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## LENNY “TWO SHEDS” MCGREW

*By Ryan Kinkor*

In a world where babysitting was the one true calling of any income-challenged teenage girl, Marsha played a different role. She had been the tomboy of the neighborhood and that reputation was going to get her money.

A bit more stocky and stronger than most girls her age but not quite on par with the boys (though she could lick any boy in a fight and had proved it on two occasions), Marsha had taken to the neighborhood street one May Saturday just after the final storm of the spring season had played itself out. The air was still fresh and scrubbed of some of the irritating pollen that had plagued the city this year. Every flower and every tree had puffed out a pound of dust this season and her nose had been sealed shut most of the season except for those few wonderful times after a sudden rainstorm. So it was the best time to be handing out flyers for her new summer business – Marsha’s Weed And Go.

It was a little early to be promoting a summertime enterprise, considering that she had three weeks of school left over. But her dad had drilled that early-bird junk into her head,

along with some stuff about opportunity knocking and fortune favoring the bold and so on. Seriously, he was Type-A all around. He did have a point, though. If she wanted to avoid dealing with the Kennings' three spaz-tastic boys this year, she'd have to get proactive. That meant beating the teenage boys on the block to the punch.

Flyers in hand, she went from doorway to doorway all along the street, popping half-folded advertisements into waiting nooks and cracks. On rare occasion when she ran into someone in person, she'd graciously give out a flyer and be on her way. She even visited people whose lawns and yards were clearly maintained by themselves or outside services – you never knew when someone needed some cheap labor.

Nothing eventful or discouraging... well, until she arrived at the final house on the block. She knew most people in the neighborhood and she knew *about* this final home. The only thing she knew about the owner was his name: Lenny “Two Sheds” McGrew. The nickname was one the kids had picked out, and like a virus it had spread to the parents until the whole block referred to Mr. McGrew as Ol' Two Sheds. It was based on the fact that you could see *two* sheds poking above his six-foot wooden fence. People thought it strange to have two sheds, even with a yard as big as Mr. McGrew's. Coupled with his solitary behavior, this led to wild conjecture on his nature – everything from ex-CIA to ex-serial killer.

He was on his porch when she arrived with her flyer, oscillating back and forth in his rocking chair and staring off into the distance. With more wrinkles than hair and more bones than muscles, he was less of an old man than a cartoon stick figure. Despite the rumors, Marsha didn't really think badly of him. Neither did she pity him. He lived in one of the friendliest

neighborhoods in the world, yet he sequestered himself like a monk with a vow of silence. Then again, maybe he *was* a monk.

His front lawn was irregular and dotted with dandelions and wild grass. It needed love. If the backyard needed love too, he'd be a gold mine of yard work all by himself. He had the biggest property in the block, his yard stretching out into the underdeveloped land beyond.

One problem: he never hired anybody. He'd be a hard nut to crack.

“Mr. McGrew?” she called out in her sweet public relations voice. “I'm Marsha and...”

“I know who you are,” he responded, completely non-threatening, his deep blue eyes regarding her. “Burt Madison's daughter, correct?”

“Ah, yes, sir,” she answered. She took this as a hopeful sign and walked the path to his porch. His Victorian-style home was far more kept up than his yard, but the wooden porch had a hundred peeling spots along its white exterior. She didn't do painting, though. The fumes always got to her.

“Acquiring business, correct?”

“For the summer. I know things are tight these days, but I take minimum wage.”

Mr. McGrew shook his head as if she'd just said something silly. “Money is not a problem, child, despite appearances. But I do have my priorities, and fortune has brought you to me at the right time. I have one thing for you to do, one thing for which I am willing to pay. I will double the minimum wage for you, but I cannot wait for summer. Come tomorrow, come after every school day for as long as you can, but it must be now.”

Marsha knew that people who were cryptic about their intentions were usually not to be trusted. Neither was she prepared to start her summer job now. Still, her father would say that this was an opportunity begging to be snatched. A job at double her normal wages – it couldn't hurt to ask further, and she did.

“My shed in the back,” he explained. “I need you to paint my shed.”

“Don't you have two sheds?” she blurted out.

“Only one of them needs painting,” he answered serenely. “Now, will you accept this job, child?”

Maybe it was his father's voice in her ear. Maybe it was her own sense of youthful arrogance. Maybe it was the disarming way Mr. McGrew talked or the sweet thought of affording an I-Phone with her own money. Whatever the reason, Marsha found her head nodding, sealing the deal. Forget the fact that she didn't paint. Somehow she'd cope for double minimum wage.

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Mr. McGrew didn't even let her inside. With his bony, exhausted frame leading the way, they walked up the side yard and through a padlocked gate. It took a full minute for Mr. McGrew to unfasten the lock and push open the door. Marsha respectfully kept her snickering thoughts to herself.

It was the biggest yard that Marsha had ever seen that contained absolutely nothing... except the two sheds, naturally. No garden or landscaping graced the surroundings,

only scattered patches of weeds and wild grass amidst bare earth and cracked dirt. It wasn't even muddy, despite the rain that had just fallen. How does dirt not get muddy in the rain?

Dead center in the yard were the two sheds, each one about the width of Marsha's personal walk-in closet and about three feet taller. The one on the right reminded Marsha of Mr. McGrew's porch, with tan-colored paint flaking off in long strips. It wasn't in bad shape, all things considered. The left one, though... Ho boy! Even from a distance, you could see the numerous cracks and rot damage marring its surface. It leaned slightly to the left, as if the bottom was giving out. Whatever paint was covering it had abandoned ship long ago. They both needed love, but the one on the left was too far gone to save. That couldn't be the one she was going to paint, could it?

As Marsha and McGrew closed to the sheds, Marsha realized something. The yard, as unruly and dead as it was, had a certain pattern to it. On the right side, the vegetation thrived and grew with a life of its own, the plants nestling around the first shed as if hugging it. Most of the dirt spots and dead grass were on the left side, and there were absolutely no plants growing within a foot of the left shed. There was six feet of distance between the two sheds, and the conflicting parts of the yard formed an irregular line down the middle. What was up with that?

Before, she was merely hoping the left shed wasn't her project. Now, instinctively, she was absolutely sure that she couldn't work on the left shed. Forget double minimum wage. That shed needed one of Daddy's contractor buddies, not her tender touch.

But her fears were alleviated when Mr. McGrew stopped in front of the right shed and pointed a twiggy finger at it. "This is the shed that you will be painting. You will need to

remove the old paint first before you add the first coat. That should not be difficult. The paint is all but ready to come off on its own.”

Marsha felt herself sighing with relief until she realized what Mr. McGrew had said. “First coat? I have to do more than one?”

“Three coats, child. It will require that much. It is very old.”

She groaned inwardly. Three coats? This job would take forever. She’d need a ladder to get to the top and there was no shade at all. Good thing the weather remained on the cool side, but this whole job might eat up all her free time before school ended. Her friends would think she’d dropped off the face of the planet.

Perhaps sensing her reluctance, Mr. McGrew said, “I will supply you with all the tools you need and the required paint. I would do this myself, but while age confers wisdom it does not grant us strength. I will trust you on this task, and I will require you to finish it to the end once you start it. If this is too much responsibility for you, I ask that you back out now. I will not think less of you.”

*Not think less of you?* Marsha almost laughed aloud at that one. This was the first time she’d met the man, and he thought she cared what he thought? Rather presumptuous on his part. And yet... and yet she felt like it *did* matter. The way he stared at her, as if seeing past her fleshy exterior and right into her soul, made her shiver in response. Some people can wound you just with their eyes – Mr. McGrew was one of those people. Maybe that was why he avoided people, because it was too easy to see the ugliness within. People were so very imperfect – even at her young age, Marsha knew that truth.

“I said I’d do it, and I will,” she declared. Mr. McGrew smiled, and his smile actually made her feel better. But her mood soured again after just one look at the decrepit left-hand shed. She realized she would be working close to that thing for the near future.

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Daddy was of two minds when he heard the news. Double minimum wage was awesome, but working for Mr. McGrew, the man with two sheds to his name? Aloof, eccentric Mr. McGrew? Still, Daddy had no factual reason to object, and he was a very factual man. She was allowed to work for Mr. McGrew without parental intervention, but only for a maximum of four hours a day on weekends and two on school days.

Dressed up in her most expendable work clothing, she arrived at one o’clock on Sunday. She had to knock on the side yard gate to be let in. Mr. McGrew was adamant about that. He had let her in with a cheerful smile, sincere without effort. He’d set up a portable table near the Good Shed, as she came to call it. An array of paint brushes, scrapers, buckets and rollers were already laid out for her use, along with a metal ladder high enough to touch the roof. It was almost too big for her to manipulate, and she had to wonder how a little old man like Mr. McGrew had managed it.

She knew the basics about painting and she told Mr. McGrew as much. His concern wasn’t about her expertise, but that she followed his rules. He had the customary ones like picking up all the paint chips and arriving to work when she said she would. Such rules were common with any employer. But he had one rule that made no sense whatsoever.

Do not open the sheds.

Didn't he keep the tools in the sheds? Isn't that what a shed is for? She could understand the Bad Shed being off-limits – the thing should be condemned. But why the Good Shed? Okay, so she had all the tools she needed and there was no sense in disobeying and derailing the money train. But it still left her uneasy, the rumors in her mind pecking at her like bothersome crows.

Most of the first day was spent chipping paint from the Good Shed. Mr. McGrew wasn't kidding when he said the paint was ready to come off. She barely even needed the chipper. She plucked long strands of dried paint off the wooden structure and plopped them in a garbage sack. A few stubborn specks on the roof had to be chiseled, but even that was a cakewalk. What was truly amazing was how unblemished the wood underneath was, almost as smooth as polished oak and never scratched. Even the metallic tooth of the chipper couldn't damage it – not that she was trying. She accidentally gouged a corner of the roof towards the end of her shift, but was unable to find the scratch later on. She counted her blessings and moved on.

It wasn't all bliss, though. The Bad Shed was always at her back or in her sight. It unsettled her just being close to it. She found herself suddenly glancing at it, as if something had moved in her peripheral vision, or as if the *shed* had moved on its own. But every time she stared at it, the shed remained exactly as it was.

She preferred Mr. McGrew's company to being alone with the two sheds. He'd bring her water and lemonade every hour or so and check her progress. He'd occasionally point out a spot she'd missed, but otherwise he acted very unconcerned about the paint job itself. Marsha had the feeling he was checking up on *her* rather than the quality of her work. It was nice of him to care,

but his concern was overblown. Painting wasn't all that hazardous a job... well, unless you were painting a skyscraper.

At the end of the day, he paid her for four hours of labor and agreed on the next day's time. So far, so good. Yeah, working after school would suck, but the money was great and Mr. McGrew was proving harmless. If it weren't for the Bad Shed, the job would almost be pleasant.

Some life happened between shifts; food eaten, sleep slept, and school tolerated. Back at Mr. McGrew's the next afternoon, she was now on to the actual painting. Mr. McGrew unsealed and stirred the chosen color, an off-white variety dubbed Mother-of-Pearl. What was weird was how it sparkled at times in the sun. Not just reflecting the light, but actually sparkling like glitter or diamonds. It only did it at certain angles, as most of the time it was just plain and uninteresting paint.

Being oil-based paint, she ended up ruining her pink shirt with an errant brush stroke. By the end of the second hour, her pants were equally colored. She had to apply far more paint than she imagined, even for the first coat. The wood seemed to suck it in as fast as she slathered it on, the color fading within seconds. She was only satisfactorily done with one side by the end of the day, and she audibly groaned at the realization that this really was going to take the rest of the school year to finish.

But a commitment was a commitment, and so she took Mr. McGrew's money and came back the next day... and the next... and so on.

The added stress of work after school made her mood sour considerably, enough to make her friends notice and suggest she just “ditch the old fart” and enjoy her gains now. But that

wasn't how she was raised, and her dad wouldn't let her quit now even if she wanted to. The weekend sucked more, though, as the painting ate up her precious goof-off time.

Then there was the Bad Shed. She hadn't gotten used to it, even after a week in its presence. It had grown even more bothersome, if that was possible. During breaks, she'd find herself staring at it, watching it like it was a volcano about to explode. There were times she thought she could hear some deep vibration coming from it, sometimes strong enough to make her teeth tremble. Perhaps the most unnerving moment was when she watched a large horsefly meander near the Bad Shed and then land on its surface. She realized that it was the first time she'd seen anything living come near the Bad Shed.

Then the fly fell off it, plummeting to the ground like a dropped rock. It hit the ground and made a tiny cloud of ebony dust as it landed. When she dared to move closer and look for the black corpse on the bleached ground, she couldn't find one. She had the sinking feeling that the dust cloud had been the fly's body disintegrating on impact.

She wanted to ask Mr. McGrew about it, but what would she say? “Sir, is there something evil in your shed?” That was a good way to end a job. Besides, outside of the fact that a fly had just bit the dust, what other evidence did she have to go on? Heebie-jeebies and bad vibrations? She'd just keep an eye on the shed and go about her business.

Two weeks on the job, Marsha was starting on the third and final coat of paint. The Good Shed had already eaten through three gallons of the stuff and seemed hungry for more. It was a weird shed, but it didn't make her nervous like the other one. Mr. McGrew continued his usual routine of hourly checkups and liquid refreshment. The rest of the time he spent indoors, where

she couldn't go. It was suspicious as hell, but Mr. McGrew had a way of putting your mind at easy effortlessly. A calm word, a quiet smile – that was all he needed to do.

On top of the ladder, her back to the Bad Shed, she was starting from the top down this time so that gravity would be her friend for once. The shed seemed to have gotten its fill of paint and the coat was going on smoothly. She figured that she might be done by the end of the school week and she'd have the weekend to herself. School was winding down and her friends were thinking of doing a celebratory sleepover. Without her painting commitment, she might be able to go to it. Some actual fun for a...

Distracted, she leaned too far over and unbalanced her ladder. With quick reflexes, she grabbed hold of the shed and held herself up with the palms of her hands. Careful maneuvering brought the ladder back to a stable rest, though her arms were covered in sticky paint as a result. She also slopped a portion of the can on the ground below, turning a splotch of green grass stark white. She was lucky not to lose the whole gallon.

Her brush had dropped as a result. It should have been right below her, but as she looked around she spotted it behind her, resting bristles-up next to the Bad Shed. It had somehow bounced six feet away from a dead drop. Maybe she was remembering the moment wrong and she had thrown it in panic as she grabbed for the shed.

She'd never been closer than three feet to the Bad Shed. Now she'd have to get right up to it.

*It's a shed*, she told herself as she climbed down and walked over to it. She kept trying to convince herself that it was only a shed, but she didn't believe it. She could feel the vibration up and down her bones, could see the dead zone all around her. She'd known this shed was not just

a shed for a long time, but she wasn't about to embarrass herself by asking Mr. McGrew to get her brush.

“Okay, shed, it's just you and me,” she spoke defiantly as she reached down to grab her brush. Her right hand closed around the handle, but her thumb lightly brushed the side of the shed as she did so.

She screamed in sudden blinding pain, the brush forgotten as she withdrew her hand. Her thumb felt like it had been torn open, but when she brought it up to her eyes she found no blood and no gaping wound. Instead, a toothpick-sized splinter had shoved itself under her fingernail, almost to the entirety of its length.

Crying in pain, she waved her hand uselessly in the air, unable to think. The stupid shed really did have it in for her. She had to get out of here and...

“Let me see it,” said Mr. McGrew's calming voice. He'd appeared out of nowhere, mere seconds after her scream. Despite agony, she listened and obeyed. He took her hand, inspected it, and produced a pair of tweezers from a pocket in his shirt. With deft precision, the tweezers gripped the edge of the splinter and pulled it out. Marsha gritted her teeth through the whole process, but the pain quickly subsided once the splinter was removed. Her thumb would be sore for some time, though. Feeling quite embarrassed by her non-tomboy reactions, she watched Mr. McGrew toss the splinter in a nearby trash bag. His face had fallen and he made no attempt to reassure her.

“I'm sorry, child,” he said. “I did not realize how far along it had progressed.”

“What?” she replied.

“It’s grown stronger. That was to be expected, but even the wisest can underestimate the situation.”

Marsha had put up with long hours, bad moods, a mysterious old man, and ruined clothing. But she absolutely drew the line at hostile sheds. “Listen, you’ve paid me well, but not well enough to put up with *that* thing!” She was gesturing at the Bad Shed as she fumed. “What is wrong with it?”

“I cannot tell you. It would do you no good.”

“No, being around that shed does me no good. I don’t care about our arrangement. Either you tell me, or I walk and I tell my parents you’ve got something to hide here!”

Mr. McGrew seemed uncertain at first, as if weighing the risks of both choices. After ten seconds had passed, Marsha was about ready to storm away and never come back. But just before she acted on her angry thought, Mr. McGrew motioned her to sit down on the rear porch steps. Marsha complied, hoping this meant Mr. McGrew was coming clean.

“Normally, I would not even consider this,” he began. “However, the third coat must be finished. Understand, child, that I trusted you the first time I saw you, and such moments are rare in life. I do not wish to seek another painter, nor do I wish to make my stay here more difficult. I cannot tell you everything, but perhaps I can appease your anger. Will that satisfy you?”

“I guess it’ll depend on what you tell me,” she replied.

“Of course.” The old man squared himself, his powerful gaze focused straight into Marsha’s eyes. “There are things in this universe that embody the emotional aspects of consciousness. They are rare, but they exist. Happiness and sadness, love and anger, courage and

apathy – these emotions exist in all beings. Sometimes they are taken to extremes. There are ways to create these extremes, if you know how.”

Marsha wasn't sure where this was going, but Mr. McGrew's peaceful nature made her willing to listen. The pain in her thumb was dying down and her anger with it.

“There are some out there who wish to only feel love, or only feel happiness. They want to purge themselves of the negative so that they can feel only the positive. What those souls fail to understand is that the only way to feel the positive is to use the negative as a comparison. How would you know happiness if you never knew sadness? What some have learned the hard way is that by extracting one quality, you also extract its opposite.”

“I... think I understand,” said Marsha, playing with the idea. “So if I suck all the anger out of me, I also suck out my love?”

“In a fashion. The removal of anger would also remove your passion. You would have peace, but it would not leave you content. You would be neutral. In theory, it sounds desirable. In practice, it leads to unintended consequences.”

Marsha thought about all the times she'd been miserable over the course of her young life. Whether it was her dad pushing her to do more, be more, or getting snubbed by all the boys when it came to the high school dances, misery had a way of finding her. It'd be nice to take that out of her life. But if your joy went with it, what would be the point?

“There was one species, many eons ago,” continued Mr. McGrew, “who took the idea even further. They thought they could remove Death itself from their people. They thought they could keep their bodies from aging, to keep wounds and diseases from ending them. What was amazing is that they succeeded. What was tragic is that... they succeeded.”

“Let me guess – can’t have life without death. Their life-force or life or whatever went with it, right?”

“Indeed, child. Their species ceased to be. Life must end, or it is not truly life. I...”

“Wait a minute,” Marsha interrupted as an epiphany hit her. “Wait, you keep talking like all this is happening out there.” Her uncertain hand fingered the sky. She could barely believe what she was about to ask. “Are you a...?”

“Does it matter what I am, child?” Mr. McGrew said evenly.

“Yes... Well, maybe... I mean, why wouldn’t it matter?”

“It only matters if you *believe* it matters. Do you believe that I am dangerous?”

“No,” Marsha admitted. In her heart, she knew he wasn’t. If he’d wanted to harm her, he’d had plenty of chances to do so. He could have fed her to the Bad Shed, for starters. “No, you’re not dangerous. But that shed...”

“Yes, the shed is dangerous. You knew it was dangerous the moment you saw it. You understood on an instinctual level, which is why I trusted you. Some do not trust in their own instincts, and they suffer for it.”

“What’s in it?”

“One half.”

Marsha waited for elaboration, but when none came forth she felt herself getting flustered. “You can’t just leave it at that!”

“Each shed has one half, child; one half of the embodiment that carries the life and death of an entire sentient species. These embodiments are attracted to other worlds with the same qualities. Anger flocks to anger, love follows love, and life clings to life. Even across the vast

void, they will follow the cosmic scents of familiarity. Thus, this embodiment found your world not very long ago. When I discovered it, the collision with your world had split it into its polar halves. This happens with great trauma because the two sides of any embodiment are constantly pulling away from each other. So now I keep them here, under my watch.”

While the idea of “embodiments” eluded Marsha’s whirling mind, Mr. McGrew managed to make sense regardless. It was hard not to see the grass cuddling the one shed and dying around the other. It was impossible not to see the sturdy countenance of one structure and the rotting collapse of the other. Life and Death, side by side... in a pair of nondescript sheds.

“Why here, and why sheds?” she probed. “Why not just hide them in a cave?”

“Sometimes the best way to hide is right out in the open. Sheds are ordinary, common. People dismiss them. Here, I can watch them and control them. If I hid them, the world around them would change and reveal them. They are much too dangerous to be hidden, child. Some things should not be hidden from all eyes.”

“So you control them? You have that power?”

Mr. McGrew smiled lightly at the notion. “No, child. They control each other. I merely maintain the balance. In close proximity, they cancel out most of the other’s effect on the world. But Death is stronger, I’m afraid. Most of the universe submits to it. For Life to survive, it must be strengthened with effort and attention.”

“Is that what the paint is for? To strengthen Life?”

“Yes. The paint has a special ingredient,” admitted Mr. McGrew. He pinched something out of his shirt pocket and showed it to Marsha. His pointer finger had a smidgen of gold powder that shimmered like a cluster of stars. As Marsha watched, the dust lifted off into

the air and fluttered in the wind like a batch of tiny drunken fireflies. Within seconds, the dust faded into nothingness. Not even a smudge remained on Mr. McGrew's finger.

“Trade secret,” he stated. “All I can say is that it makes Life stronger.”

Marsha felt like she was five again and Santa Claus had just arrived with his bag of toys. If she were lucky, maybe Saint Nick would make a flyby today and complete the fantasy. But the reality of her sore thumb reminded her that this fantasy wasn't all magic and presents.

“Why did the Bad Shed attack me? Was it... was it trying to kill me?” Mr. McGrew's severe expression pretty much answered the question for her and her elevated mood plummeted.

“As the paint began to flake off, the paint also began to lose its potency,” he explained. “Death began to exert more power over its surroundings – Death wants more death. Once the final coat of paint is applied, Life will regain the upper hand and Death will recede. For now, the shed is still dangerous.” His expression softened as he continued. “I never wished to put you in danger, child. If you do not want to finish this, I will understand. I only ask that you be mindful of what you tell others. The harm Life and Death could do in careless and malicious hands...”

“Yeah, I get that part.” Marsha replied. The practical part of her had a healthy dose of skepticism. Embodiments? Life and Death? Mr. McGrew being from... somewhere else? She'd seen the symptoms but not the sources. She only had Mr. McGrew's word to go on, and his story was truly unbelievable.

But she trusted him. Somehow, it all felt true. Perhaps it would damn her down the road, but she knew in her heart that Mr. McGrew was no liar. She was still in that place where the

world was flexible in her mind, where there were still mysteries and curiosity and possibilities. For better and for worse, she could still do a leap of faith.

“You know,” she said, “my dad told me to never give in to a bully, no matter how bad the situation looks. Bullies will rule your life if you let them. Well, I’ve never backed down from any bully before, so what would it look like if I ran from a rotten shed?”

Mr. McGrew smiled warmly and silently, and that made Marsha’s remaining fears fly away like glitter dust in the wind.

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It was late Friday afternoon as Marsha stood before Mr. McGrew in her paint-covered work clothes on his front porch. He was counting out the final dollar tally in his rocking chair, humming some old tune in a tone far higher than his speaking voice. Marsha wasn’t paying that much attention, even though she was excited to have the chance to actually spend money for a change. Money didn’t do you much good if you didn’t have the time to spend it.

No, she was surprising misty-eyed about concluding her business. She’d have other clients during the summer, but none of them would be Mr. McGrew. There was something to be said about someone who trusted you enough to keep an earth-shattering secret. She wasn’t sure if she trusted her own parents to keep a secret like that. Well, the secret was kept, the world was none the wiser, and she would be able to call her friends on her own I-Phone this summer. Wowy-zowy!

She never did see the inside of his home, but that was never part of the deal. She would leave with more questions than answers, but at least the questions that were answered were the right ones.

The Bad Shed was still there, as rotten as ever, but her fear of it had vanished. She had beaten it, had applied the last layer of paint to the Good Shed without further incident. She'd felt the Bad Shed's power fade, the vibration in the air fading to nothing with the last brush stroke. She had been tempted to touch the Bad Shed again and see if its power had truly faded, but she hadn't been that brave... or stupid.

“It has been a pleasure, child,” said Mr. McGrew, handing her the wad of cash in his hands. As she pocketed the money, he looked out absently toward the setting sun, still peeking over the neighborhood homes. “I feel you'll have a lucrative summer ahead of you. But don't take my word as prophecy. I lack that power.”

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked him. “All by yourself, I mean?”

“I'm not lonely, if that's your concern,” he answered. “I am old, and because I'm old I am content to perform my sacred duty and be stationary. The young... well, they are too busy learning and growing to take root in one place. I think you will see the world, child. Perhaps, when the time is right, we will work together again.”

“I think I'd like that,” she said. “Oh, and you totally don't have to worry about me spilling secrets or anything. I've done pretty good so far.”

“I'm sure you won't say anything.” Mr. McGrew offered his hand. “It was good to meet you, child. You give me hope for your people's future.”

She suddenly felt uncertain about shaking his hand. The way his tone had changed suggested finality, like he was going away or something. Still, she had no reason to distrust him, so she took his hand and gave it a good shake. She felt entirely calm and peaceful as she grasped his warm hand. So much so that she forgot to let go and could only listen attentively to Mr. McGrew's parting words.

“I'm sorry, child, but some secrets cannot be shared. Secrets have a life of their own, and you would eventually say something you shouldn't. You will remember that you did something good here. You will remember me as you always have, but your business with me is done. You will not come back here. Go and explore, child.”

She listened, and then she walked home.

For the remaining time that Marsha lived in her neighborhood, before leaving for college and travels and the rest of her life, she would continue to do yard work for the people of her block. But she always found a reason to skip Mr. McGrew's place, despite the fond memories and the lucrative payout. Her father asked once why she never tried him again, and she said that it was a one-time thing. Mr. McGrew had no more business to give her.

Mr. McGrew left while she was away at college, and no one could say when or how he'd gone. He just disappeared one day, with only an empty house left in his wake. The sheds had gone with him, which somehow made sense to Marsha. Even though she never saw him again, there was always a part of her that knew he was still alive and at large in the world, doing something important.

Mr. Lenny McGrew, the old man with two sheds to his name.