

Herself, Alone

by John Riley

Greggie will turn six soon, but she would never send him to school. She knew of no school built for a child so small he could snuggle in the crease of her elbow. It'd have to be a tiny school, she thought, one where even the words are small.

Her name was Maybe and whenever she thought of herself, someone else was always there. Once she thought she caught a flash of herself standing behind strands of barbwire in a muddy barnyard, wearing rubber boots so tall the tops brushed her knees, but before the image fully gathered itself together an old man on an old tractor emerged and it was dry summer and the barnyard was gone. Behind her a cotton field bloomed and she could smell the honeysuckle and she was not alone.

Greggie's eyes were bright as diamond flecks and sometimes on the hot, river-sweaty nights, she'd let him sleep on the window sill in her room. His eyes would turn into pins of blue in the half-dark when the moon was full and the light came through the screen. She'd watch them until he fell asleep and wonder if Greggie was tiny because he knew her imagination would not do what she wanted it to. If he'd decided that if he stayed tiny, it would be as though he wasn't there. Then she'd wonder if in his imagination he wanted to see himself big but could only see himself small.

Greggie had grown a few inches since he was born, but rabbits and squirrels and even small birds like cardinals and blue jays still posed a threat. She had to be on guard when they went outside. On the first day of school after the bus had gone by she placed Greggie in the old music box she had removed the lid from, and they went down to stand by the broad river. She loved the river and Greggie did, too. He sat tall in his box and clasped his hands together as they stood on the bank and breathed in the rich air. Far out over the water

three pelicans soared. A double-crested cormorant she would have to keep her eye on perched on a water stump downstream. So many things at the river could be a danger to Greggie without her there to protect him, and at that moment the joy of being his mother quaked through her. What did it matter if her imagination was not hers alone when she had moments like these? There was nothing more powerful than being needed, and from now on she would welcome her visitors and try to make them feel at home. The realization gave her such deep relief she smiled down at Greggie and lifted the velvet-lined box to whisper she loved him, but before she could speak he touched her ear and said, "Go ahead, mother, pretend I'm not here."

