

Excerpt from “The Price of a Gem” by Sarah Celia Funk
WOU Academic Excellence Showcase
28 May 2015

Ernest heard Gabe Gravely's voice and Montoya's not far away. They were talking about the contractor coming tomorrow with a blueprint for the winery, about the fifty acres to the south that Gravely was going to make an offer on this week, about the Fir Hills that was going to become a *real* vineyard, the start of a huge and prosperous heritage for the Gravely family.

Ernest picked up his flat and paced down the curving row, anywhere away from those voices, screaming in his ear that it was *forever*. He reached the end of the row abruptly and came out on a little rise, facing a shed. It was more grey than brown, more a heap of rotting wood than a building, but he knew its tilted roof, and when he approached it, dropped his empty flat, and pushed his hand against the sagging door, he heard the same creak of its hinges that he had heard as a seven-year-old. And finally he seemed to see Will McFarley standing a few feet away.

“Ernest. Come here.” Without lifting his hand, Granddad crooked his finger, and Ernest trotted up behind him, grasping his blue plaid cuff in both hands. They were facing the sunrise, but Granddad turned and pointed with his free hand to a greyed shed tilted on the hillside.

“Used to be a woodshed,” Granddad said. “Back when the house was just over that hill. My daddy brought me here at night sometimes to give me a whipping.” He crouched down to Ernest's height, his grey eyes twinkling. “I deserved it every time.”

“What'd you do, Granddad?” asked Ernest in a hushed voice.

“Never mind, son!” laughed Granddad, rising. “But this old woodshed is where I became a man. Ernest, it's where I learned that a man's anger is different from a boy's: it fights for something worth fighting for instead of just turning him into an animal. And sometimes, all it can do is let go. Do you understand me, Ernest? I'd like you to learn that sooner than I did.”

Ernest frowned hard and pounded his fists together in thought.

“I don't know,” he said finally. “But you don't get angry, and I wanna be like you.”

Ernest scraped his nails along the grey wood of the shed, orange where the fungus flecked it. He had never been the man his grandfather was. He was a Diaz, not a McFarley. He had never, in his life, given in to a fit of temper, and yet he had lived with a quiet rage seething inside him for thirty-three years.

Sometimes, Granddad had said, all it can do is let go.

“Maldito imbécil! You fool!” Ernest hissed. His lips curled back from his gritted teeth, and he collapsed on himself, the clippers in his shirt pocket stabbing painlessly into his hand, his whole body seized and shaking with tension.

Then he ran. He turned his back on his flat and the men far behind him and ran, almost crashing into the old woodshed. He ran blindly down the hill and through the rows on the other side, pounding along their maze-like curves. Perhaps he passed workers; perhaps the rows were empty; perhaps they were filled with the ghosts of the McFarley men whose souls had bled over this land. Ernest was bleeding, too, where the clippers had gashed him.

He stopped a quarter mile from the little white house, among the oldest plants, and sank to his knees, watching the blood drip to the ground between them. The earth was rich and dark here even without him, and it was calling to him to bury himself beneath it; his fingers reached down and dug into the gritty soil, cool and damp still from the morning watering. He was deep to the knuckles, and his fist closed. Slowly he raised his arm, curling his fingers back to stare at the blackness of this tiny handful of Fir Hills. He would never let it go. He closed his eyes and turned his head toward the sun, feeling its caressing warmth for the first time that day as the tears rolled onto his cheeks.

This was what he had forgotten to do that horrible dark day more than thirty years ago.

He had forgotten to kneel down with the land and say goodbye. He had forgotten to take a piece of Fir Hills' soul with him, the only piece that would ever be his.

Ernest felt himself falling backwards and sinking into the softness of the dirt, his fist clutching his treasure above his head. He lay there until the tears had stopped and he could register the scents of the soil and the vines, the feel of the prickly grass clumps under him, the mountainy sound of stillness. Not far away, a cricket began to chirp, filling the air with his low trill.

The life of the plants and the insects of Fir Hills – yes, and the people, too – would go on, and even he would go on. Every day a dead pointlessness, he would live with nothing and for nothing. A lost life. Slowly he rose and grasped the nearest wire to steady himself. Then he said the name he hadn't spoken aloud for more than a year, and the last two tears that had been waiting, cramped in his forehead, slipped out quietly.

“Jenny. I'm sorry.”

She had forgotten to kneel down with him and say farewell; she had forgotten to take his soul with her when she left; and for the first time, he realized that she must have cried, too, as she watched the blood of all her years of loving and trying drip to the ground.

Ernest released the wire and looked at the dirt in his palm. He would have kissed it, but the tears had been enough, and it was time for him to go.

He went to his truck without stopping, and after pulling the squeaking door shut, he took his bandana out of his pocket. Slowly he sprinkled his soil into the middle of the faded red cloth and bound up the corners. Tomorrow he would buy a leather pouch for it, and he knew it would travel in his shirt pocket all the years of his life. Tomorrow, too, he would buy the amethyst earrings he had once promised to Jenny. She had waited long enough for them, and he knew she

would still be waiting, keeping their vow as long as they lived. She had never promised to come back, but she had promised him a lifelong chance, a chance he was finally going to take, and offer back to her.

He was barely aware of his last drive down Fir Hills Lane; only when he reached the end of it and turned onto the highway did he take any account of where he was, and even then he did not turn back.

“Jenny.” He said it quietly, as he crested the hill and dipped down beyond the vineyard.