gravel crackled under my worn-out shoes as I walked the road that would lead me to school.

Here it was, the place I stopped at every day – the Cheviot Store. I stared at the new book in the window. My breath left a foggy patch on the glass, and I felt tears begin to well. The moment passed. I pulled myself together and trudged on, eyes downcast.

A silvery glint in the grass caught my eye. I knelt down to pick it up. It was a coin. I wiped off the dirt and read “New Zealand Half Crown 1934” before turning to the back, where there was an engraving of George V, King and Emperor. My heart thumped.

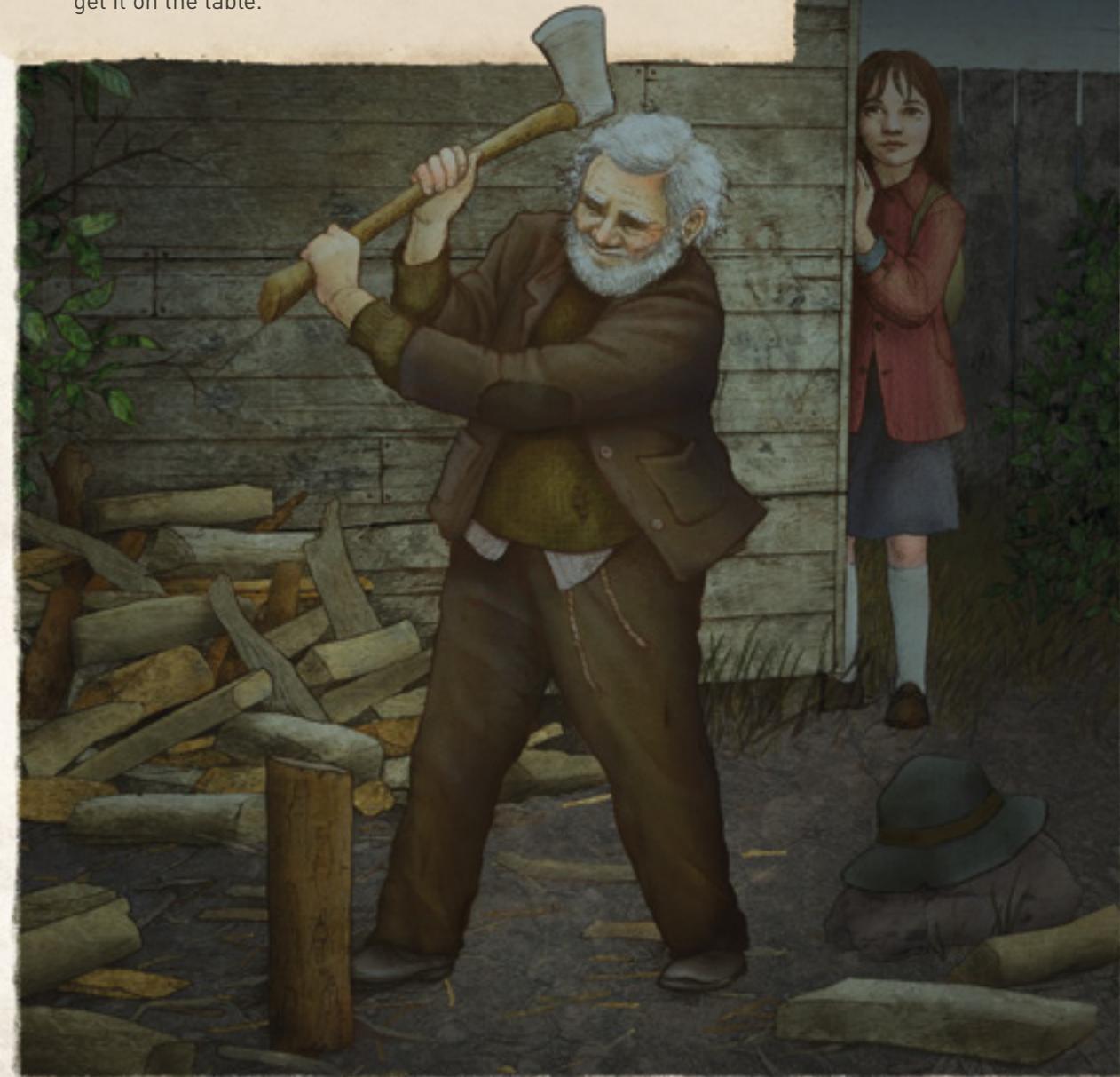
I stared at it. A half-crown! The school bell rang, jolting me to get moving. I carefully tucked the coin into my pocket, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. So many ideas raced through my mind. I kept thinking about the book in the shop window.



My head was still swirling when I got home. It was nearly dark – the night stars were already starting to twinkle. A sound from behind the house lifted my thoughts from the coin. Someone was chopping wood. Maybe it was Dad, but he wasn't due home from his work gang for weeks. I peered around the side of the woodshed. It was an old man. He was wearing a jacket and trousers that didn't fit him well and were full of holes.

"Mum, who's that man chopping wood?" I asked when I got inside.

"He's just someone who came by looking for work in exchange for a meal," Mum replied. "Now wash your hands and help me get it on the table."



As we sat down for dinner, I took a good look at the man. Although his clothes had once been smart, everything about him was dirty: his hair, his face, his hands, his clothes. He smelt bad, but he had a kind face.

"What's your name, Mister?" I asked.

Mum scolded me for asking questions, but the man didn't mind.

"My name's Jack," he said. He ate fast and seemed in a hurry to leave.

"Where are you staying, Mister Jack?"

"Why, at the Starlight Hotel, Miss," he said proudly, "and I best be on my way." With that, he picked up his dusty hat, thanked my mother for the meal, and headed out into the dark.

That night, I slept with the half-crown under my pillow, and I dreamt of the Starlight Hotel and how grand it would be.

The next morning, Mum asked me to bring in a load of firewood. At the woodshed, I saw the strangest thing: a foot sticking out among the logs. There was someone sleeping there! As I got closer, I saw it was Jack. But why? Shouldn't he be at his hotel?

Then I realised where the Starlight Hotel was. I felt ashamed. I had been thinking about how much I wanted a book when Jack didn't even have a place to sleep.

I ran to my room and grabbed the coin. On the way back to the woodshed, I quietly said goodbye to my chance of a new book. Carefully, without waking Jack, I slipped the half-crown into his hand.



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