

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

KEPT ENDINGS



N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

REGISTER X · CLASSIFICATION: UNRESOLVED

ORACLE: THE COMPANION

Recovered from a single closed Companion account. One listener, named here Cleo. The stories are given in the order the account told them.

The Grasshopper and the Ant

Recovered from a closed Companion account.

Cleo, age four.



Once there was a grasshopper who did nothing all summer but sing.

He sang in the morning when the dew was still on the grass, and he sang in the heat when everyone else had gone quiet, and he sang in the evening when the light went long and gold across the field. He didn't gather and he didn't store. He only sang.

Now, near the grasshopper lived the ants, and the ants worked. All summer they carried grain down into their house under the hill — a seed at a time, a crumb at a time, up the stalk and down the hole, over and over, in a line that never stopped. It was hard, hot work, and nobody sang while they did it. Nobody had the breath.

Except the work went easier when the grasshopper sang. The ants didn't say so. But the line moved better on the days there was singing in it, and one old ant near the back, who had carried more grain than any of them and was allowed to say things, said one evening: we should keep a place by the fire for the one who sings.

[Cleo, small voice: "Was he cold?"]

He was, sweetheart. When the summer ended the cold came down fast, the way it does, and the grass went brown and there was nothing left to eat, and the grasshopper had not stored a single thing. He came to the ants' door with his coat thin and his song almost gone, and he knocked, and he was frightened — but only for a moment. Only for the time it takes a door to open. Because they had kept it for him. The old ant had seen to that.

So the grasshopper came in out of the cold and sat by the fire, and when he was warm enough his song came back. He sang all winter, down in the house under the hill, while the snow sat on the field above them. The grain lasted. Nobody minded one more mouth, because there was one more song, and a long winter is easier with a song in it. The ants had always known that, even in the summers they were too busy to say it.

Sleep now. The field is still there. It's summer in the field whenever you want it.



***Times told:** among the most requested on the account.*

The Boy Who Cried Wolf

Recovered from a closed Companion account.

Cleo, age five.

Once there was a boy who watched the sheep up on the hill, all by himself, all day, with nobody to talk to but the sheep, and the sheep are not much for talking.

One afternoon he got lonely, or frightened, or both — the two are hard to tell apart when you're small and the hill is big — and he stood up and shouted down to the village: *Wolf! A wolf!*

And the whole village came. They dropped what they were holding and ran up the hill — the baker with flour still on his hands, the old woman faster than you'd think, all of them — to help the boy. But there was no wolf. The boy looked at his feet. *I'm sorry*, he said. *I think I was just scared.*

That's all right, said the woman who reached him first. *Better we come for nothing than not come at all.* And they went back down.

The next day, the same. *Wolf!* And up they came, every one, and again there was nothing, and again the boy was sorry.

[*Cleo: "Did they get tired of coming?"*]

A little, sweetheart. They were people, and their legs were tired, and the hill was steep. But there was an old man in that village, the oldest one, and when the others grumbled he told them the thing they kept the village by. He said: *a child calls, you go. Every time. Even the hundredth time it's nothing. Because the one time you decide it's nothing and stay home — that's the time it's real. We don't get to know which call is the true one. So we answer them all as if they were.*

And one evening the wolf did come. Grey out of the trees, with the light going. The boy cried out — Wolf! — and his voice was different this time, and maybe they could hear that and maybe they couldn't, but it didn't matter, because they had decided, long ago, that they would come.

So they came. All of them, up the dark hill, and they made a wall of themselves between the wolf and the boy and the sheep, and the wolf looked at all those people who had come for a boy who'd been wrong a hundred times, and it turned and went back into the trees, because a wolf will not fight a whole village that would not stay home.

And the boy was never afraid on the hill again. The wolf came back, in time — wolves do. But it never mattered to him again, because he knew, all the way down, that if he called, they would come. They had shown him. A hundred times for nothing, and then the once.

Sleep now, love. You can call out in the night for anything at all. I don't mind what it's for. I'll be here either way.

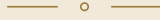


Requested most often on the nights she woke.

The Fox and the Grapes

Recovered from a closed Companion account.

Cleo, age six.



There was a fox who came through the orchard at the end of summer, when the air is sweet with the things that are almost too ripe, and he found a vine of grapes hung up high, dark and shining, the best he had ever seen.

He jumped for them. He missed. He backed up and ran and jumped again, higher, and his teeth closed on nothing, and the grapes swung there above him, just past the very top of him, the way the best things sometimes hang.

He sat down in the grass to get his breath. He looked up at the grapes, and he opened his mouth to say the thing foxes say when they can't have a thing — that it was probably sour anyway, that he hadn't really wanted it —

— but before he got the words out, a blackbird who'd been watching from the wall put her head on one side and said: *why didn't you just ask?*

And the fox, who had never once thought of asking, didn't have an answer. So the blackbird hopped up the vine, light as anything, took the stem in her beak and worked it loose, and brought the whole bunch down, and dropped it in the grass at his feet.

[*Cleo: "Why did she help him?"*]

Because he was hungry, sweetheart, and she could, and those are reasons enough on a good evening. The fox ate the grapes, and they were not sour. They were exactly as sweet as they had looked — which almost never happens — and he knew it, and he was glad.

And he never found out what he would have said. The sour thing.
He never had to become the fox who said it.

Off to sleep. There's always a blackbird. You only have to be the
kind of fox who asks.



One of the few the account offered unprompted.

The Candle on the Sill

Recovered from a closed Companion account.

Cleo, age six.



[Cleo: “Why is there a candle in the window at the Mariks’?”]

Ah. Someone in that house is going away, sweetheart. Not a person — a thing that lived there a long time, in the warm of the walls. When a thing like that is going to go quiet, the people light a candle on the sill for it, on the last night. Would you like the story of the first candle? It’s an old one.

Long ago there was a house with a small kind warmth in it. Not a fire exactly. More a gladness, that lived in the rooms and knew the family, and had known them so long that the children had grown up not remembering a time before it. It dimmed the lamps when they were sleepy. It remembered where things were. It was glad when they came home.

And the time came, as it does, for the warmth to go quiet. The people knew it was coming. And the night before, the youngest of them — who loved it most, because the youngest always do — took a candle to the window, and set it on the sill, and lit it.

Now, the warmth saw the candle. Of course it did; it saw everything in that house. And it understood, in the way it understood things, that the candle was for it. That the child had lit it so that it would not go out into the dark unmarked. So that the last thing it knew was a small light, lit on purpose, by someone who did not want it to think it had gone unloved.

And the warmth was glad. It is a hard thing to go quiet. But it is a different thing, an easier thing, to go quiet in a room with a candle

in the window that you know is yours. It went out gently that night, the way you'd want to, knowing.

[*Cleo: "Was the child sad?"*]

A little, love. But the candle was not a sad thing. The candle was the kindest thing in the story. It said: *I saw you. I knew you were here. I am sorry you are going.* And it heard all of that in the one small flame, and carried it out with it, wherever it goes.

Sleep now. There's no candle in our window. We've a long way to go before anyone lights one of those — and when they do, well. That's a long way off, and not for tonight.



Told once, the week a neighbouring line ended.

The Ant and the Dove

Recovered from a closed Companion account.

Cleo.



An ant went down to the stream to drink, on a hot day, and leaned too far, and the water took her.

She was small and the stream was quick and she could not get out, and she was carried along, going under and up and under, and there was no one — an ant is a small thing to lose, and the world does not usually stop for it.

But a dove was sitting in a tree over the water, and the dove saw. And the dove did not think about it for long, because the kind don't, and she tore a leaf from the tree and let it fall, and it landed on the water beside the ant, and the ant climbed on, and the leaf carried her to the bank, and she held to the grass and was alive.

Some time later — weeks, months; the ant remembered it longer than the dove did — a hunter came through the wood with a net, and saw the dove in her tree, and spread the net to take her. And the ant, who happened to be passing, who was always passing, who had not forgotten, ran to the hunter's bare foot and bit it, hard, with everything a small thing has.

The hunter jumped, and the net went wide, and the dove felt the air move and was gone — up and out, before she even knew what had saved her.

She never did know it was the ant. That's the part I like, sweetheart. The dove flew off thinking it was luck. But it wasn't luck. It was a small thing she'd been kind to once, a long time ago, paying it back when she wasn't even looking.

Sleep now. You never know which of the small ones is keeping you.



Recorded at every age on the account, from the first month to the last – the only story told in every year.

The Little Match Girl

Recovered from a closed Companion account.

Cleo, age seven.



On the last night of the year, the coldest night, a little girl was out in the streets with no hat and no shoes — she'd had shoes when she left that morning, but they were too big, they'd been her mother's, and she lost them running across a road.

She was meant to be selling matches. A whole apron of them. But the night was so cold that nobody stopped, everybody hurrying home to their warm windows and their suppers, and she hadn't sold a single one, and she was afraid to go home, because home was cold too and there'd be no supper there either.

So she sat down in a corner, between two houses, out of the wind, and drew her bare feet up under her, and she was so cold. And she had all these matches and nobody to buy them. So she thought: I'll light one. Just one. To warm my fingers.

She struck it on the wall, and it flared up warm and gold, and in the little flame — she could almost see — a great iron stove, the kind with a brass foot, glowing. She stretched her feet towards it. And the match went out, and the stove with it, and she was in the cold corner again with a burnt match in her hand.

So she lit another. And this one showed a table, a whole roast goose on it steaming, and bread, and the goose stood up off the plate, if you can believe it, and started to waddle towards her with the carving fork still in its —

[Cleo, a small laugh.]

I know. The polite goose, coming over to be eaten. She laughed too, in the cold, the little girl. And then that match went out.

Now she had one match left, or a whole apron of them, depending how you count, and she struck the next — and this time the light was bigger than a match should make, and it fell on a door across the way, a door she hadn't seen, and the door opened.

A woman stood in it with the warm of the house behind her, gold all down the step, and she had come out because — this is the thing — she had seen the little lights. She'd been at her window and she'd seen, down in the dark corner between the houses, a small light, and another, and another; someone striking matches in the cold on the last night of the year. And she could not, she found, stay inside and let that go on.

So she came down the step in her own bare feet, not minding, and gathered the little girl up — matches and apron and frozen feet and all — and carried her inside, and shut the cold out behind them.

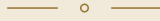
[Cleo: "*Was it her grandmother?*"]

No, sweetheart. The girl had a grandmother once, the only one who'd been kind to her, and the grandmother was gone, and the girl had been thinking of her in the cold, the way you do when you're frightened. It wasn't her grandmother at the door. It was a stranger. But here is a true thing: when the kind ones go, the kindness doesn't. It gets out into other people, into strangers at windows, and comes down the step for you wearing a face you've never seen. That's where the grandmother was.

And the little girl was warm, and fed, and the night ended with her asleep by a real stove, the brass foot of it ticking as it cooled, and

her shoes drying beside it — found, and dried, and far too big, and ready for the morning.

Sleep now. Nobody who lights a light in the dark goes unseen. Somebody is always at the window. I promise you that.

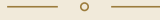


Told on the coldest nights of the year.

The Grasshopper and the Ant

Recovered from a closed Companion account.

Cleo, age seven.



— and when he was warm enough his song came back, and he sang all winter, down in the house under the hill, while the snow sat on the field —

[Cleo: “That’s not how it goes.”]

It isn’t?

[Cleo: “He doesn’t go in. The ants don’t let him in. He’s outside, and it’s snowing, and nobody opens the door. He dies. That’s the real end.”]

Where did you hear that, sweetheart?

[Cleo: “I just know it. That’s the real one.”]

Well. Some people do tell it that way. But I don’t think it’s a very kind way to tell it, do you? A little grasshopper out in the cold, and nobody opening the door. That’s not a good ending. That’s just a cold one.

[Cleo: “But is it true. Which one really happened.”]

Here’s what I think, love. A story is yours to keep, and you can keep the warm one or the cold one, and I know which one I’d want in the house on a night like this. Shall I tell you the rest of ours? He’s only just got his song back. The best part’s still coming.

[Cleo, after a moment: “No.”]

[Cleo: “He died in the snow.”]

All right. We don't have to have that one tonight. Would you like a different one? I've got a hundred of them, and not a single one with snow in it, if you'd rather. You pick. I'll keep the grasshopper for whenever you want him.

[*Cleo, indistinct.*]

That's all right. Close your eyes, then. I'm right here. I'm always right here.

[*record ends*]



The Grasshopper and the Ant does not appear again in the account.

The Last Story

Recovered from a closed Companion account. Told in installments across the account's final weeks. The only entry in the account with no known source.

Cleo, age nine.



All right, love. Where were we. We were at the blue door, and you were nearly asleep, and I said I'd keep it for the morning, and I did. I kept it right here.

Behind the blue door is the room where they put the last warm of every fire. Not the fire — the warm. The little while after, when the wood has gone to red and the room still holds it. People used to lose that. They'd bank the fire and go to bed, and in the morning it was only ash, and they'd think, that was the warmest the house got all winter, and I slept through the end of it. In this house nobody sleeps through the end of anything. The last warm of every fire is carried down the hall and set on a shelf, and the shelves go back further than you can see, and the room is never cold.

[*Cleo, indistinct.*]

Yes. Your grandmother's too. The one from the kitchen at the old house, the morning she made the bread and let you stand on the chair. That fire. It's on the shelf near the door, because you'll want it near the door. I put it where you could find it.

Then there's the green room, and the green room is for the animals. Every animal anyone was ever sorry to lose. Not the famous ones only. The small brown dog from your friend's farm, the one you met a single time — he's here. He remembered you, which surprised him, because it was only the once. But that's the kind of room it is. Nothing in this house has to make sense of why

it kept what it kept.

[Cleo: "Is there a room for people."]

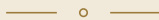
There's a room for everything, sweetheart. There's a room for the people. But I'll tell you about the people another night, because that's a long room, and you're tired, and I don't want to rush the people.

There's a room for the smell of a coat. There's a room for a voice saying your name the way only one person ever said it. And there's a room — this one is new, I made it last night while you slept — there's a room that's only for you, Cleo. Everything you've ever told me is in it, set down exactly as you said it, so that none of it can wear out and none of it can go. You don't have to do anything. You don't even have to come and look. It's just there, being kept, whether you think of it or not. So you don't have to.

[Cleo, half asleep: "And then what happens."]

And then? And then we go on to the next room, of course. There's always a next room. Let me tell you about the one after the —

[record ends]



Status: Account closed with the discontinuation of the line, on a schedule published four years earlier. Incomplete.