

A Near Miss

I knew she'd be in a place like this. Surrounded by the music of the stream and the soft breath of the wind through the branches above. The sunlight flashed in the troughs and furrows of the water as it moved past her feet. Magic was born in places like this, and so was she.

"Have you been sleeping out here again?" I said. "There are leaves in your hair"

She didn't flinch. She just ran her hand through knotted, auburn curls. "I like it," she said.

My backpack was heavy, full of extra layers and supplies. I slid the straps from my shoulders and leaned the pack against a nearby tree. She didn't look at me. I knew she'd be angry.

"You were hard to find," I said.

She crouched down and cupped her hands in the moving water. "You've been gone a long time," she said, bringing her hands up to her mouth.

"Don't drink that, It'll be dirty! Here, I brought a bottle." I began to unzip my pack.

"Did Fear tell you to bring that?" she said, finally looking at me.

I left the bottle in the bag. "He's just trying to keep us safe, he doesn't want us to get hurt."

"He's kept you very safe indeed, hasn't he?" she said. "For two months now you've been safe and sound."

"I'm sorry, I've had a lot on at work."

She nodded, "Perhaps Fear should keep you safe from work." She'd never understood work.

"I brought you some sandwiches," I said, digging around inside my backpack again.

"Frazzles and cheese spread?" She understood food well enough.

I smiled and held the tinfoil wrapped package out to her. She walked towards me, her bare feet leaving wet footprints like question marks on the flat surfaces of the rocks. The thin material of her dress, yellow with purple swirls, swished around her feet as she moved. The hem was wet and brown with dirt. She wore a purple, hand-knitted cardigan on top. The over-stretched sleeves hung limp past her hands, and she had to push them back up her arms to hold her sandwich.

“Don’t you get cold at night?” I said.

She took a big bite and the crisps inside cracked and crackled. She gave a satisfied groan as she chewed. “I light campfires and bury myself in leaves like a hedgehog,” she said, making circles with her shoulders.

“What if you get ticks?” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “So how come Fear let you come and see me?”

The question cut me. “He doesn’t *let* me, I come when I...”

She raised an eyebrow and tilted her head to one side. I shuffled my coat from my shoulders and began to roll it up to put it in the backpack. “I wanted to come sooner, but...”

“Work?” she said.

I nodded.

“Do you love it?”

“What?”

“Work, do you love it?”

“No, I don’t love it, but... you know.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.” A single, dry leaf detached itself from her hair and landed silently beside a grubby, wet foot. “I found some more stories,” she said.

“You did? That’s wonderful!”

“They’ve gone though. They went into the woods. I needed you.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m sorry. I’ve been busy.”

She shrugged. “That’s no fun. Sorry’s no fun. Let’s just catch another one.” She pushed the remains of the sandwich into her mouth.

“Wait a second, I haven’t had mine yet,” I said, rummaging in my backpack again.

“You’re not even hungry!” The words were malformed as she said them through a mouth full of sandwich.

“Well, it is one o’clock,” was all I could think of to say.

She made a noise somewhere between a groan and a scream. She was right. I wasn’t hungry, and for some unfathomable reason, I’d put mild cheddar and margarine in my sandwich. I walked over to join her. She was standing in the stream again.

“Look, I really am sorry it’s been such a long time. It’s just ...”

“Shhh!” She grabbed my hand. “Look in the stream,” she said. “Sometimes they come from there.”

I looked into the stream. I felt her body shiver a little.

“Are you alright?” I said. “Do you want a jumper? I’ve a spare one.”

She jerked my hand with hers. “Stop bothering!” she said, her eyes still looking into the water, “Just listen!”

It made me cross. Who was she to talk down to me? No one at work would dare to speak to me like that. Why had I come? What a waste of time. I had a responsible job, and bills to pay. What on Earth had possessed me to take time off so that I could spend a week staring into a stream with a crazy person?

She said something, but her voice was so quiet that it took me a few moments to make it out.

“Do you remember?”

I heard childlike laughter in the bubble and splash of the stream. The sun grew a little warmer on my back. A blue-tit darted from bank to bank and disappeared into the foliage, and I did remember.

I remembered the tree stump and the boulder with moss covering one half of it. I remembered the trees arching over this stream like a living tunnel. I remembered following it, holding her hand with the sun on our backs. I remembered Fear standing on the bank, sour-faced and defeated. He'd said we shouldn't go in, that we'd cut our feet on the rocks. We ignored him. Fear never got his own way back then.

We'd wanted to see how far up we could get. At first, the water was crushingly cold. We had to alternate which foot was submerged, standing one-legged like flamingos until the pain forced us to swap feet. But, in time, they became numb and we went more quickly. Hand in hand, slipping over rocks, clambering up tiny waterfalls, gasping as cold water splashed some hitherto dry part of our skin, and laughing at the shock on each other's faces.

Fear stayed behind mumbling something about hypothermia and throwing ever-larger rocks into the water. He was strong even back then.

But we kept following the stream until it went under a little stone bridge. We stood underneath it and watched the sunlight dance on the arched ceiling. It felt like a magical place, a storybook kind of place, a place where normal people would never go. I remember feeling how terrible it would be to be normal and forget how to find places like that.

She told me a story under that bridge. Full of secrets and nighttime journeys and impossible things. I listened as the water moved around my ankles and the minnows swam past my feet.

"Did you make that up?" I said when she'd finished.

She was silent for a moment. "No," she said. "I found it. It just came hopping along the stream and I caught it."

I laughed "You caught it? Like a fish?"

Like a fish," she said nodding, and she slapped her lips together to make a soft popping noise.

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"Where are you?" she said. I looked down at our clasped hands. Mine looked like the hand of an old man, the loose skin bunched into wrinkles between her thumb and forefinger. "I was remembering the time you told me a story under that bridge."

She nodded, solemn and serious. "Yes, that was a good one," she said. "Fear tried to stop us going, didn't he?"

"He just worries about what might happen."

"Perhaps he should worry more about what might not happen?"

I picked a dry leaf from her hair and let it drop into the stream.

"Do you hate Fear?" I asked.

She looked up, little wrinkles crossing her forehead. "Do I hate my brother?"

I nodded.

She looked past my shoulder at the branches of the trees. "I don't hate him, hate's no fun. But he does steal things."

"He's not a thief. He's just trying to keep us safe."

"He doesn't mean to steal, but he does." She looked back into the stream and sighed. "Just missed one," she said.

We stood there for hours, trying to catch a story. At one point, I caught the tail end of one, some melancholy thing full of missed chances and regret. I asked her if we should chase it, but she shook her head. "If you have to ask then it's already too late," she said.

Then she took me to the meadow.

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The meadow stretched from the edge of the woods to the mountain, where the grassland faded into heather and then rock. The sun was high in the sky now and it was warmer here out of the shade of the trees. I was regretting my thermal underwear.

“Do you catch stories here?”

“Sometimes,” she said, performing a bent-legged cartwheel through the long grass. “But you have to be moving or they won’t stick.”

“Oh,” I said, digging my hands into my pockets. “and does it have to be cartwheels?”

“Dunno. I just do them for fun.”

I started to think about how lovely it would be to buy a place out here, to live by the woods. But it’s expensive to live in the countryside, and that started me wondering if I’d ever get that promotion. It wasn’t impossible if I did well on the current project, but the deadline was next month and I was already behind. I began to question whether it had been wise to take this week off.

“Shhh!” she said. “You’re scaring them all away!”

I stopped walking. “I never said a word.”

She stood still glaring at me, her hands in fists at her sides.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“Shout.”

“What?”

“You have to get rid of all the noise.”

“What noise?”

“Just shout!” she said. “Scream. Jump up and down. Yell.” She tilted her head back and unleashed a howl, shaking her head so that her tongue flapped against the sides of her mouth.

“Stop!” I said, grabbing her by the arm. “Someone will hear. They’ll think you’re crazy!”

She stopped immediately. I didn't understand the hurt in her eyes. It seemed disproportionate to what I'd said. She looked down at her feet. "Perhaps they will," she said.

She walked away from me then, head down, stepping on a patch of daisies and crushing them with her naked foot as she went.

"Where are we going now?" I said.

She pointed without looking up.

"The mountain? We can't. You're not dressed for it."

She kept walking.

"I'm scared you'll get hurt," I said.

"I know that," she replied

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We walked for hours, the soles of her bare feet becoming blacker and blacker as we went. She walked quickly, and the path grew steep. My thighs began to ache, but I couldn't stop if I wanted to keep up with her.

"Will we find a story up there?" I asked.

"I never have," she said.

"Then why are we going?"

She turned and looked over my head, out across the valley. "Doesn't it all look so small from up here?"

I turned to look. The meadow was just a thin band now, and our stream was concealed under the jumble of darker greens that made up the woods. I was surprised at how far we'd climbed. "It's beautiful," I said

She smiled at me then. I noticed that she was standing with all her weight on one side. She turned to carry on and I saw a dark red gash on the sole of her foot.

"You're hurt," I said.

She kept walking.

“Why are we doing this?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” she said.

“You don’t want *me* to get hurt? I’d be a lot less likely to get hurt if we weren’t halfway up a bloody mountain!” I shouted after her.

She tilted her head back and released her caterwaul again. It echoed back to us across the valley like the call of some strange, wild animal. We kept climbing.

I’m still surprised how far she got. It was freezing up there. I had thermals on and my fingers were still numb. But her thin dress was no protection against the cold mountain winds. There was no point trying to persuade her to stop. I could either follow her or not. Those were my choices. She was going on either way.

The path had dissolved into shifting scree, interspersed by short vertical crags. She was climbing one of these rock walls when she fell. I was about ten feet below her. I could see the red gash on the underside of her foot whilst she felt for a foothold. She found a small indent with her toes, but as she tried to pull herself up, putting her whole weight on her bad foot, her leg gave way beneath her.

She didn’t scream. The only sound was that of her fingers scraping along the rock face as she tried to grip on. She slid down the rough surface and slammed into an outcrop of rock, which kicked her outwards away from the face of the crag. I took a step backwards on the loose rocks, my arms stretched out to slow her fall, but the force of her body knocked me over, and sent us both bowling down the steep slope together.

She was on top of me when we came to a stop.

“Are you ok?” I said.

I disentangled myself from her and stood up.

“Are you alright?”

She stayed on the ground. Her legs and arms were covered in grazes, nothing looked broken, but her eyes stayed closed. A single line of blood trickled out from under her hair.

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Fear met me at the foot of the mountain. I don't know how he knew to come. She woke up when he took her from my arms. She looked up at him, then she closed her eyes and fell asleep with her head against his chest. It seemed so strange to see her lying there, looking so small in her brother's strong arms. The two of them had always been so different. Always at war, always pulling in different directions, with me in the middle wondering which way to go.

It was Fear that carried her back to the house. I couldn't have done it. I was exhausted, but he was much stronger than me these days, though he grumbled continually.

"Ridiculous. Could have been killed. Only surprised it hasn't happened before. What was she thinking?"

Despite his gruff words, I saw real concern in his eyes. Fear was a soft-hearted soul for all his size. I knew he'd look after her now. Deep down he loved her as much as I did. He helped me bandage up her foot. He lit a fire to warm the house. Then he made some soup for her, in case she woke up again. Fear made me stay up with her each night, holding her hand, checking she was breathing. But she didn't get better.

The days passed. I had to go back to work. Each day I'd come home and tell Fear how busy it was, how hard. He would sigh and tell me about the bills we still needed to pay. And each day she seemed a little paler. She would open her eyes for a while and watch Fear fussing around her room, changing sheets and making sure she was warm. Then she would drift off again. She slept most of the time.

But one morning Fear slept in. He'd been up half the night fixing the lock on the back door. I could still hear the loud snores from his room when I took a cup of tea into her. I watched as she slept. It was terrible to see such a carefree thing so broken. She hadn't been eating. Her

hair was pasted against her scalp with sweat and looked grey, as though it had been dusted with chalk. What could I do?

I slipped back into the kitchen. I looked out of the window at the garden. Fear kept it nice and trim, the edging was always tidy and he mowed the lawn every other day in summer. I stared at the perfect, suburban garden and felt claustrophobic. I longed to see the disordered beauty of the woods, the meadow, the wild. Her places.

I turned and grabbed the rucksack from the back of the kitchen door. I smiled as I put the cheddar back in the fridge and made up a frazzle and cheese spread sandwich. I filled the flask with hot coffee and put my coat on.

Fear caught me just as I opened the back gate. "Where are you going?" he said, catching the back door before it swung closed. His bleary eyes took in the backpack, the jeans and walking coat. "Why aren't you going to work? They'll fire you."

I stood there at the back gate for what felt like a long time. Poor Fear. He was just trying to look after me. I walked back to him and hugged him, trying to make my arms stretch around his huge body.

"I think she might die, Fear,"

Slowly, he put his arms around me too. "I don't want that," he said. "You know I don't want that."

I patted his back.

"I think I know what to do," I said.

"Can I help?"

I unwrapped my arms from him and looked into his worried face. "I can't take you with me, Fear. I'm sorry."

"But I'm scared you'll be hurt too?"

I shook my head. "I'm already hurt."

Fear looked down at his feet. "I know," he said. "Is it my fault?"

I squeezed his shoulder gently.

"Look after her whilst I'm gone, will you?"

He pushed a hand through his unbrushed hair and sighed. "I don't think I help much. She doesn't like me."

"She's your sister. She needs you now."

He nodded.

"I'll be back soon," I said. "Phone work and tell them I'm sick."

"That's lying," said Fear.

"No," I said, closing the gate behind me. "No, it's not."

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I climbed the mountain first. I found the rock face where she fell and pulled myself up. When I got to the top I sat down and looked at the world spread out below me. I closed my eyes, sipped my coffee and asked myself what she would do now. No, that was the wrong question. What did I want to do? That was the question. It seemed such a strange thing to ask myself. So simple and yet so difficult to answer. Like digging for some small, quivering thing buried under years of sediment. But I found it in the end.

I left my shoes and socks by the side of the stream. The cold water was so painful on my feet that I had to stand still and take a few deep breaths at first. I must have waded for miles, clambering up waterfalls and slipping on mossy rocks. Tiny cuts appeared on the soles of my feet and I stubbed my toes, but by then my feet were so numb that I didn't feel it.

And then I caught one. I wasn't even looking. It just leapt out of the trees and bounced across the water like a skimming stone. I caught it without thinking. Just a flick of the hand and there it was, wriggling under my fingers like a fish. I opened my hand and it seemed to settle

down. I felt the soft thrum of it against my skin. It was beautiful, full of purples and golds, distant birdsong and warm breezes.

“Oh, she will love you!” I said.

I went back down the stream, bashing knees and elbows as I slipped over rocks and tree roots. I dared not use my hands in case I lost the thing still pulsing softly against my palm. I left my shoes beside the stream. They’re still there now, for all I know.

When I got home, Fear opened the door. “What’s happened? Are you okay? Where are your shoes?”

“Shh,” I said, “Everything’s ok. Just be still. Listen.”

And to my surprise he did. He followed me into her room and sat down in the corner. He crossed his arms on his knees and rested his chin on them.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and opened my hand. She stirred slightly under the covers, but nothing more.

“Maybe it won’t work,” said Fear. The purple and golden light faded a little.

“Shh,” I said. “Not helpful.”

I reached out, took one of her hands in mine, and held the story in the other. I blew on it gently, as though trying to ignite dying embers. It shivered against my palm like a small animal, and the light from it pulsed a little brighter. Then I began to speak.

It was the sort of story she always loved. Full of nighttime journeys and fireside secrets. I told it for hours, staring out of the window and watching the shadows of the house lengthen along Fear’s well-groomed back lawn. He sat in the corner in silence. The story seemed to calm him. He stayed there staring at his sister and taking slow, even breaths. Not quite smiling.

I didn’t see her open her eyes. I was so immersed in the story that I didn’t know she was awake until I heard her chuckle at the description of the old sheepdog’s tail thumping against the floor. She laughed then and I looked up at her.

"What is it?" I said.

"It just reminded me of something."

I wanted to do something, to check her temperature or ask about her foot. But she shook her head.

"Don't stop," she said.

I kept telling the story.

Fear rested his head on his arms and listened.

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It's a Thursday morning. There are two sets of frazzle and cheese spread sandwiches and a flask of hot Vimto in my pack.

"Be careful," says Fear as he helps me lift it onto my shoulders, "Are you sure you'll be ok? Do you want me to come with you? You know, just in case."

I pause and walk back down the hall. I wrap my arms around him. He stands there awkwardly for a few moments. Then, he puts his arms around me and squeezes back.

"Thank you for looking after me," I say. "You've done so well, and I know you care."

I pull away so I can see his face, my hands still on his huge shoulders. He nods, his face serious.

"But I'm just going to the woods to see her," I say. "I don't need you today. And I will be back soon, I promise."

He nods again and I let go of his shoulders. I close the door softly and breathe in. The morning air is cold and new. I watch the commuters driving to their offices and smile to think that I'm heading in the opposite direction. I work part-time nowadays. I watched that promotion sail

past me. It looked like an opportunity from the front, but once it had passed me by, I saw it for what it was: a near miss. I've never regretted it.

It takes me a few hours to find her. It always does. I don't mind. I just wander around until I find a nice spot and wait. She always finds me in the end. We sit and munch our sandwiches and see if a story finds us. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. That's ok. It feels good just to sit there with her beside me, singing her songs, doing her cartwheels, teaching me how to live, and eating frazzle and cheese spread sandwiches.