**Her Voice Would Be the Sea**

**By: Donna Ison**

**Winner of 2017 Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning Flash Fiction Contest**

“Open casting call. Female with melodious speaking voice. No nudity. Very generous compensation.”

Despite the fact her Acting 101 professor had told her she needed to lose weight and gain stage presence, Sarah put on her new yellow sundress and lucky horseshoe necklace, and went to the audition.

It consisted of reading from children’s books to a panel of two stern men and a meticulous woman. At the end of the day, Sarah was offered the job, contingent upon her passing a psychological evaluation and thorough background check. Only after she’d cleared both did the trio reveal the highly sensitive nature of the work.

Now, one week later, she stood in the waiting room outside the death chamber of the Greenbriar Correctional Facility clutching a hardback copy of *Where the Wild Things Are* tight to her chest. She wanted to run back down the hallway, back to her cozy dorm room, back through time to before she’d seen that ad thumbtacked to the bulletin board outside the theatre.

Startled by a loud knock, Sarah spun and found herself facing a man who looked like he’d been built with Legos. “Mitch Gaines. I’m the warden.”

“Sarah Cunningham. Nice to meet you, sir.”

“Beautiful voice. Soothing. I can see why they hired you.”

She blushed, despite herself.

“I know you’ve been briefed, but let’s go over protocol one more time. You enter, read the inmate his chosen story, and leave. Then, we do our part. Any questions?”

“Only one.” Sarah hesitated, then blurted, “Who is he?”

“Darrell Julian Wade.”

Her eyes saucered.

“I’ll leave you with that. You have three minutes.” The warden departed. His Old Spice cologne lingered.

Sarah was in the sixth grade when Darrell Julian Wade, nicknamed the Mountain Murderer, was arrested for raping and strangling nineteen female hikers he’d abducted from the Appalachian Trail. Footage of victims, their devastated families, and Wade’s trial dominated the news for weeks.

Her brain became a battlefield.

*I can’t do this. Not for him. I can’t. Yes, you can. You will. You’re here to bring comfort. It’s your job. They chose you. You signed a contract. He’s a murderer. He’s a human being. Human barely. Calm down. Breathe.*

The door swung open and the warden announced, “Show time.”

Brandishing the book like a shield, Sarah crept into the chamber. The air buzzed metallic. Wade was already strapped to a gurney with IV lines snaking from both arms. On shaking legs, she walked to an “x” taped on the floor and opened the book.

“Darrell Julian Wade, before she begins, do you have any last words?"

Wade looked through the warden and past the execution team. Gray eyes sought Sarah. In them, she found a sadness and a softness. And, she understood. Her voice would be the sea that carried Darrell Julian Wade from this world with its terrible teeth back home.

“Any last words?” the warden repeated.

Wade whispered, “As Sendak said, ‘Let the wild rumpus start!’”

Sarah nodded and began to read.