

Honorable Mention, Fiction

Inspiration Point

by Gerald Warfield

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From the cliff top, high above, the single clap of a bell.

Florey straightened over the wicker fish trap she tended and pointed. "Modo, the ladder!"

Sand flew from the boy's feet as he raced to the bottom of the cliff.

Standing in the water, Florey looked up and down the river, relieved to see only smooth, sandy banks, ferns and tall umbrella plants, but her gaze lingered on the stands of vegetation. Once, from her terrace halfway up the cliff, she had seen a pack of diyotes stalk a longhorn through the dense plants at the water's edge.

Modo scrambled up the ladder. Despite his hump, the boy was agile as a monkey, for which Florey was grateful. Seeing no immediate danger, she pulled up the stringer from the wicker enclosure and lifted three fat carp from the water.

She waded out of the river. "Come on, Julie-Ann," she cried to the child playing in the sand. "We have to hurry up-up."

The toddler, wearing only a coarse sleeveless smock, lifted her one arm and began to cry.

"Please don't, dear," Florey said, bending and lifting the child to one hip. "One day you'll lead the diyotes right to us."

When she reached the basket next to the cliff, she deposited the whimpering girl inside and knotted the ropes to hold her in. Then, with a glance at the long metal ladder, she deposited the carp in the basket, too.

The cold fish on the girl's bare feet caused her to wail anew.

"It's only for a little while." Florey stroked the girl's face. "We've got to save dinner."

"Ready?" shouted Modo from above.

Florey looked up to see the boy leaning over the railing. "Go," she shouted.

She steadied the basket as it rose into the air and then, as it passed beyond her reach, hastened the few feet to the ladder. By the time she had climbed to the landing, Modo had already pulled the basket up with the squalling girl, taken out the still-gulping fish, and stood ready at the wench. As soon as she stepped clear, he turned the big wooden wheel, and the ladder began to rise. Florey took the other side. Always, when they raised the ladder with the big wench, she felt as if she were at the wheel of a sailing ship, but, of course, she had only

seen such things as a child on TV. She watched the rope, winding around the shaft, for any signs of weakness or unraveling. Like the ladder, the rope was an artifact from before the Failure, and it was brown and weathered although otherwise it looked sound. If the rope should fail, she and Modo would have to pull the long, metal ladder up by hand, a prospect she would not relish.

Both the ladder and the metal platform on which they stood had come from an old hotel in Mineral Wells. Men from the compound above had installed it at great effort to provide access to the river from the cliff. The people of the compound, however, seldom needed to reach the river, especially after the new well, so the stairs and the landing with its convenient cave had become the exclusive domain of Florey and her brood.

The two strained at the wheel to raise the ladder the last few feet, and Modo wedged a wooden block beneath the final rung.

“Whew!” Florey leaned back against the cliff wall. The bottom part of her brown, homespun dress, still wet, clung to her legs.

“Ma, I don’t feel nothing coming,” said Modo, who didn’t seem winded in the least.

“You need to use your eyes, like I told you, and not just guess,” said Florey.

The boy leaned over the railing for a better view up and down the river.

“Probably a false alarm,” said Florey. “One of the dogs must’ve barked.”

“They’re fraidy cats up there,” said Modo in a sing-song voice. “They aren’t brave like us!”

The boy straightened and tried to stick out his pigeon chest, but the hump prevented it, and he only stood a bit straighter than usual, but the effect was not lost on Florey, and her heart swelled with pride. She had scattered the ashes of seventeen deformed children, including one of her own, on the river over the years since the Failure. Modo was her oldest survivor, and, if Florey had any influence with fate, God, or the Devil, he would make it to adulthood.

There were three others: Julie-Ann, the one-armed toddler who had ceased her bawling, Tinker, the infant, and Blue, the six-year-old who was entrusted with watching Tinker while Florey and Modo took Julie-Ann down to the river.

“Take the fish,” Florey said to Modo, and picked up the basket carrying Julie-Ann. They started up the metal stairway—stairs not a ladder—which doubled back on itself three times before reaching the terrace with the cave halfway up the cliff face. Blue called down to them, waving her cane, while they climbed the last flight.

“We didn’t see anything, sweetie,” answered Florey. “It’s probably a false alarm.”

“I was scared,” the girl said, jumping up and down, clinging to the railing.

“Don’t be afraid, honey. The Compound will protect us.”

“But why don’t they let us inside?”

“Honey, I told you, we’re the guardians of the stairs. We’re brave people,” she said, reaching the edge of the terrace and giving the girl a hug. “Nothing can get to us when the ladder is up. Now, you quit your fussing and take Julie-Ann back to the nursery with Tinker. I’ll go up and see what the matter is.”

“Can I go? My legs are a lot stronger, and I can climb the stairs!” She held up her cane to prove it.

“No, honey. I’m just going up and back down, again.”

“I could carry her,” said Modo, his dark eyes wide with excitement. “I can carry her on my back.”

The image caused Florey’s voice to catch in her throat. She fumbled with the carp, unstringing one, until she could speak. “That won’t be necessary, Modo. It’s a very kind thought, but not today. I need you to gut this carp and get it ready to cook. I’ve gotta take the other two up,” she motioned with her head. “Keep an eye on Julie-Ann and Tinker while I’m gone.”

Five more flights of metal stairs and two of rock had to be climbed before reaching the top of the cliff. On the way, she thought how Modo had carried Blue on his back everywhere the last few days, her bent legs about his waist. They had bounced through the cave and about the terrace most of the morning, Blue shrieking with glee.

Florey paused to brush the moisture from her eyes with the heel of her hand. It wouldn’t do to blur her vision on such treacherous stairs.

She reached the top of the cliff and set the carp on a clump of grass. The rock wall enclosure was high and near the drop-off, leaving only a small landing in front of the wooden gate.

“Hello!” she called up.

Sara poked her head out over the wall. “Oh, hi Hon. How are the little ones?”

She was grateful it was Sara. They had been friends before the Failure, and she took up for “the pound” in the weekly town meetings. Flora knew this from others as she herself was no longer permitted to attend. Once, she had been told, Sara referred to those in Florey’s care as “children,” and Dawson, the head alderman, had severely reprimanded her. “Little ones” was the phrase they could use.

“They’re fine. The pound’s safe; the ladder’s up. What’s the alert about?”

“The Baker Hotel’s burning.” The plump woman rested her arms on the railing in front of her. “Sydney saw it from the watchtower. Started out just a little trail of smoke, but it’s getting worse.”

“Burning? That’s the last safe place in Mineral Wells. I wonder what happened?”

Sara shook her head. “The aldermen just had a powwow. Some of ‘em wanted to send scouts, but Dawson says there’s mutants running around in droves now. He’s got everybody scared to death.”

“Controlling with fear, he’s good at that.”

“Sh.” She waved and looked behind her. Disappearing for a moment, she reappeared with a bundle. “Here, Honey. Here’s the cloth you wanted. Had to hide it. Dawson’s getting suspicious of me talking to you.”

She held the bundle over the wall and dropped it down to Florey. “There’s some nice big pieces in there. And there’s some bread and cookies, too.” And then she mouthed the words silently, “for the kids.”

“Bless you Sara. I brought two carp,” she said, holding up the string. “I could have brought more, but the bell caught me before I emptied the traps.”

“Oh, damn! I can’t open the gate during a yellow alert. Dawson’ll have my hide. You’ll have to tie ‘em on.” She threw a length of thin rope over the wall. Florey tied the stringer on it and watched as Sara drew the fat carp up to the top of the wall.

“Nice ones. You’re so clever with those traps.” She dropped the stringer back to Florey. “Not nobody can catch fish as good as you.”

Florey laughed.

“Oh, and we may have another mouth to feed by morning. Grace has gone into labor.”

“That’s wonderful,” she said, but as she looked up into Sara’s forced smile she knew what else was being said. Yes, she was still nursing Tinker, but he could be weaned if she had to take in another.

The bell pealed again. Both women stopped to see if it would continue ringing. It did.

“Oh Damn!” Sara turned back to face the compound. “What?” she cried in answer to someone’s shout. Turning, she shaded her eyes and looked to the southwest.

“Damn it again! Florey, it’s locusts. There’s a whole cloud of them coming up over there.”

Florey turned, and she could see it, too, a dark, malevolent head rising from the hills. She remembered the last plague of locusts, and her stomach tightened. The giant insects, with wingspread over a foot, denuded a wide strip of forest eating everything: plants, trees, birds, even animals. One of the compound workers got caught in the swarm and was found the next day, a clean skeleton on bare, rocky ground. Even his belt had been eaten, leaving only the silver buckle, along with his knife and a pair of glasses.

“You better get on down to the pound and close everything up—every crack!”

“Thanks, Sara,” she said, holding up the bag of cloth and food. “You’re good to us.” Half an hour, she estimated, perhaps a little more, was all the time they had.

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Stepping onto the terrace, she saw Modo and Julie-Ann at the wooden railing looking out in the direction of the locusts.

“Ma!” cried Blue, twisting to face her, but still gripping the railing. “Modo says they’re gonna eat us!”

“They’re about this long,” said the excited boy, holding out his hands. “I killed one with a stick one time.”

“Now don’t go scarring Blue. We’ve got work to do.”

“They’re gonna eat us!” wailed the girl.

Florey cast a reproachful eye at Modo. “Now listen here, Blue. Did Modo say they ate everything?”

The girl nodded.

“Well, I want you to know they did. Last time they ate everything, they even ate Modo.”

The girl, near tears, stopped and looked at her puzzled. “They did not,” she said after a moment.

“Oh, well since Modo’s still here. I guess that means they didn’t eat everything, doesn’t it.”

“Yes.” Blue looked at Modo, her eyes narrowed.”

“They ate almost everything,” the boy said defensively.

“But they aren’t going to eat us because we’ve got a nice cozy cave to get in. We’ll close the door and chink up the cracks and the poor locusts will just have to starve if they want us for dinner.”

Blue grinned.

“That’s better. Now start grabbing up stuff and getting it into the cave. Modo, you pick what’s left of the okra on the far ledge. Don’t bother with the turnips, they’re underground. Blue, come with me.”

“What about Mr. Mousie?” cried Blue.

“Oh, all right. Put Mr. Mousie in the gourd and take him in, but make sure the lid’s on tight, and then come out and help me.”

After they had brought Mr. Mousie in and water from the cistern, Florey happened to look out at the far terrace where their few crops were planted and saw Modo standing close to the edge, not moving. He had not gathered a single ear of okra. He just stood, facing the approaching cloud of insects.

Florey started to call to him, but something in his posture was strange, and she hesitated. Instead, she walked on the cliff path to the terrace garden where he stood. It was then she saw that his eyes were closed.

“Modo,” she said, quietly, not wanting to startle him, so close to the terrace edge.

The boy opened his eyes and turned, his face dead serious.

“Ma, I can hear them.”

She paused and looked at the cloud. “You must have good ears. I can’t hear a thing.”

“No, I mean I can hear what they’re thinking.”

“Honey, this is no time to play. Those things are dangerous, and we need to get inside.”

“They’re thinking hungry thoughts.”

“Well, I could have told you that, and I don’t talk to bugs, or snakes, either. Now, get that okra.”

“But I made the snake go away. Don’t you remember?”

She regretted bringing up the snake. “Modo, that snake already had somewhere to go, and it just happened to pass by us. You’ve got to get those crazy thoughts out of your head.”

“I’m not crazy!” The boy’s lower lip quivered. “I’m trying to tell them not to come and eat us up.”

The hurt in the boy’s eyes was more than Florey could bear. “Modo, honey, I didn’t mean it. That’s just a way of talking.”

A tear slid down his cheek.

“Okay, let’s forget the okra for a minute. You talk to those locusts, and tell them not to come.” She looked at the boy dead serious.

“They don’t understand me.” He sniffed.

“Can they hear you?”

He nodded. “They hear me, but they don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Hmm, let’s see.” She estimated the distance to the cloud. They still had ten minutes or so. “Maybe it’s because they don’t know people talk.”

“But I don’t know any bug talk.”

“Well, maybe they understand pictures. Look over there. See those old okra stalks from last year up on that little ledge? Try sending them a picture of those. Maybe they’ll think nothing’s green over here and go away.”

“OK.” The boy visibly brightened. “I’ll send them a picture of some rocks, too.”

“Good. Send it loud and clear. They shouldn’t be here for a little while, but you come running if you see one. You hear?”

The boy shook his head, already concentrating on the dead stalks on the ledge.

Oh God, I shouldn’t humor those kids so much, thought Florey, quickly moving down the rows of okra. I don’t discipline them enough, but damn it, they’re happy, and they’ll have little enough happiness when they’re grown.

Carrying the okra in a basket, Florey went to stand by Modo, his face locked in a frown. It was fast growing perilous to stand on the terrace while the lethal cloud approached, and there were still chinks around the door to be stuffed.

But the cloud did not approach. The initial front hesitated and grew darker as insects from behind compacted with the vanguard. And then, to Florey’s astonishment, the front of the cloud seemed to slide and turn to the northeast. She didn’t believe it at first, but then it became obvious that the cloud no longer bore down on them. In shock, she looked at Modo.

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“This fish is yummy wummy!” exclaimed Blue. Julie-Ann, sitting next to her, licked the fingers of her one hand.

The baby burped. “Slow down, Modo. Let him swallow before giving him another spoonful.”

“Ma,” said Blue. “Did Modo really tell the locusts to go away?”

“Now I told you not to go saying that. People get upset when they hear about things they don’t understand. Modo and I were just playing.”

Modo looked up at her, his dark eyes veiled. Florey shot him a warning glance. “It was most likely the wind; I definitely felt it shifting.”

Blue squinted at her.

“At any rate, it’s our secret. We don’t want to get Modo in trouble.”

#

The next morning, Florey brought up the rest of the carp from the river. Plopping them on the mat by the door of the cave, she went inside looking for Modo and Blue. Julie-Ann played in her pen in the back; the baby was asleep. Not wanting to call out, Florey returned to the door and surveyed the main terrace and the few little terraces where their crops grew. When she saw no one, her curiosity turned to alarm. She quickly went to the far ledge where there was no railing. It was with relief that she saw no small bodies splayed on the rocks below.

Then, she had a darker thought. “Oh no,” she said, turning to look up at the stairs.

When she reached the cliff top, Sara was watching for her.

“Florey, honey,” she said, before Florey could catch her breath. “You shouldn’t have let those k...little ones come up here!”

“I didn’t! They were supposed to be doing their chores. I had to get the rest of the fish. What happened?”

“Modo carried little Blue up here on his back. Dawson was here. At first they were real shy, but Dawson got them talking.”

Florey groaned.

“Blue said Modo turned back the locusts all by himself—yes—and he was proud of it, too. Dawson pretended to get all excited and opened the gate or them, the bastard. They wanted to see inside, and he kept plying them with questions. Modo told him he talked to animals all the time.”

“What happened? Where are they?”

“They’re in the holding cell, poor dears.”

“I can’t believe it! Putting children in jail!”

“Don’t say that word. Dawson’ll ...”

“They are children for God’s sake, and they don’t know what they’re saying!”

“Okay, okay. Calm down. They’re safe for now, anyway. And Dawson wants to talk to you.

“Oh God, the babies are alone down in the pound. If I don’t get back in a few minutes... Can you go take a look at them?”

"I can't leave my post," Sara said, but I'll try to get one of the girls to go."

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Florey stood in a real room, with windows and pictures on the walls. Twelve men and women sat on chairs, skirting the room, looking mournful. Dawson, with greying hair and hard, chiseled features, sat behind an ornate desk. In wooden tones, he said: "It is the judgment of this council that the mutants be thrown from the cliff and that the pound be closed. Henceforth, any deformed offspring of the citizens of Inspiration Point will be thrown from the cliff on the day of their birth as should have been done from the beginning."

"No." Florey raised her chin. Her eyes flashed.

"We are a bastion of normalcy in a sea of deformities," continued Dawson. "We'll not become a pesthole of mutants like Wichita Falls or that God-forsaken Weatherford. If we are ever to regain our place in the world we must maintain the purity of the human race."

"Those children have feelings. They are intelligent, they can create, they speak, they..."

"The judgment of the council shall be carried out in the morning. You are to bring the remaining two mutants up from the pound at daybreak so that sentence can be carried out." And then he said, leaning forward: "Listen to me, Florey. Do you think I enjoy condemning them to death?"

"I don't know. You are very far from the man I knew who used to own a hardware store."

"I want to become that man again, Florey, but the human race is fighting for survival."

"Do you save humanity by shedding every last trace of it?"

"I will fight to the death to save humanity. I'll fight to save you, too, if you let me."

"I'm not the one who needs saving."

"We have no alternative, Florey. Grace's child was born last night—deformed—but thankfully it did not survive. There'll come a time when the mutants overrun us."

"They are human beings."

Dawson sighed. "Grieve for your little ones, Florey. You must do that. But when you're through grieving, come back up the cliff. Your place is here, helping us hold this compound together."

She glanced around the room. Three women and one man stared back at her; the rest of the council looked at the floor.

"I'd rather die."

"Florey, you've got more spirit than half the people here. We need that spirit. Everyone wants you back with us. I want you to come back to us—to me."

"I cannot."

"You must. The decision of the council is final."

"Let me and the children go. Turn us loose and let nature decide our fate."

"I cannot. That would condemn you to death, too."

Florey's shoulders slumped, and she closed her eyes to steel herself for the bitter cup that had been passed to her.

"Then grant us one last night together, Jim. Let Modo and Blue come back with me to the pound. There's no use in subjecting them to a night of terror before they're killed. Let them come back to familiar surroundings. Then, in the morning, your executioners can come down to us. The little ones will die just as surely thrown from halfway down the cliff as from the top." She looked steadily at Jim Dawson and wondered if he saw through her plan.

"Very well. Take them and go straight to the pound. Be warned, however, that if you attempt to circumvent the will of this council they will be thrown from the cliff immediately, with no delay, and you will end up in the holding cell for a very long time. Do you understand?" But then Dawson's rugged features softened. "But for now, give them one last night of comfort. It's your motherly nature, and I respect that. We'll come at daybreak."

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"We've got to hurry," said Florey, tucking a blanket around Tinker.

"But why can't Modo carry me?" cried a tearful Blue.

"Because he has to carry Tinker, and I have to carry the supplies. Supplies can't walk by themselves, but you can—with your cane."

"Why can't we stay here? We could hide in the cave. They wouldn't find us."

Modo looked up hopefully, as if to second her plea.

Florey knelt on the dirt floor among the possessions that she had flung into rough piles. The candle on the table illuminated anxious faces. At the open door of the cave only the faintest glow from sunset remained.

"Now listen to me, sweeties. There comes a time when you have to leave familiar places and find new ones. Those are times to grow, to see new things, to make new friends. The people here don't understand us."

"I won't ever tell what I did again, ever, ever," said Modo in a solemn voice.

"We promise and cross our heart," pleaded Blue.

Florey smiled. Thin as their chances were, only with a full night's lead would they have hope of eluding capture.

"There's a place I know of, a fortified city north of here called Wichita Falls. All we have to do is get there, and they'll take us in. We'll have a comfortable place to live together, just like we've always had." At least she hoped they would take them in.

"Is it far away?"

"We'll follow the river a few days, and then go north. It'll take about a week, that's all." But not for a woman with four children, one crippled and two of them too young to walk. Even if they evaded capture, only a miracle would get them to Wichita Falls before the diyotes tracked them down, or some other of the deadly beasts that populated the dark.

Modo straightened and listened.

Florey heard it, too. Sound carried through the iron stairs; they always knew when someone was coming.

"It's them," whispered Modo.

Julie-Ann began to whimper.

Dawson, of course, had guessed her plan. He had sent his minions to prevent her from leaving.'

Florey got up quickly, clutching the basket that held Tinker. "Get Julie-Ann," she said to Modo.

They exited the cave onto the dark terrace.

"But we left our backpacks," whispered Blue.

"Hush, come over to the terrace. We can hide there."

They approached the far edge with care, the edge that had no railing. Florey looked down into the dimness and saw the river, a silver streak in the shadows. She could not see the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

"Why are we coming here?" whispered Modo.

"If those are bad people, they may make us leave right away," she said, her voice trembling, "and I want to go with you."

"Where are we gonna go?" he asked.

"I don't know, honey. I don't think anyone knows for sure, but I hope we're going to heaven."

Modo's little hand reached out and took hers. In his other hand, he held Julie-Ann by her one arm. Blue turned to her, gripping Florey's thighs, and burying her face in her dress.

"Now, listen to me carefully," Florey whispered. "Do exactly what I tell you... and bring Julie-Ann with you."

The sounds grew louder. Three, perhaps four pair of boots descended the stairs.

Florey looked back to see candle light glowing from the cave door, the cave that had been the only home the children had known. When the boots reached the bottom of the step, she had to turn her face up to keep the tears from spilling from her eyes; the stars blurred in the night sky.

Gravel crunched as booted feet started across the terrace. But then, the footsteps stopped. Florey squeezed Modo's hand and took a deep breath.

The plump form of Sara was silhouetted in the light from the door. Two other shadowy forms stood behind her.

"Florey?" Sara's voice broke the ominous silence. "What are you doing out there?" Her voice was sharp, and she took several steps closer.

"Stop right there, Sara."

"What are you doing?"

“I didn’t think they’d send you, but you should know that...” Her voice broke. Modo pressed against her side, and she could only whisper in a rough voice. “They won’t be so frightened if I go with them.”

Sara looked at the terrace edge and back at Florey. “Oh, honey. No, no! Come away from there.”

“Do I have your word that you’ll wait? You’ll wait ‘till morning?”

“No, I mean yes... Florey, listen to me.” She reached out her hand but did not come closer. “Why don’t you get the children away from there? You’re scaring me to death. Bring them over here, and we can sit and talk on the bench.”

Breathing in shallow gasps, Florey began her retreat from the cliff’s edge. Wary, still, she could hardly move with the children clinging to her. She set the basket with Tinker on the bench, but she and the other children stood. The two women behind Sara stepped closer, their arms folded.

“What? What is it?” Florey asked.

“I’ve got news. Incredible news.”

“We can stay!” cried Blue.

Florey felt Modo’s thin hand squeeze her fingers.

“No. It’s not that, but it’s almost as good, maybe better...” Sara seemed unable to go on. She put her hand over her mouth and looked at the children.

Florey set her jaw, but tears began down her face. “Well, tell me, dammit!”

“Florey, this afternoon, after you left, a woman showed up at the compound. She’d come all the way from Weatherford. She and a man were coming to Mineral Wells, but when they found the Baker on fire they split up. Her partner went off after the evacuees, but she came on out to talk to us.

“She said the man had gone to find the others because of the locust swarm. She said he could talk—communicate with the locusts and they wouldn’t hurt him!”

“I didn’t really talk to the locusts,” said Modo. “I was just playing like it.”

“No, and we’ll never do it again,” said Blue, shaking her head emphatically.

“What do you mean?” Florey felt as if she were about to faint.

“When she heard about Modo and... the pound, she wanted you to come with her, to Weatherford!”

“Why? Why would she want us?”

“Oh, honey, don’t fight it. She said they were learning to work with gifted people. I’m not really sure what she meant, but it doesn’t matter.”

“What did the council say?”

“It was unanimous—almost.”

“To what?”

“To let you and the children go with her.”

In the silence, the crickets chirped and the frogs croaked from the silver river below. Her babies, Florey thought, they would not die that night. Her throat tightened until her voice was but a croak. "Sara," she said, her chin trembling, tears streaming down her face. "I almost..." She glanced back at the cliff. "I can't hold on any more. I'm gonna fall apart."

"No you're not, honey. Let me give you a hug." Sara's ample arms engulfed her. "You can't fall apart; you've gotta pack these kids up and take them to Weatherford."

The two women clung together and wept.

The End

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Sometimes differences are made in the world by people who are, themselves, different. During periods of hardship and stress people with special abilities are often desperately needed, but those are also the times when fear and ignorance can snuff them out before they can prove themselves—particularly those with disabilities. This was the inspiration behind "Inspiration Point."