

# Billy of the Flies

and other stories

ALAN GREENHEAD



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Alan Greenhead

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**No flies were harmed in the making of this book.**

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## The Sea People

When I was young a strange thing happened to my family – something so bizarre that today I wonder whether we all went crazy for a few weeks and imagined it.

We lived by the sea in a small, rundown house that overlooked a stretch of golden sand. Although we never had much in the way of money or nice things it was a good life, especially in the long summers when we would have barbecues in the evening followed by singing, with Dad on guitar and maybe a bonfire on the beach. Then we would swim in the cool sea as it grew dark. The sun would colour the water golden so you felt like you were swimming in a pool of molten metal. Even today I sometimes imagine I can smell the rotting seaweed or hear the gulls squawking each time a breeze blows on my face.

There were a few other wooden houses behind the beach but overall it was a pretty wild place. I was an adventurous girl and loved spending days exploring the coast. Sand dunes covered in tussock surrounded

the houses, and looking each way along the beach you saw rocky headlands covered in pohutukawa trees enclosing the sandy bay. On a clear day, with fluffy clouds hugging the horizon and a cooling sea breeze, it was a marvellous place to spend a childhood. Most of the families living there had boats and we spent a lot of time out on the water fishing and swimming, sometimes followed by dolphins and seabirds. Other times we dug for pipis with our feet, letting the soft sand ooze up delightfully between our toes, or searched the shore for shells, washed up rubbish or oddly-shaped driftwood, always imagining that treasure lay just ahead. It was a quiet and sometimes lonely place, but we liked it that way.

It was in this setting that a strange thing happened and even today my family does not talk about it as if to do so would mean bad luck. It has always been accepted as one of those unexplainable things that other people would scoff at if you mention it too much. Because of this it has come to seem like it was all a dream, but I only need to look out across the sea to sense the mystery of those days again.

It must have been on one of our beachcombing patrols that I found the odd creature we came to call Sog. My brother Tamati will insist until he's blue in the face he spotted it first but I know he was busy looking at a jellyfish at the time. "Huia," he'll say, "I found the seadog first. Your memory's gone soft." But I know better.

I saw something that looked like a pile of seaweed until I got closer and realized it was some kind of animal. At first I thought it must be a seal pup because it was covered in soft brown fur, but then I saw it had

four legs with hands like a person's and a bit of webbing between the fingers. There were also some strange, elongated growths all over it that resembled seaweed and trailed off behind it. The face was like a dog's but with the large, sad eyes of a seal and it had a strange pattern on its forehead. It lay there blinking at me and looked exhausted as if it had washed up and didn't have the strength to swim out again. But surely it hadn't come from the sea, even if Dad did say all the time there are stranger things in the sea than we could ever imagine.

"The ocean is a huge place," he used to tell us, especially when we were out on the boat, "and we don't know the half of what's down there in the deep." Then he would pretend something had grabbed him and was trying to pull him over the side of the boat and although his screaming and thrashing about freaked us out the first time we saw it, he soon had us roaring with laughter.

I wrapped the strange animal in my jersey and carried it back to the house to show Mum and Dad. They thought it was the weirdest thing they had ever seen and Mum pulled out a book on sea animals to look it up.

"I can't see anything like it in here," she said. "It looks a bit like a seal, but then again ..."

"It's something unknown to science," said Dad with his voice rising in excitement. "I told you there are some odd things in the sea. I'll ask at the museum. Perhaps they'll know something about it."

In the meantime we gave it food and cared for it, making a cosy bed where it snuggled down quite happily to spend the night. It ate only fish and luckily

Dad had caught a fresh load that day. In the morning we took it to the water's edge and it ran in and swam about like a seal, diving and leaping and doing barrel rolls of pleasure. After a while it came out and seemed pretty happy on dry land too.

"It seems to be at home in the sea and on the shore," said Tamati wisely, "but I still think it came from the sea."

"I have to agree," said Mum. "I think it belongs in the ocean."

"It seems to think we are its new family," chuckled Dad. "I reckon it wants to stay with us." Indeed it did sit and stare at us as if expecting to be shown what to do next and when we left to go to the house it trotted along behind us like a faithful family pet.

"It likes you," said Mum as it came up to sniff my hand. "Let's give him a name."

"I think it's a her," corrected Dad. "It sure is pretty enough to be." The idea seemed to be accepted by everyone.

"I think we should call it Sog because it's a bit like a seal and a bit like a dog," said Tamati, and somehow the name stuck.

Pretty soon it became clear Sog was no ordinary sea creature. In the middle of the night we were all woken up by a haunting, high-pitched wailing that came from outside. It was the sort of noise that sent a shiver up your spine and when we all gathered in the living room you could tell even Dad was a bit spooked.

"What *is* that noise?" he asked.

"Sounds like a ghost," said Tamati with a quiver in his voice.

“Don’t be silly dear,” said Mum. “It’s probably a sick animal.”

We opened the door and nervously went outside. There on the sand facing the water was Sog, illuminated by the silvery light of a half-moon and calling out her mournful cry to the sea. When she heard us behind her she looked back with those big, round puppy-dog eyes and seemed to be asking for help. Tamati said he thought he could hear a call answering from across the water but because no one else heard it we didn’t believe him.

“She’s pining for the sea I think,” said Mum, astonished. We took Sog back inside.

“I bet she’s lost and wants to get home,” I said, and everyone agreed she certainly did look sad and homesick.

But what could we do? We did not know where she came from or even what sort of animal she was, although we were beginning to realize there was something odd and strange about her.

The next morning we noticed a bizarre thing. Outside the house the sand was full of footprints. They came from the sea, seemed to wander around as if looking for something, and then returned to the water. But the strangest thing was that although they looked mostly human, you could see the marks of claws at the ends of the toes, and they were much bigger than any of our footprints. We were all quite freaked out by it.

Days passed and Sog quickly became one of the family. She would curl up at night on the couch or someone’s lap, making a sound a bit like a cat purring and seemed to share herself around so no one got

jealous. Dad kept a plentiful supply of fish coming in but never seemed to find the time to make the trip into town to ask at the museum about our new pet. We had all fallen in love with Sog and she seemed happy with all the attention and strokes too. I would watch Dad or Mum lying next to her, running their hands through her fur, and they seemed so happy I wished I could have taken a photo. But every night we would be woken by that same pitiful whining lasting for an hour or more. The neighbours were starting to complain and we knew we had to do something about Sog soon.

One day Dad was down at the boat getting ready to go out and Sog was playing in the shallows when a pod of dolphins came close to the shore. I always loved to watch them leaping gracefully from the water and riding the waves like bodysurfers.

Sog saw the dolphins and immediately started swimming out to meet them. Dad looked a bit concerned because we had never seen her go out so far before but she was obviously completely at home in the sea. Then we saw an odd thing. The dolphins seemed to change course and came to where Sog was, and they all began to swim and play together like it was a game. But it got stranger still because the next thing we saw was Sog riding on the back of a dolphin as it leaped and danced, like a jockey on horseback.

“That’s the weirdest thing I ever did see,” said Dad, looking dumbfounded. “It’s like those animals can talk to each other.”

From then on Dad began to think there was something almost magical about Sog but it was some of the local elders who gave him even stranger ideas. He went off to the nearby marae one day with Sog

bounding along behind him, and when they came back he had a dazed expression on his face.

“I showed Sog to the folk at the marae,” he began, “and one old kuia said she has seen that mark on Sog’s forehead before and it shows ownership. I’m afraid she is someone else’s pet.”

Tamati looked startled and concerned, and I probably did too. “Whose pet?” he said. “They won’t come and take her away will they?” We had all come to regard Sog as belonging to our family, and the thought of losing her was unbearable.

“Well, it won’t be easy to take her back to these owners. You see, the mark shows she belongs to the Ponaturi.”

“To the who?” I asked. This was a word I had never heard before.

“The Ponaturi. In legend they are the people of the sea and they have magic powers that can be used against those who aren’t careful.”

“What do they look like Dad?” I asked.

“They have green skin that glows in the dark, claws instead of fingers and hair made of seaweed,” he said dramatically, “and they cloak themselves in fog because they don’t like the sun’s light. Sometimes they come ashore at night and you find their footprints in the sand the next morning. They can be very dangerous and if you’re smart you stay out of their way!”

We all had the feeling Dad was pulling our leg. “But those are just stories Dad. Surely you don’t believe them?” I said with a mocking tone that I had perfected over many years.

“A few weeks ago I would have said I didn’t, but we’ve seen some unusual things and perhaps this is no weirder. What about those odd footprints? The old folk know many things other people have forgotten and we should listen to them more. These are old stories, sure, but there is normally more than a grain of truth in even the most far-fetched legends. As I’ve always said there are some pretty strange ...”

“Some pretty strange things in the sea, yes we know Dad,” finished Tamati, still unconvinced, but Mum just sat quietly and I think she too thought there was something so unusual about our pet that no possibility should go unexplored.

“How can these people live in the sea?” I asked.

“I don’t know that they live in the sea as such,” explained Dad. “I don’t think they are people like you or me – more like spirits that some people can see and others can’t but which can make their presence known in various ways and must be treated with respect. In the stories they are normally in conflict with humans. The old folk remember these stories and tell them as if they are fact.”

“What are we going to do Dad?” I asked. I was beginning to realize Sog might not be staying with us forever as I had imagined.

“The kuia said we must take Sog back out to sea on our boat and the Ponaturi will come and claim her. All we can do is take her out and see what happens.”

“But she’s ours!” I cried and I could see Tamati was also becoming upset.

“Now, now,” said Mum. “We always knew Sog was a wild animal, not a pet. She came from the sea and she must go back to the sea. We enjoyed her company

for a while but now it's time to pass her on to her real owners."

"I don't care!" yelled Tamati. "I want her to stay here. I won't let her go."

"Be careful," warned Dad. "We're dealing with things you don't understand. I'm not saying I believe all this stuff about the Ponaturi but I know there are lots of things we can't explain and I'm not taking any chances."

"Water fairies!" said Tamati derisively. "You're talking about water fairies!"

"Don't be cheeky," said Mum. "When I was a little girl we believed in far stranger things and I've seen sights that might seem like magic and fairy tales to those who don't understand them. There is a lot more to the old stories than most people think and we should keep an open mind."

Tamati hung his head and went into one of his huge sulks but it was clear Mum and Dad were going to get their way.

That evening we all cuddled Sog even more than usual, aware this might be our last night together. I felt a great sadness and Tamati too looked sombre and tearful. Mum and Dad were being strong for us I think, but they were also quiet and lost in their own thoughts. However, I was later woken by the chilling sound of Sog wailing at the sea again and I knew she did indeed have to go back to her home.

The next day we all took the boat down to the beach and loaded it up. Sog clambered aboard happily and once we had our lifejackets on we found our places around the side of the boat as Dad started the outboard motor. It roared loudly as we began to cruise out over

the sheltered water of the bay and past the headland to the rougher open sea beyond. Farther out we could see a number of craggy islands capped in green and fringed with a white collar of surf. Dad explained that he had been told the area around these islands was the home of the Ponaturi.

“We’ll go out there and see what happens aye?” he said.

“What if nothing happens?” I asked.

“Then we go back home, I guess, and try another day.”

It was such a beautiful morning, with a gentle breeze and just a few cumulus clouds, that the idea of mythical sea spirits seemed suddenly silly. We approached the nearest island and watched as the terns and cormorants on it grew agitated. Their droppings coloured the dark rock white like icing on cake.

We all fell silent as we realized we were entering a place of mystery and power if the legends were true. Indeed there did seem to be a noticeable chill in the air and a veil of mist had begun to drift around the islands as if from nowhere. It grew darker as the mist blocked out the sun. The water grew unexpectedly calm and a stillness filled the air that was quite eerie. Suddenly the stories of strange folk of the sea with supernatural powers did not seem so unbelievable.

“I’m scared,” I said. “What’s happening?”

“It’s just a bit of mist,” reassured Dad. “The weather can change very quickly out here.” But I could tell he was feeling nervous too.

Then things began to get really creepy. The wind picked up and the water became choppy so we all had to grab the sides of the boat. A strange moaning

sound filled the air but so softly you had to wonder if you were really hearing it at all and there was a definite feeling of menace. I could see that Dad had gone pale and I knew he felt it too. I became really scared. Sog's head lifted up at the moaning sound and she became fidgety and restless. We even imagined we could see vague, indistinct shapes in the mist that could have been people standing on the surface of the water and they seemed to glow with a soft light. Then again, maybe it was only swirling mist. When we looked again they were gone.

Next there was sudden chaos. The wind blasted us like a sneeze from nowhere and there was howling, waves and spray all around us.

"Hold on!" yelled Dad over the noise. "I think they're a bit upset!"

Dad clearly had no doubt this was the home of the sea people and even thought they were somehow mad with us. Perhaps they believed we had stolen their pet and were punishing us with a storm.

I could not see through the spray and wind and felt a growing sense of terror. I was scared of sinking out on the sea and even more scared of what was hidden there in the mist. But things were about to get much worse. With a terrible lurch the boat tipped sharply as a wave hit it side on and I was flung into the water. It was like being in a washing machine and I did not know which way was up and which was down. I began to take in mouthfuls of water and the salt stung my eyes. Looking up I saw a wave crest fall to reveal the boat getting farther and farther away, with my family peering over the edge with horrified expressions on their faces. I could hear Mum's voice

yelling my name frantically. Only my lifejacket was keeping me afloat but even so I was getting weaker and taking in water. The waves were just too big and I decided I was going to drown. Perhaps I was in a state of delirium but I again imagined that human-like forms were rising from the mist, closer this time. I began to say my prayers as I started to give in to an intense weariness.

Suddenly I was aware of a small body next to me in the water, nudging my side with its nose. This focused my mind a little and I opened my eyes to see Sog beside me. She looked upset and frightened and was trying to get me to follow her. When she saw I was too weak to swim she turned away and appeared to be calling into the wind. Again I thought I was starting to black out, but an amazing thing happened. Just as quickly as it had begun the sea calmed down, the wind dropped and the mist began to clear. As the waves settled I became able to keep myself upright and stable and my head cleared. The real world seemed to be drawing closer again and the eerie sense of being somewhere unnatural started to lift.

But things were to get stranger still. I turned to see Sog swimming out towards the last tendrils of mist seeping around the islands. Once more I imagined that ghost-like shapes could be seen among the swirling vapour. Sog was diving and spinning joyfully as she rushed to rejoin her masters but just before she reached them she stopped and looked back towards us. She gave a high-pitched whistle as if to say thank you and then turned and disappeared into the mist. That was the last we saw of her.

One more surprise was in store. I was suddenly surrounded by smooth, glistening bodies. With a gasp of delight I realized I was in the middle of a pod of dolphins. One by one they would arc out of the water to look at me and I felt completely safe. With gentle nudges they started to push me back towards the boat and I could not help thinking Sog had been involved in their sudden appearance.

There is not much more to tell. When the dolphins brought me to the side of the boat Mum and Dad and Tamati all pulled me aboard and hugged and kissed me, while the dolphins disappeared into the distance.

“Thank God you’re all right!” beamed Dad.

“Will we ever see Sog again?” I asked weakly.

“I don’t think so,” said Mum. “I think she has returned to her family. But we will never forget her will we?”

“No, we won’t,” agreed Tamati and his smile was the warmest he has ever given me.

“Why did the Ponaturi stop the storm?” I asked. “I thought I was gone for sure.”

“I don’t know,” said Dad, “but maybe they had the wrong idea and thought we had stolen Sog from them or were holding her against her will. Perhaps seeing her go to your rescue showed them she was really our friend and had been cared for. I think they decided we were all right after all.” Although I still found this talk of sea people and magical storms hard to believe it seemed that until a better explanation came along everyone was willing to accept it. I just felt glad to be safe and back with my family and in the years that followed I began to wonder whether overactive imaginations had made a misty day and an unexpected

storm into something magical. But then again, I will occasionally lie awake at night and hear a mournful cry lifted on the wind outside, sounding far away and drifting at the edge of hearing. Then I remember Sog and hope she is safe with her masters somewhere out beyond the waves.

To this day I still enjoy wandering along beaches searching for odd bits and pieces and although I have found many strange and beautiful things none has been as fantastic and memorable as the sad, lonely creature we came across that day.

If you should ever find something belonging to the hidden folk of this country, be they of the land or sea, treat it well and with respect because you never know when they will appear to reclaim it, and though you might not get a reward from them, to have had a glimpse of another world, even for a moment, is a rare gift indeed.

## Billy of the Flies

We called him “Billy of the Flies”. Although he told everyone how much he hated the name we called him it anyway. But what else would you call someone who had a cloud of flies that buzzed constantly around his head? I’m not talking about just a few flies; this was a little black cloud of swirling bodies that buzzed so loudly you could hear Billy McPherson coming from a hundred metres away. Nor am I joking when I say that he had this swarm of flies zooming around his head all the time. They were there when he woke up in the morning; they joined him in the shower and followed him to school. When he ate his dinner in the evening they almost drowned out the family conversation and at night they circled tirelessly above his head as he lay sleeping in bed. Sometimes he would bury his head under the pillow to have some quiet but he could be sure they would still be there when he woke up.

Most people had forgotten when it was they first noticed the flies but Billy remembered it well. It had started on a school trip to the park. We had walked a nature trail, seen some large kauri trees like bloated power poles, and chosen one tree each to sketch and do a bark rubbing from. This was done by rubbing a pencil or charcoal over some paper placed on the

tree's trunk and Billy was particularly pleased with the pattern he had made.

The nightmare began when we stopped for lunch. Billy noticed a single fly buzzing around his sandwich and waved it away angrily. A few seconds later it returned with a friend. Billy swung at them both but they bobbed away and returned to hover around his food. He swiped at them again – they avoided his hands easily and now there were three. He was getting very annoyed, especially because nobody else seemed to be bothered by insects. He waved his arms even more furiously but the flies just dodged and continued to circle him like miniature warplanes. Now he was really angry and he slapped and whacked madly at the growing group of flies that had increased to perhaps a dozen. He could see other people laughing at the commotion and stopped. The flies had formed a small swarm and buzzed merrily above his head. And there they stayed, as if they had found a place to their liking and decided to make it their home.

The day that followed was a humiliating one. It was impossible to hide the flies circling his head and he soon gave up swatting at them due to exhaustion. He had to endure the taunts and jokes of the other kids, and we were merciless I'm ashamed to say. We pretended to hold our noses as he passed even though he was a very clean boy, and asked him what the names of his new friends were. Someone called out, "All hail the king of the flies!" He took it all in silence but inside he was feeling angry and embarrassed. What were the flies doing there and why had he been cursed with them? His teacher, Mr Wiggan,

eventually made him go and sit outside and there he stayed until the end of school.

The flies went with him as he walked home. He looked so sulky and bitter that he frightened dogs and small children away. As soon as he got to his house he went straight into the shower and scrubbed himself until his skin felt raw. The flies hovered around the top of the shower and when he stepped from the cubicle all clean and fresh they settled back into position above his head. He yelled at them and waved at them and even begged them to leave, but it was becoming clear they had no intention of going.

When Billy's mother saw him she shrieked and said, "Get into that shower young man!"

"But I've already had one," he replied, bursting into tears of frustration. His mother raced over to give him a hug but then stopped and screwed up her face and seemed to change her mind.

"You'd better tell me what's going on," she sighed. Billy's teacher had already rung her and she could not believe what he said.

Billy explained about the flies and together they made their battle plans. First they hit the cloud with fly spray. One by one the flies dropped down dead but there always seemed to be another that would fly in to take the place of each one that died. They closed all the doors and windows and tried again, but somehow flies would find their way in through the smallest of cracks, or the swarm would indeed dwindle in size but grow again as more flies joined it as soon as he walked out the door. Perfumes, hats and insect repellents all failed to make any difference.

Next they began a campaign of heavy bombardment with rolled up newspapers but these were the quickest and smartest flies they had ever seen and casualties were light.

They tried sucking them up the vacuum cleaner but the flies would move away craftily whenever the nozzle came near. Billy was beginning to realize he would just have to get used to them until they left in their own time. He had noticed that the swarm did change in size slightly as new members joined or left, but there always seemed to be enough to draw looks of disgust from other people.

Billy's father was just as flabbergasted when he arrived home from work and looked embarrassed to have a son who attracted flies. "What will the neighbours think?" he moaned.

They took Billy to the doctor and although she pronounced some long, impressive-sounding words it was clear she did not know any more than they did. He was given a sweet and told to take more showers, even though by now he smelled wonderfully of lilac, lavender and a dozen other nasal delights.

Mr Wiggan also seemed to be resigned to having the flies join Billy in class and began to pretend they weren't there. We were less forgetful and teased him endlessly. It was not long before someone had come up with the name "Billy of the Flies" and from then on just about everyone used it. Even Mr Wiggan once said, as Billy raised a hand to answer a question, "Yes Billy of the Flies," before realizing what he had done and spluttering in embarrassment.

As days grew into weeks Billy came to forget for the most part that the flies were there, and life began

to return to normal. We grew tired of teasing him and although the name Billy of the Flies seemed to have stuck we treated him much as we had before. He was happy again and enjoyed school although much of the time he was a lonely boy with no one to play with.

Now and then, when the buzzing of the flies grew louder or some stranger stared at him with a look of distaste, he was reminded of the odd followers he had acquired, and a weird thing began to happen. He actually grew to like the flies. The sound of them was a strangely comforting one like the sound of the sea or rain on a roof and it helped him get to sleep at night. When he woke in the morning they were the first things he saw and it was like being greeted by an old friend. They were there for the good times and the bad, the ups and the downs. They saw him naked as the day he was born and they were with him as he went to the toilet. He even began to talk to them and felt he could tell them anything. To a boy who did not have many friends they became his best buddies. His parents commented on it with concern – “That boy’s spending too much time with those flies” – but what choice did he have? Even the rest of us at school began to develop a fondness for Billy’s flies and Mr Wiggan noticed a marked improvement in class behaviour and concentration that he put down to the soothing drone of the swarm. We began to follow “Hello Billy,” with “Hello flies,” when we greeted him. Once a boy from a higher class even asked to borrow them for the day to impress his girlfriend and offered Billy money, but the flies could not be bought and sold like toys. They did their own thing.

And so Billy came to be quite fond of his flies and they gained him a certain standing among his peers in the same way a trendy top or a new bike would. We thought he was pretty cool. Months passed and Billy and his flies were quite literally inseparable. But as with many things it could not last.

As time went on Billy began to take his flies for granted. He stopped talking to them and even began to resent their constant happy buzzing. "What have you got to be so cheerful about?" he would say whenever he was in a bad mood. Also we had grown used to the idea of his flies and he was not getting the attention he had become used to. People had moved on to more exciting things like Ryan Wilson who could blow milk out of his nose and Susie Morgan's pet rat. A filthy rat! How could it compare with a whole swarm of marvellous flies? He had to get our attention back.

It was one day while walking home that he hit upon the idea of how to do it. If we had decided that flies were not exciting enough anymore then he would give us something new and even more outrageous. He was going to replace those boring flies with bees. He would become "Billy of the Bees"!

Billy went to work straight away. He got his mother's wide-brimmed straw hat and stuck as many flowers as he could find into the band. There were geraniums and pansies and daisies and marigolds. The hat was a kaleidoscope of colour and he was sure bees would be drawn to it like, well bees to honey. But the results were not quite as expected. Sure enough several bees were attracted to the hat and buzzed around angrily until all the flies were bullied away, but once they had gained their fill of nectar and pollen

from the flowers they left to find others. Billy was furious. “No sense of loyalty!” he fumed.

It was then he began to realize the mistake he had made. The flies were gone, chased away by the bees! He had come to take them for granted and now a heavy silence and empty space were the only things above his head. He was devastated. Why had he cared so much about what others would think? Loyalty? He was the one who had driven his faithful flies away! It was as if his best friend had left, and a crushing loneliness filled him as he went to his room by himself. Who would he tell his biggest secrets to? Who would help him get to sleep and keep him concentrating in class? The silence seemed to ring in his ears as if the buzzing of the flies had been keeping it away. He was lost without them.

His parents noticed straight away that the flies were gone and although they were cheering inside at the idea of having a normal son again they pretended to be disappointed for him when they saw how sad he looked.

“Sorry love,” said his mum. “I know how much they meant to you.” Turning to her husband she mouthed, “Yes!”

Everyone at school was sorry to see that the flies had left. It seems we too had not realized how special they were until they were gone. “Where are the flies?” we asked and no one wanted to play with him at playtime. Mr Wiggan noticed his class was more unruly and unmotivated than usual. Everybody seemed to be down in the dumps. Even the principal, Mrs Evans, noticed something seemed to be missing when she visited the classroom before commenting that the

comforting sound of buzzing flies was gone. Billy decided he had to get them back.

The first thing he did was search the area. He looked around the school and surrounding streets and everywhere he thought a fly might like to go. He went to the rubbish dump; he hunted through the smelly socks in the lost property box at school and looked in the waste food bin among the banana peels and half-eaten sandwiches. He even found a dead possum swarming with flies but not only did they ignore him, they even felt like strangers. There was no sign of his own flies.

Next he placed an advertisement in the paper that read “Lost: one swarm of flies – makes a nice buzzing noise. Last seen in West Town area. Ring 3539168 if found”. He put posters in the local dairy and supermarket and stuck them on power poles, and even asked people if they had seen some lost-looking flies or heard a sad buzzing. Though plenty of flies had been seen around, they were all busy going somewhere and none looked particularly sad. It seemed hopeless.

Another thing he did was give up having showers or washing his clothes, which his mum was not happy about. That night he crawled into bed in the same smelly pyjamas he had worn for the last few nights and thought sadly how much he missed the flies. They had been his only real friends in a way and he was determined he would not rest until he had them once more spinning safely above his head.

It was the next day that Billy made the breakthrough. A girl at school said she had seen a forlorn-looking swarm of flies hanging around a

rubbish bin behind the local Chinese restaurant. He rushed over excitedly and as he approached the back of the restaurant sure enough he could see a small shifting cloud of tiny bodies around the bins. Could they be his flies? He looked more closely. There could be no doubt. He knew exactly the tone of their buzzing and the way they moved. He was sure it was them. He stood still with a smile on his face and waited for them to come to him.

He waited and waited and waited some more, but they made no sign of moving towards him. A deep disappointment filled him and he trudged home feeling lonelier than ever. He did not blame them for abandoning him, after all he had treated them terribly. He would just have to learn to live without them.

However, the next day he decided he should not give up so easily and went along to the zoo to find a woman who worked there. Her name was Diane Fussy. He had read about her in the paper and she was an expert on animal behaviour. He told her all about his problem.

Miss Fussy stroked her chin and thought for a while. "Hmm," she said. "Flies are fairly sensitive creatures and they may still be hurting a bit inside from what you did. It would've been terrifying to a fly to have a bee come in and take over its patch."

"I didn't think about how they would feel," said Billy sadly.

"Well, you have to find a way to make it up to them and then the next move is up to the flies. They may decide to forgive you but then again ..."

Billy returned home feeling a new sense of hope. Once again he got his mother's hat but this time he

coated the top with some smelly sardines and a piece of old cheese from the fridge that had begun to turn green. He put on some cat food and topped it off with a dead mouse he found in the garden. Then he put it on and walked purposefully to the restaurant where he had last seen the flies, ignoring the odd stares people gave him. It smelled awful but to a fly he was sure it would be a delight. He felt nervous as he approached the bins. Would the flies still be there? Would they forgive him? There was only one way to find out.

There they were, still hovering over one particularly foul-smelling bin that overflowed with rotten food. Billy cleared his throat to get their attention and then began his carefully prepared speech.

“Look guys, I’m really sorry. I treated you awfully. I can’t change that and I don’t expect you to come back but if you do I promise I will never take you for granted again.”

He stopped and stood there and waited, feeling a bit silly at having talked to a bunch of flies. After a while he began to shuffle his feet nervously. The flies were not moving from the bin. They must have given up on him and he did not blame them. But he had tried and that was the important thing. He would just have to go on with his life as plain Billy McPherson.

He turned and started to walk slowly home, his head hung low. Life would never be quite the same. After a while he noticed he could still hear a low humming coming from behind. Looking around he noticed the swarm of flies following him at a distance. He walked on and turned around again. They were keeping pace but not coming any closer. Perhaps they were thinking things over. He stopped and waited expectantly, his

heart beating a little faster. The swarm hung there for a moment as if confused and then suddenly it rushed forward to crowd excitedly around Billy's head. Some of the flies dipped down to land briefly on his face like a dog giving its master licks. Others went to begin feasting on the delicacies he had put on the hat.

Billy let out a cheer and he felt full of happiness. They were back and this time he would make sure they always felt appreciated. After all, everybody needs to know they are loved and perhaps we don't share our feelings about those who are important to us enough.

So Billy returned triumphantly to school as Billy of the Flies once more. We were overjoyed to have the flies back too, although Mr Wiggan insisted the smelly hat be consigned to the nearest waste bin. Even though the fame Billy enjoyed was again short-lived he knew his own feelings about the flies were all that really mattered. And although others may have had more exciting pets like rabbits and dogs and tortoises he decided that, for him, being Billy of the Flies was quite special enough.

## Homeless

The first odd thing that day was when I woke up and went downstairs to find the t.v. on in the living room. It was not unusual for me to wake up first before Mum or Dad, and I enjoyed the calm, quiet moments while the rest of the town was still shaking itself awake. It felt at those times as if I had the world to myself and it was stuffed full of promise and potential.

It was unusual that the t.v. had been on all night though – Mum and Dad were pretty careful about turning off all the appliances before they went to bed and complained bitterly if I so much as left the computer on standby. They were a bit obsessive when it came to saving power, or “saving the planet” as they rather dramatically put it.

I dropped myself onto the couch, still lost in an early morning haze of drowsiness and stiff muscles. Later in the morning I was planning on meeting up with some mates to head out for a surf. The sea was just starting to get warm enough to go in without a wettie and the weather report had predicted a decent swell, so I was feeling pretty excited. On the t.v. screen a glossy-haired man flashed a plastic smile and

promised another enthralling hour of news and inane interviews.

“What is this rubbish?” I croaked, stifling a yawn that threatened to engulf my whole face. “What happened to the cartoons?”

That was the next mystery – a small thing perhaps, not worth a second thought to most. You might be thinking a high school kid is a bit old to be watching early morning cartoons and you’re probably right, but ever since I was little it had been a ritual of mine to blob in front of a few toons while I ate breakfast. I didn’t even watch the programmes really, just had them on as a kind of comforting background noise that connected me back to my childhood. The thought of some shiny-headed mannequin taking their place was enough to ruin my morning.

I went to make myself a bowl of Weet-bix and noticed there was no milk in the fridge. It was common for me to be the one to top up on bread and milk so I grabbed some money from Mum’s purse and headed outside. It was a great day – sunny and bright with a cool crispness to the air that I really like about the early morning. It would be a hot day later on.

The next strange thing occurred at the dairy. It was just down the road and we always went there when the groceries ran short. We knew the owner, Sunny, pretty well, but today there was a new face behind the counter, grinning like an idiot from beneath a hideous mop of curly hair. It looked ridiculously top-heavy – enough to cause a serious neck injury.

“Hi, Sunny not here today?” I asked, placing a note on the counter beside the bread and milk.

“Who?”

“Sunny,” I replied.

“No, never heard of him.”

“He owns the place,” I said, allowing a hint of irritation to creep into my voice.

“Sorry mate, I’ve owned this place for the last few years now. I don’t know any Sunny.”

I grabbed my loaf and carton and left with a glare that hopefully conveyed enough dull menace to ruin the man’s morning. What was he talking about? I had been coming to this place for years and had seen Sunny only yesterday. My morning was starting to feel unnervingly strange, like something just didn’t quite fit.

As I walked towards the door I caught the eye of someone stooping to take a yoghurt from the fridge. I recognized her as a girl from school. She was in a lower year but I quite fancied her.

“Hi Emma, what are you doing here?” I beamed, trying not to appear too enthusiastic.

She looked puzzled, confused, even a little intimidated, like a cornered animal.

I could see I’d have to turn on some charm to put her at ease. “I’m Matt. We met in ...” Suddenly I stopped, confusion taking over my own mind. I didn’t know this girl – I’d never met her in my life. Why was I so sure before that I recognized her? It hadn’t been like when you see a person who happens to resemble someone else you know – I had a genuine memory of this girl one moment that was just as quickly gone the next.

“Do I know you?” she asked, eyes darting nervously to the shopkeeper.

“Ah, no ... no, I made a mistake. Sorry.” I shuffled quickly from the shop, the first tinges of red colouring my cheeks. Why had I recognized someone I’d never met before? I didn’t know anyone called Emma. I cursed myself for looking like an idiot. What would make me say that?

But the strangest thing was the park. It stood where the new Diamond Creek housing development had been started a month ago. At least I thought it had been there. Now I wasn’t so sure. Instead I saw a tidy, well-groomed maze of cobblestone paths fringed with flower-beds and a couple of fountains. It was still, quiet, almost unnaturally so. Surely the housing development couldn’t have been pulled down and the park put in its place overnight. In fact the park had the lush, ordered appearance of having been planted a long time ago. This looked like a garden that had soaked gradually into its location over many years. It was exactly what you’d expect to see in a sleepy suburb on a Saturday morning, but something about it seemed wrong – maybe the tense stillness pulled tight like a bowstring ready to snap, maybe the lack of people and birds, or the feeling it was quietly waiting there for me.

I hurried on with a growing unease. I felt like I had woken inside a dream – everything seemed wrong about the morning. Sometimes it was glaringly odd like the park and at the dairy, but I was aware of other things I couldn’t quite put my finger on. It’s like when you walk into a room and you can tell something is out of place. It might be that a painting has been moved or the carpet has been changed but you just can’t say what it is. This sense of strangeness was

much worse though, because it was the whole world that was out of whack, not just some furnishings or ornaments. The entire morning seemed to be askew, slowly going out of phase with what I had come to know and rely upon. Everything was going wrong bit by bit. Little things, details, weren't as they should be. I was sure a street sign was on the opposite side of the road to where it should be, and the sign over the local school was written in a different style. Why did I feel like I didn't know anything anymore? It was as if all of a sudden basic assumptions about the world and my most ingrained memories couldn't be trusted. Looking down I noticed I had even gone out of the house in my pyjamas. Was this how a madman felt during the first insidious prickings of insanity? A cold sweat was beginning to soak into the fabric of my top and I shivered.

When I got home the door was shut. I rang the bell. Didn't we have a knocker? I couldn't remember anymore; my world was growing increasingly fuzzy and indistinct, disintegrating from the inside-out. I stood and waited nervously.

The door swung open and there stood Dad, looking a bit irritated at being called to the door so early in the morning. A wave of relief washed over me and I felt suddenly quite faint and exhausted from the anxiety I had been holding in.

"Dad, you won't believe ..."

"Can I help you?"

The look of coldness and indifference on my father's face left me momentarily speechless. There was no recognition showing there at all.

“Dad, it’s me ... this is my home ...” I muttered, suddenly unsure of even this simple truth.

“What’s that?”

“I, I live here ...”

“Is this a joke mate?” Dad looked annoyed and impatient. He was still dressed in pyjamas and had a few days’ growth of beard. Hadn’t he been clean-shaven yesterday?

“Who is it dear?” It was Mum’s voice, calling drowsily from the next room. She appeared in the doorway. I had never felt happier to see anyone in my life.

“I think it’s one of those street kids that have been hangin’ round,” said Dad. “I’ll deal with this.”

“Mum, it’s me, Matt.” My eyes pleaded with her, begging for the faintest glimmer of recognition, a smile, a simple act of acknowledgement.

“Do I know you?” She looked frightened and turned to Dad, her own quiet plea framed in her eyes. “Phil, what’s going on?”

“Just some weird kid, probably doped up on drugs. Go back to breakfast.” He turned to me with a scowl. “Look kid you’d better be on your way, and don’t come onto the property again.”

“I, I want to go to my room,” I whimpered, my face beginning to twitch with nervous desperation. “I’m going to my room.”

I began to move forward but was stopped by Dad’s hand, gripping my arm in a tight squeeze of warning.

“Look, if you don’t get lost I’ll call the cops,” he said, barring my way. From behind him I saw a new figure appear and stand in the doorway to the kitchen. He was smaller than Dad, and very familiar. A spasm

of fear gripped me as reality went nose-diving. I moaned feebly through a throat dry with horror. The figure was me – slightly scruffier and thinner with longer hair and glasses but undeniably me. It couldn't be, but I knew that face. I had gazed at it every morning in the bathroom mirror!

The boy saw me and seemed to jump a little in recognition. Then his face relaxed and a smile played across his lips. It was an ugly smile though, as if he had twisted his mouth into a position it was not used to. It was taunting me – telling me that what was mine had been taken away forever. His eyes flashed in gleeful triumph.

Rough hands pushed me backwards and Dad slammed the door in my face, so the smug grin on that idiot's face was the last thing I saw. How I hated him!

I banged on the door and screamed but Dad's voice called back that he was calling the police. I had been shut firmly out of all that was secure and dependable – all that I had known. I staggered away on unsteady legs, lost in a daze of confusion and fractured sanity.

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I don't remember much about the hours that followed. Somehow I found my way downtown and wandered the streets. Days passed – days in which I shuffled around the centre of town hungry, homeless, yet with a home now denied me. I went back of course, but on the last occasion Dad called the cops and they made sure my "eviction" was as unpleasant as possible. I think they intended to take me back to the station but I ran off and lost them. Besides, it hurt too much to see

him there with them, living the life I should have, enjoying what was mine.

I stole some clothes off a line but they soon became dirty and smelly, and I was just as unappealing. I saw a few friends – a painful process of humiliation. They all told me I looked like a bum and to get away, not believing who I was. One told me to have a bath and get a job. I suppose if I had seen me I would have been repulsed too. I stopped trying to get through to them – just wandered the town centre with the other lost souls, scrounging food wherever I could and trying to stay warm through the long, lonely nights. I hated myself for having to steal to survive.

We had our own sense of community there on the streets – the forgotten and the homeless – but having to cut through the veil of madness and crushed humanity made it difficult to get close to anyone. I wondered if they too had been shouldered aside from the homes that knew them by some cruel twist of reality. Maybe the world had taken a wrong turn somehow to a place where we didn't belong anymore...

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The breakthrough came after I had been living and sleeping on the streets for about two months. I had come to feel like I was not even human anymore – an animal deserving of the pity and hatred I saw in the faces of the normal people. I had once been like them, with a home and family. Perhaps it was only chance that singled me out to lose all I held dear, and not them. The others living on the street, the dispossessed

and hopeless, wore the same haunted, vacant looks on their faces as if they too had misplaced the comfortable, sane lives they had known. It was like we had all slipped between the cracks and no one else noticed we were gone. Perhaps the normal people chose to ignore us, as if by consensus they could make us all disappear forever.

I often walked in my old neighbourhood, reminiscing about a life that seemed less connected to me and more surreal by the day. I was careful not to go near my “home” and hid whenever the cops drove by.

It was on one of these wanderings that I noticed a curious thing. I was walking past the dairy when I happened to glance in and see a familiar face there. It was Sunny, busily rearranging the items on his counter. I stopped in stunned disbelief and must have stood there for a full minute digesting what I had seen. What did this mean? If Sunny was back then perhaps so were my real mum and dad. Maybe reality had gone through another twist and returned me to where I belonged. Dare I hope that this was my old life again? I hurried towards my house, stopping in front of the Diamond Creek housing development that had until recently been a park with garden paths and fountains. The houses and construction sites were back! My hopes soared – a sudden elation filled me and I couldn’t help grinning in childish excitement. I was going home!

I ran down the street, almost delirious with joy. I didn’t notice anything out of place although the rest of the journey was a bit of a blur. The street sign was on its correct side again and the school was back to

normal. I longed to see my mum and dad, to hold them and hear a friendly voice, to eat a decent meal.

When I got to the door I rapped the knocker hard against the wood and shuffled impatiently while waiting for it to open. I was almost in tears of happiness and close to dropping in exhaustion after the long weeks of misery.

I heard footsteps, the lock turned and the door opened. There stood Dad, clean-shaven and handsome and just as I remembered him. My eyes met his, waiting to see what his response would be. Was this my life after all – was I home again? Were these the parents who had known and loved me all those years?

He looked shocked and it seemed to take a while for him to register what he was seeing. Then the muscles around his mouth twitched a little and his face twisted into an expression that said he was close to losing control and bursting into tears.

“My God, is it really you? We’d given up hope.” His voice was shaky and weak as he fought to stay composed. He threw his arms around me and hugged me hard, oblivious to the grime and body odour.

He held me at arms length to get a good look at me as if he feared I might disappear again. He was clearly exhausted himself and seemed to have aged a little.

“Where have you been?”

“I, I don’t know Dad,” was all I could say.

He turned to the kitchen and called out. “Mary, come quick. It’s our boy. He’s come back to us!”

There was a shriek from the kitchen and Mum came running out. She stopped to see if it was true, then a huge smile blossomed on her face and she ran forward to hug me more tightly than she ever had before. She

put her hands on either side of my face and held me there for what seemed like a full minute, tears glistening in her eyes. I must say I was crying myself, overcome with emotion. Never had I loved them more than at that moment.

“Oh thank you, thank you,” she seemed to say to the Universe. “I don’t care where you’ve been, I’m just glad you’re home. Don’t ever leave us again. Please.”

“No Mum, I won’t.”

Dad turned to the kitchen again. “Matt, come see your brother!” he shouted.

I froze in confusion. I didn’t have a brother. And why was he calling out my name? A small kernel of fear began to tie my insides in knots. I couldn’t think straight, and felt gripped by a sudden sense of dread. Who was I? What was my name? I couldn’t be sure of anything anymore. I began to shake and my legs turned to jelly. Maybe the nightmare was not over after all.

From the kitchen a small, thin form emerged slowly. There was an arrogant confidence in the way he moved and leaned with feigned nonchalance on the door-frame. It was me – at least the scruffy, bespectacled me I had seen before. The same repulsive smile stretched across his face. There was something malicious and repugnant about him, as if he was gloating over some undeserved victory.

I stared at him, frozen in terror, unable to move or speak.

“What’s the matter?” he said in a voice dripping with insincere pleasantness. “Don’t you recognize your twin bro’?”

# On Why the Mona Lisa Smiles and Why You Should Always Listen to a Troll

*Author's Note: In this story you will read about the famous artist, scientist and inventor Leonardo da Vinci, who lived in Italy about 500 years ago. His most famous painting is called the Mona Lisa. It is a portrait of a lady with a mysterious smile, and people have often wondered what she was smiling at. You will also meet Christopher Columbus who sailed to the New World, as well as Napoleon Bonaparte (who lost a famous battle at Waterloo) and the conquerors of Mount Everest – Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. A lesson will be learned about being careful with candles – fire can be a dangerous thing, as the people of London can tell you. Much of their city was destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666 that began in a baker's shop in Pudding Lane. You will discover the true story of how an apple falling on his head gave Sir Isaac Newton the idea for his theory of gravity (I long believed the apple story to be a myth but there you have it!). You might also meet Elvis (the “King of Rock and Roll”) if you are lucky, as well as a rather ugly creature called a troll ...*

There was once a troll named Urlag, who lived inside a cave hollowed out from the ice of a huge glacier

high on a mountain. He was not like other trolls, for while they were out bashing in the heads of people and nibbling on naughty children, he would stay at home and paint. It was his greatest pleasure and what's more he was rather good at it. The other trolls would laugh at him, and even become angry, saying if he was going to paint he should at least paint something decent like piles of bones or freshly steaming dung, instead of silly flowers and pretty sunsets.

But he continued with his painting which, I might add, was very hard work. Making his paintbrushes involved the painful plucking of his own nostril hairs, while one pot of paint required the squeezing of 5000 gingle beetles. The blood of a gingle beetle is very good for painting and comes in different colours depending on what it has just eaten.

Urlag would hang his creations on the wall of his cave and dream of the day others would come to truly appreciate them as he did.

One summer a young inventor named Leonardo da Vinci happened to be exploring in these parts. Leonardo came upon the cave where Urlag lived and walked inside, amazed at the soft blue light filtering through the icy walls. He was even more astounded when he saw the beautiful paintings hung all around the cave. He called Urlag out of the bedroom and, after recovering from a little initial shock (for trolls are extremely ugly), convinced Urlag to share his masterpieces with some important people in Italy.

Urlag accompanied Leonardo to Florence and the paintings became a huge success. People came from far and wide to see them and they proclaimed

Leonardo to be a genius. “Leonardo?” you ask. Yes, for the inventor convinced Urlag not to sign the works, explaining that people were a bit funny when it came to trolls and it would be better if they thought the paintings were by Leonardo. Of course this was very unfair because although Leonardo was quite good at inventing and science, he was terrible when it came to art. Urlag didn’t mind too much, although he was a little confused by the odd ways of people. Not only were they blind to their own hideousness (all that naked skin!) but they did not eat their pets and put their lips against those they liked.

And so Urlag continued to paint and help his host with inventing and design. Many people came to sit for the great painter Leonardo, who was actually Urlag covered with a huge robe and hood (he had to explain that these were his “magic painting clothes”). Leonardo would hide behind a curtain next to Urlag, giving instructions and answering questions, and people were convinced the voice was coming from the robed figure.

One day a rather pretty young lady came to have her portrait painted. She found the sight of Urlag bent over in his huge robe with his spiky troll hairs sticking out very amusing, and Leonardo had to keep roaring at her to stay still and stop smiling. You may have seen her portrait; it is quite famous. And you will have noticed that she did not quite manage to hide her smile after all.

Years passed and Urlag continued to make his masterpieces. He sometimes wondered if he should sign one, just one, of his paintings but always decided not to. He was a very thoughtful creature, often asking

Leonardo why people did not think more as well, and it is a sad fact that many of his ideas were stolen by others. He once climbed a tree to eat apples and dropped one onto the head of a man named Newton who sat below. He apologized to the man and remarked as an aside that it was a force called gravity responsible for directing the apple downwards (a fact trolls had known for centuries). I think the odd idea had quite an impact on the man. Another time an unscrupulous thief named Columbus stole a precious troll map that showed the location of an unknown land and Urlag never saw it again. But that is another story.

Leonardo's popularity and fame grew and grew, but he continued to keep the existence of Urlag a secret, saying it was in the troll's best interests. It was not entirely selfishness on Leonardo's part, for if the truth be told he had grown rather fond of Urlag and was heavily influenced by the kindness and compassion he saw in his friend, even deciding to be a vegetarian like him. But he could not be sure how other people would react to the sight of a large, hairy, and extremely ugly troll, even though there are many people who could be described in such terms (you may know a few). Urlag agreed to go along with Leonardo's advice, for he knew from bitter experience that others did not always take kindly to trolls. He once met a man named Napoleon commanding a large army, who was on his way to a place called Waterloo for a big battle. Urlag told him to go home and stop thinking about fighting and killing and nasty things like that. Perhaps the man should have listened instead of setting his dogs on Urlag. They chased the poor troll for an hour and bit off large mouthfuls of his fur – he had a cold bottom

for weeks afterwards. And as for that candle he knocked over while working late into the night at a baker's shop in Pudding Lane, London ... But those too are stories for another time.

By now you will have noticed Urlag lived a lot longer than you or me and was very widely travelled, because trolls live for many centuries. He was there at the top of Everest eating a sandwich when Hillary and Norgay arrived (a fact conveniently left out of the history books) and some believe Charles Darwin was inspired by the sight of Urlag to write *The Origin of Species*. Others say the hippie movement of the 60s began with him. So you see Leonardo was not the only person to use Urlag's talents for his own gain, in fact if I named all the famous paintings, discoveries, and even books and music that the troll produced but allowed others to use you would be very shocked. Have you heard of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*? Einstein's Theory of Relativity? The painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? He wrote some of the great classical works of music (are we really expected to believe Beethoven continued to compose after becoming deaf?), and once gave a rather untalented writer called William Shakespeare some plays to read and never saw them again. I will say no more ...

Another of Urlag's talents was his fine voice, and he helped a young musician named Elvis Presley to record some songs, for though the man had some interesting moves and could play the guitar well his voice was like a pig at a yodelling contest. If you have seen movies of Elvis performing you will be surprised

he did such a good job of lip-synching. But again I digress. You want to know more about Leonardo.

One day Urlag had just finished his greatest masterpiece and went to find Leonardo to show it to him, when news came of Leonardo's death. As I have said trolls live for many centuries and so when Urlag formed such a strong friendship with Leonardo it was inevitable a time would come when he would see his friend die. It was still a hard thing for Urlag to accept. Overwhelmed with sorrow he hid his last and greatest painting away, which is why you have never heard of *The Madonna and Chicken*. But if you had seen it you would be stunned by its astounding beauty, the liveliness of its colours and the careful attention to emotion and feeling on the face of the chicken.

If this story, which is quite definitely true, has inspired or moved you in any way then I want you to do this. Next time you visit an art gallery and see a painting by Leonardo da Vinci (the nice young lady is in the Louvre in Paris) I want you to scream at the top of your lungs, "This painting was not painted by Leonardo da Vinci. He is a fraud. It was painted by Urlag the Troll!" Don't be shy – shout it out proudly, secure in the knowledge that you, and only you, know the truth of the matter. Ignore the funny stares that less enlightened people might give you.

And say a prayer for Urlag, who has just recently passed on himself, and hope there are plenty of gingle beetles in heaven.

# Angelina

A long time ago, when there were still many wild places left in the world, there lived a couple named Will and Eva on a farm surrounded by thickly forested hills.

It was a tough life with few rewards. Working the land was arduous work, and the winters could be cold and snowy. It was also a lonely life. The only time they saw others was when they took the long journey to town along muddy dirt roads. There they sold produce or bought items they needed. When clouds and drizzle hung grey and unfriendly over the hills for days on end they could feel trapped in the silent valley where they lived, but on a summer's day with the songbirds calling from the dense forest that clung to the ridges it could also seem a magical place. As the mist draped itself around the hilltops in the morning while the sky brightened in warm colours, Will would sit on the stone steps of the farmhouse with his dog, Boy, and breathe in the stillness. He would be there with Eva at the end of the day, watching the sky darken again and the smoke drift lazily from the chimney across the valley. Then they would feel this place was indeed their home and it was worth going on. Eva often thought a family would complete things and make the isolation bearable, but so far their only child had died young, and as they got older she began

to accept it might be their fate to spend the rest of their years alone.

One day Will went to tend to a sheep giving birth high up on a steep slope just below where the forest began, calling Boy to join him. He had just checked on the new lamb when he heard a child's voice singing nearby. It was light and musical and seemed strangely out of place amongst such wild country, almost haunting as it rose from the stillness of the forest. Will could not help but feel a chill run through him. He looked up and saw a small girl with blonde hair dancing and playing at the edge of the forest, seemingly unaware of him. She bent down to pick flowers and put them in her hair. She was a little grubby, and her clothes were odd. They looked as if they had leaves and twigs sewn into the cloth. Will thought she was the strangest thing he had ever seen, but something about the way she expressed such simple joy filled him with delight. It reminded him it was indeed spring and the morning had a brightness and warmth that should be celebrated. Perhaps he had overlooked the wonder of it lately.

"Hello," he called to the girl. "Where did you come from?"

She looked up, startled, and seemed for a moment to be about to run away, but then she smiled nervously.

"You must be lost. There are no other farms around for miles," said Will, almost to himself. "Come here and we'll get you inside and find your parents."

Again the girl looked uncertain and she did not say a word, but after a long pause she stepped forward. Boy ran up to lick her hands and she giggled with pleasure. Although she did not join Will she followed him at a

distance, skipping and stopping to pick flowers, all the while singing to herself. She seemed so happy and intent upon enjoying the morning that Will had an odd feeling of emptiness. He and Eva had a child once who died at a young age, and seeing the girl made him think how much he had lost. Their son had wandered away one day and fallen into a pond on the farm. When Will pulled the boy's cold body from amongst the weeds he was filled with a shame unlike any he had felt before. The weeks that followed were the blackest of their lives and for a while they drifted along in their own dark thoughts before realizing they needed each other to get through. Eva was a tough farmer's wife, as hardy as the land outside, but she never completely recovered from the loss. Will blamed himself, even if his wife did not.

He continued on to the farmhouse, finding himself smiling and even singing, which was something he never did. If Eva could hear she would think he was mad. He kept looking over his shoulder to make sure the girl was following, and although she was absorbed in the flowers and animals around her she was keeping up with him. In fact the animals seemed to be attracted to her – lambs and sheep trotted to her side and a swallow flitted around her head. Boy, too, seemed fascinated by her and kept running up to sniff her hands.

*Even they seem to be caught up in her spell,* thought Will with a grin. He felt suddenly happier than he had for a long time.

At the farmhouse he called out to Eva, "Look what I found up by the woods."

Eva looked at the girl playing over in the field and was shocked. "Where did she come from then?" she asked. "There are no children round these parts."

"It's like she appeared out of thin air," replied Will, and although he was joking he had an odd feeling it could almost be true.

"Well let's get her inside then. She's as thin as a stick and not dressed for such a morning. What is she wearing? Once she's had a decent meal we can find out where she's from."

Eva went up to the girl and knelt beside her. "What's your name love?"

The girl looked up and smiled but did not speak.

"She's a quiet one," said Will. "Hasn't said a word yet. Boy's quite taken with her though."

"Perhaps she's just shy," said Eva, and Will noticed a softness had crept into her voice and face. "Come on inside lass." She took the girl's hand and led her into the house. Eva made a hot meal that was eaten so quickly she almost wondered if the girl had ever seen food before.

In the days that followed Will made inquiries at the farms nearby, but his neighbours had never seen her before and seemed loath to make it their problem. He decided to take the long trek to the nearest town. He had told Eva the girl should be handed in to the police and though Eva's face seemed for a moment filled with a sadness she could not hide it was clearly the right thing to do. The girl must belong to someone.

He loaded up the cart with some produce and hens in cages and hitched it to his strongest horse, before helping the girl into it. Boy leaped up to sit alongside her.

“He really is fond of you,” chuckled Will. She sat beside him and looked nervously around, but when he smiled at her it seemed to calm her fears. In fact, as they made their way along the muddy track to the township she began to enjoy herself, gazing fascinated at the changing landscape of deep valleys and forested ridges and giving plenty of strokes to a happy Boy. Still she said not a word, though she hummed to herself and looked occasionally to Will as if to seek reassurance. Most of the time, however, she seemed lost in her own secret thoughts.

“You’re a strange one,” Will said aloud. The girl seemed not to hear him but went on watching the hawks gliding high above the valleys. “Why is it you don’t speak? Perhaps you can’t. What a pitiful thing that would be.”

In the town the streets were busy and Will felt the slight sense of unease he always had around crowds. It was an odd thing, he thought, to go so long away from company and then miss the comforting quiet of the farm as soon as he left it.

Once he had finished trading for supplies he took the girl to see the local constable. Constable Williams shook him vigorously by the hand.

“Good morning to you Will. We have not seen you here for some time. You seem to have acquired a young friend since I last saw you.”

Will explained how the girl had suddenly appeared and asked what he should do. The constable scratched his chin and looked perplexed.

“Well, I must say I’m at a loss to know what to advise. I’ll make some inquiries – someone must know something – but I haven’t heard of anyone

missing a child. Mrs Worthington usually takes in orphans but I know for a fact she is struggling to feed the ones she has at present. And it's a long journey to anywhere else that might take her. Perhaps, if it's not too much of an imposition, she could stay with you and Eva until I have more information. I know it's been a hard time for you both and it will be good for you to have a little one round the place for a while. She'll be safest with you, and I know everyone will pitch in and help if you find it hard to provide for her. She seems like a dear wee thing. Quiet though. I will send word if I learn of anything."

"Thank you." Will was surprised at how relieved he felt that the girl would not be going away just yet. At the same time he sent himself a silent warning – he could not afford to get attached to the lass. She must have a family somewhere and in time they would come forward to claim her.

Next he took her to Dr O'Leary to see if there was anything wrong with her. The doctor did a thorough examination and asked her some questions. He was no more successful than Will at getting any reply. He took Will aside and spoke to him gravely.

"I must give you warning – don't rely on ever getting any response from this girl. She seems healthy enough, though somewhat underweight and pale, but with little evidence of an intelligent mind. Occasionally one comes across an idiot child whose faculties have been impaired for whatever reason. Sometimes if the family is poor and cannot face such a burden the child may be abandoned in some wild place – a shameful thing to be sure but a fact of life in these hard times. I think that may have happened in

this case. I'll make some investigations of my own and let you know if anything comes to light."

Will took his strange ward back to the cart and sat her between a bag of flour and a roll of fabric. Boy was happy to see her and jumped up, causing her to laugh gleefully. Will peered intently at her and sighed in resignation.

"You're a curious one, that's for sure. Where did you come from?" Somehow he could not bring himself to believe Dr O'Leary. There was intelligence in those eyes – a keen perceptiveness and awareness of all that was going on around her. It was easy to take her for a simple child when she would not speak, but he felt that in some strange way speech was unnecessary in one so peculiar. It was almost as if she was in communion with the very air and earth around her. He shook his head as if to banish such ridiculous thoughts.

Back at the farm Eva seemed glad to see her again too. She gave the girl a big hug and Will noticed a gentle warmth in his wife that he had not seen for many months. As she looked at the girl contentment lit her face. Again a warning teased his mind and he frowned.

That night they sat before a fire once the girl was put to bed, to discuss the future. They decided to name her Angelina.

"Every child needs a name," chided Eva. "She will have the name of my great-aunt. She is like our little angel from the woods. Such a frail little thing. And why does she not speak?"

"I really don't know. Perhaps she had an accident or a shock. I had an uncle who didn't speak for two

whole years after coming back from war. Maybe she'll speak when she's good and ready." Will thought again that words did not seem important anyway when it came to Angelina. They were themselves the type of people who spoke only as much as was needed and no more. Whatever the case the girl found such innocent joy in things that they could not help but feel uplifted themselves.

"Maybe she should stay here with us," Eva said quietly, as if afraid she was saying something foolish.

Will could tell she was speaking about more than the next few weeks. "It's not right to keep her here forever," he said after some thought. "She must have a family somewhere."

"Well until they come to claim her she has nowhere else to go. We've left a message in town, and now it's just a matter of waiting. What are you going to do Will – send her back into the forest on a dark night?"

Will could not argue with that, and so she stayed. As spring turned to summer Angelina began to put on weight and look healthier. Her complexion took on a rosy hue and she appeared stronger and more energetic. There was no word from town and the constable seemed to have washed his hands of her.

"She was a gift from the forest," joked Will and though Eva scoffed and said the only gifts came from God, Will could not help looking at Angelina and wondering at her strangeness. She still did not speak, unless the odd words she sang counted as a language, and it seemed unnatural that a child should always be so happy and never show anger or ill-feeling. Only once had he seen her cry when a lamb died. He knew

no more about where she came from and almost felt she had just appeared that day from the forest itself.

As the summer progressed she grew stronger and if anything even more full of a pure joy. Her hair brightened to a rich gold that caught the sun, and her smile sparkled as much as her hair. She would spend hours playing outside. In fact she could rarely be found indoors even on the wildest of days when the chill southerlies blew, and loved to play endlessly with Boy and the other animals.

“It’s like they can understand each other,” laughed Eva one day. “She’s almost half-dog herself.”

Will and Eva came to gradually look on the child as their own. They would watch her run through the fields, or dance in the summer showers and feel a tremendous happiness inside that seemed to be more than just the joy of having a child around. They felt they were seeing the world as if for the first time, and it was Angelina who was teaching them to see its perfection. They almost felt intoxicated by it. The happiness she brought was all that mattered and sometimes they would watch her laughing and dancing with the swallows, or swinging from the trees and then suddenly feel as if they had just woken from a pleasant dream. They almost knew what it was like to run through fields and leap from rocks again themselves. The girl seemed to be wrapped in sunshine and chased by butterflies wherever she went. Only once did Will say there was something not quite natural about her and Eva told him sharply to be quiet and not speak of it again, as if she too had a sense of strange powers at work.

Another thing that was not spoken of was the way Angelina would disappear for hours at a time into the forest. At first Eva was frightened, claiming it was not a safe place for a young girl. They would shut Angelina inside to stop her wandering, but she became so withdrawn and miserable they could not bear to keep her in for long. It was impossible to watch her all the time and eventually they grew resigned to Angelina's absences.

"There's wildness in her blood," Will once said, before Eva shushed him. "It's like the forest is calling her."

"Will Farrier, don't speak such things," she warned. "There's something Godless about that child – something untamed. But I love her none the less for it. Just keep an eye out for her Will. She may come and go as she pleases but we don't need to like it. Follow her next time she goes wandering."

And so Will did. He stayed a discreet distance behind when he spied Angelina heading up towards the bush-line the following day. She did not appear to be concerned that he was following; indeed he could not be sure she was even aware of his presence. She reached the edge of the bush and seemed to be absorbed into its dark spaces. He followed quickly, darting behind trees, but Angelina had vanished and was nowhere to be seen. He caught a glimpse of shifting shadows here and the sound of a twig snapping there, but though he searched and searched he could not see her. One moment he thought she was in front of him and the next he heard a playful giggle coming from the opposite direction. He almost came

to think she was everywhere and nowhere at once. Unnerved he left the bush and returned to the farm.

“How could you leave a child in the forest?” scolded Eva.

“Bah, she knows the woods better than I do,” responded Will. “She’ll be back when she’s ready.” It became something they did not speak of again.

One day though, Angelina disappeared and did not return by nightfall and they grew desperately worried.

“She must be lost,” wailed Eva. “Our poor girl is in those woods all alone. Do something Will.”

Will got a lantern and called Boy before trudging up to the bush to search. He was concerned but also surprised. She seemed so at home in the forest that he found it hard to believe she could ever get lost in it. He almost felt she came and went as she pleased and if she was still in the forest it was of her choosing. He entered the bush and walked the trails he knew hoping the dog would pick up a scent. The lantern lit the trees starkly and the coal-black shadows danced and shifted as it swung in his hands. He felt uneasy and wanted to be out as quickly as possible. This felt like a place where he did not belong.

He called and called and after several minutes Boy finally caught a scent. The dog scampered onwards to a small clearing in the forest, weakly lit by the light of a half-moon. There was a small form lying on a bed of moss that shone silvery-green in the moonlight. It was Angelina. The dog licked her face excitedly but she did not awaken. There was no movement and with growing fear Will rushed forward. Was the girl dead?

He sighed with relief as he noticed she was breathing and fast asleep, with a look of great calm on her face.

Picking her up gently he cradled her in his arms and carried her back to the farm. He and Eva settled Angelina into bed, still asleep, and looked in wonder at the child.

“She’s an odd one, that’s a fact,” said Will. “It’s like some greater power than us is looking over this lass.”

Eva could not suppress a shiver. “Let’s not question the way of things. She follows her own rules, and we must just leave it at that.”

Will could not shake off the impression that Angelina embodied some great mystery and he grew to believe she was tied in some strange way to the land and the seasons. A strong smell of fresh earth and pine clung to her, and when he looked into her large, brown eyes he got a mysterious, faraway feeling, like he was looking at something wild and untameable. When she stared entranced at a moth, or they found her in the middle of the night outside singing to the moon they accepted her peculiar ways with a sense of uneasiness that grew as summer turned to autumn.

It was as the year grew cooler and the days shorter that Will noticed Angelina gradually becoming thin and sickly. It gave him a disturbing sense of foreboding. Her hair was darkening to red and she seemed to be lethargic and frail. When she danced and sang it was for shorter periods and this would tire her out. They began to wonder where the boundless energy of the summer had gone.

Autumn turned to winter and the first cold winds stripped the leaves from the oak trees around the house. The skies darkened and storms were more frequent. Angelina became worse, and Dr O’Leary was fetched from the town.

“I can’t find anything specifically wrong with her,” he confessed. “She’s very sick, there can be no doubt, but quite what the ailment is I can’t determine. It’s almost as if she is wasting away by the exercise of her own will. Keep her warm and well-fed – there is little else you can do – but I must warn you to prepare for the worst.”

The news left a great heaviness in their hearts. They began to feel a terrible prescience that their time with Angelina was drawing to an end. The child would sit still with a faraway look in her eyes, seemingly in a trance, and she just picked at the meals Eva prepared. Eva gave her all sorts of medicines but still the girl became more and more ill. Her eyes had become dull and even her hair seemed to have lost its shine. Will and Eva became desperate with worry but could only watch as their child wasted away. As Will looked out the window at the stark, cold winter landscape outside, he again had a feeling Angelina and the change of seasons were linked in some unfathomable way. The farm outside was blanketed in an unusually heavy snowfall, and this was mirrored in the pallor of her skin. The magic seemed to be gone and winter was stealing something precious from them. As they stared at the ghostly paleness of the child they had gained so briefly they felt a terrible emptiness.

She died in the middle of the winter and they buried her beneath the trees she had loved so much. Will lowered her carefully into the grave and thought she was so thin and light it was like she was not really there at all. As they stood shrouded in sorrow and drifting snow he put his arm around Eva who was

sobbing quietly. Boy crouched silent and downcast beside the grave.

“I think she was never really ours anyway,” Will said softly. “I reckon she belonged in some way to this land and has returned perhaps to it.” It did not make the hurt any easier to bear as they walked slowly back to the cold farmhouse and waited with hope for the spring.

## The House That Ran Away

The woman woke and felt immediately that something was wrong. The bed, indeed the whole house, was lurching and rocking from side to side. The motion was smooth but nonetheless disconcerting. Was it an earthquake? She tried to think what you were meant to do. Was it climb under the bed or stand in a doorway? She could never remember.

She sat up and tried to make out the details of the room in the darkness. The rocking was still there and did not seem to be getting any worse. It came and went with a predictable rhythm that put her in mind of something else. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was, but it did not feel like any earthquake she had experienced before.

Then she became aware of another strange and unnerving thing. She could not remember exactly where she was or what she was doing there. Sure, the room was familiar and she knew this was her house. She had lived there for several years, she felt sure of that. Her home was by the sea, looking out towards the Pacific Ocean. But when she tried to think what day it was her mind went oddly blank. Was it a Saturday, so she could lie in? Or did she need to get up for work? But then what was the job she would have to get up for? Wasn't it in a restaurant, serving or

cooking ... something to do with food? For a moment she almost had it, before it slipped away again. She tried hard to concentrate and get it back but it was a struggle to keep her thoughts together. Her head felt fuzzy and disconnected as if she was still half-asleep, but at the same time this did not quite have the lack of clarity found in dreams. She was definitely awake.

The more she thought about it the more frightened she became. Although she could remember more or less the layout of her house, when she tried to imagine the world outside – her garden or the local neighbourhood – there was only blankness. She had occasionally woken from deep sleep and for a split second been unaware of where she was, what she did, or what day it was before understanding flooded back in, but the confusion only lasted for a few seconds at most. Perhaps this was a more extended version of that? Maybe she just had to wait for it all to come rushing back in. She tried to think of her parents and childhood. Even those memories seemed indistinct and blurry. She could vaguely picture two figures but when she tried to put faces to them the features kept changing and morphing into something different. She had an overall feeling of what her childhood was like but no firm details – a few happy times, but also much loneliness, anger and a sense of not belonging. She did not think she was particularly close to the parents she had conjured up from her memory, but then she couldn't trust any of her recollections.

Then she realized the most shocking loss of all – she had no memory of her own name! Surely such a basic, cherished possession could not be misplaced? Didn't it start with an M or N? It was short ... like Mary or

Mel. She felt like she had lost an essential part of her identity. *No*, she thought, *don't panic. It must come back in a moment*, but she was beginning to feel something definitely was not right with the day.

She got up from bed and walked across to the light switch. The floor still moved so her steps were awkward and unsure, but perhaps she was still drowsy and light-headed from sleep. Flicking on the switch, the room was thrown starkly into view, burning her eyes with the sudden transition from darkness to light. Yes, the room looked more or less familiar. She was sure this was her house. Perhaps she was coming right after all. Each recovered memory seemed to stir awake others, so that images and impressions whispered and jostled around the fringes of her consciousness. She remembered loneliness and disappointment, a feeling of being out of place, but whether it was her loneliness or someone else's she could not be certain. Had there been a break-up of some sort? And a long period of being stuck doing work she did not enjoy?

Suddenly she was aware something about the room did not feel right. The curtains she remembered and the carpet and furniture were definitely hers, but an unknown item did not belong. The feeling grew to be one of dread. Something in the room was making her nervous, anxious, like it was the key to understanding all this craziness, but she also felt a little frightened of finding this thing, as if she might not like what it revealed. Perhaps being lost in confusion was preferable to the understanding that was denied her. She searched the room, but everything looked to be in its right place. Her eyes drifted to a tall pot plant

standing in a plastic tub in the corner. It was a beautiful poinsettia with deep, blood-red leaves. She stopped for some reason and stared at it and as she studied it the feeling of wrongness grew. She had a sudden ridiculous idea it was somehow watching her. She did not like it at all, though she could not say why. Turning away, she went over to the window and drew back the drapes.

The scene outside drew a gasp of disbelief from her. She stood paralysed in shock, unable to process what her eyes were seeing. It was still fairly gloomy as the rising sun struggled to break through thick cloud cover, but she saw that the house was adrift on the sea, with large gulls circling overhead. There could be no mistaking it – in front of her was the undulating surface of the ocean rising and falling as a heavy swell passed. In fact it was growing quite rough, with white caps crowning some of the waves. The house continued to shudder and lurch as it rode the swell. She could not believe it. Her house was floating on the open sea! The horizon met the sky in all directions and land was not in sight. She had a sudden terrible fear the house might sink, though it continued to bob like a cork on the water.

Forcing unwilling legs to move, she ran through the living room and out onto the veranda that fronted one side of the house. Leaning on the railing and looking carefully over the side she saw the green water lapping at the wooden planks at the bottom of the house. She was on the other side of her home now, and it was clear it was indeed afloat and well out of sight of land.

Unaware of what else to do she pulled up a chair and sat down to think, resting her legs on the top of the railing. She tried to recall the last thing she could remember but the previous day was still a blur. In fact the whole of the recent past was nothing more than a collection of vague memories. What was happening? Was she going mad?

With a start she realized a piece of land was coming into view. It was a small island with steep, rocky cliffs rising to a forested top. Waves dashed themselves into sprays of white on the jagged rocks at its base. As the house sped past she became aware of just how quickly it was travelling. It drifted on, overtaking a fishing boat whose captain stared in open-mouthed disbelief at the strange vessel passing by. She waved meekly, unsure of what else to do.

Without warning the floor began to shiver wildly. This was more of a rattling vibration than the smooth rolling of the sea, and she became frightened the house was going to shake itself to pieces. She was afraid of being pitched into the water – whether she could swim or not was one of the memories she seemed to have lost.

With a stomach-churning leap the house rose from the water and began to ascend into the sky. Water poured from the base in large plumes, hissing loudly, and a small section of lawn that had been submerged came into view. It continued to rise into the air higher and higher, until the sea was a crinkled plane below. Now the land could be seen in the distance and it awakened a memory of the town where she lived, nestled on the green coastline.

She went inside, deciding she should use the phone to call for help. As she entered the living room she caught sight of the pot plant and stopped, again overcome with a strange dread which she could not explain. The plant had not changed in any way, and she wondered why she was frightened of it, yet she felt like it should not be there, as if it was a stain or blemish on an otherwise pure memory.

She felt so uncomfortable she went back outside to the veranda and was shocked to notice the house was so high now it was approaching the base of the clouds. Light sparkled from the ocean far below and fishing boats were mere dots. As the house entered the mist it prickled her cheeks and all was lost in whiteness. Then she was above looking down on the rounded towers and valleys of cumulus cloud, heaped up in sculpted mounds like some vast plate of mashed potato. The light was bright above the clouds, but she was surprised it was not cold. Indeed there was little sense of the wind rushing past as she expected, nor did the air seem to be getting any thinner. Yet she was sure she was not dreaming. It just didn't make sense.

The sky above began to darken to a deep blue and a few twinkling stars appeared, even though it was still day. This was the upper atmosphere, far above the Earth's surface. Looking down, she could see it curving away below, the land and sea cloaked here and there by swathes of cloud. It looked so close, as if she could reach down and dip her fingers in a sea that was only centimetres deep.

It was certainly beautiful, and she felt an intense happiness as well as awareness that such joy had become a rare and keenly missed part of her life. She

became engrossed in the sight of the Earth coloured in swirling blues and whites and receding into the distance at increasing speed. Another large, grey globe appeared so suddenly to the right it startled her. She recognized the pockmarked surface of the moon; it was so close it appeared to dwarf the Earth. It swung silently past, craters and ridges whisking by above her head, before it too shrank to a single shining dot.

The show was not over. Another twinkling star grew in size until it resolved into a dusty red ball scarred by canyons and mountains – Mars! One of its tiny moons shot past, an amorphous lump like a blob of play dough.

Soon Mars too was gone and she was afloat in space, with its sprinkling of stars and the glowing veil of the Milky Way spread gloriously before her. The sun appeared as a fiery ball far off in the distance. She had always loved the sight of the night sky, so marvellous and alluring in the clear air of the Southern Hemisphere. This was one memory that had not been lost. It often amazed her that although the stars appeared to be placed on the surface of a giant celestial sphere, with a slight “twist” of your mind you could imagine them as they really were, spread away before you at a mixture of different distances, so you had an uncanny sense of them suddenly springing into three dimensions. She had that feeling now, as if the Universe was stretching away from her in all directions.

The veranda steps went down to the small piece of lawn that had been ripped away with the house. She walked carefully down to it and peered nervously over

the edge. There could be no doubt the house was floating in a vacuum – a thick layer of soil and a tangle of roots could be seen underneath, and below that nothing but space. Again she wondered how it was she could breathe away from the Earth's atmosphere. Come to think of it she should be frozen, or go off pop from being in a vacuum – that much she knew. Yet she felt comfortable, warm and even rather serene. Was it a force-field? Delusion? Or was she really still asleep and dreaming after all?

More surprises were to come. The house shot through an asteroid field so quickly that one irregularly-shaped boulder after another rolled by, tumbling end over end. They were so close she shrieked for fear of the house being dashed to pieces. Some had so many craters and tunnels they resembled huge lumps of holey cheese. Her home seemed to be gathering pace, travelling at an amazing speed.

A vast sphere of stupendous beauty came into sight, painted in exquisite swirls and bands of colour – hues of red, orange and apricot. It was Jupiter, looking like some enormous marble. Its glorious moon Io shot by with its garish palette of yellow and gold, followed by pimple-faced Callisto.

Then they were gone and another world blossomed from the darkness, even more sublime. Saturn! For a brief, wondrous moment she hung above a cratered moon, with Saturn smaller and partially eclipsed behind. The bands of colour were more subtle than on Jupiter, and huge rings surrounded the planet in vivid concentric shades. The house dropped through the plane of the rings and she could see they were actually formed of large boulders the size of cars. She

marvelled that none collided with the house as they whipped past. Perhaps it had some form of special protection.

The house continued to speed up, until she was going so fast that lovely blue Neptune shot by in a flash. She was reminded of something she had read about interplanetary probes using the gravity of planets to increase their speeds as they swung by. She wondered if that was happening here. Then she was in deep space, with only an occasional comet flying by, leaving its luminous trail of vapour shining behind.

Soon she was so far out and travelling so quickly the vast field of stars was slightly blurred and shifting rapidly. She did not know enough about the Universe to understand what this might mean – would she leave the galaxy altogether and be lost in a boundless void? Or would she grow old and die before she came close to any other stars and planets? More importantly, were there planets with intelligent life that might give her hope of rescue?

Onwards flew the house as if it knew exactly where it was going. Suddenly she noticed with shock that she had left the Milky Way galaxy entirely, at first skimming along beside the immense sea of stars forming one spiral arm, before it shrank in size to be a glowing whirlpool of light seemingly frozen in place. It looked like she was above a shining city at night on the Earth that seemed now so far away. Then it too was gone and she was adrift in the true emptiness of space. Numerous clusters and swirls of light could be seen – she guessed they were other galaxies spread across the infinity of space. One seemed to be picked out as a target and the house was drawn towards it,

crossing the colossal black gulf between worlds. It grew into a vortex of white similar to the Milky Way.

The immensity of it all made her feel suddenly small and lonely, so she retreated inside the house. And there was the blood-red poinsettia, still waiting in its plastic tub. Why did it creep her out like that? She felt suddenly tired and drowsy. Her eye lids seemed to stick like glue every time she blinked and she just wanted to close them. Moving into her bedroom she found her bed and lay down for a moment, falling instantly into sleep ...

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A change in motion brought the woman back to consciousness – a sharp deceleration that left her stomach feeling queasy. She got up from the bed and rubbed her eyes, before going outside to stand on the veranda.

She gasped in surprise at what she saw. Flowing shrouds of translucent colour twisted and wrapped around the sky – she guessed she must be inside a nebula, one of those enormous clouds of gas and dust in space. Through the nebula floated huge jellyfish-like creatures the size of mountains waving long, sinuous tentacles that reminded her of kelp moving with the tide. She was amazed that here in the depths of space life seemed to be flourishing. Perhaps she was the first human to see such a marvel. Maybe they were even intelligent. It was spectacular, like being inside a giant lava lamp. But there was more. Hanging in space before her was what appeared to be a collection of gigantic crystals as big as an asteroid,

shimmering in the light reflected from the wisps of gas making up the nebula. The larger crystals formed mighty towers projecting out at different angles. For the first time she noticed smaller objects nearby; in fact they were other houses like her own but in a variety of styles from across the Earth. European town houses floated beside mud huts; log cabins cruised past grand mansions. All were heading towards the largest crystal. As she watched, a vast doorway opened in its side and the house moved towards the blackness within, as if drawn along some invisible cord. She was suddenly afraid of what was inside that dark space, but the growing sense of terror was joined by an acute weariness. She fought to stay focused on what was happening. Waves of tiredness washed over her again, and she felt her consciousness slipping from her grasp ...

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## REPORT TO THE GALACTIC COUNCIL ON THE RECALL OF EARTH-STUDY PROBES

*Excerpt (translated):*

Stage 1 of the recall of those involved in the study of the planet Rargon 3 (known to the only indigenous inhabitants to have achieved space travel as “Earth”) has begun, with all field researchers engaging the automatic recall programmes in their probes to begin the return to base. The probes, along with their researchers and data recorders, have started their journeys back at faster-than-light speeds (technology patented) to the Centre for the Study of Other Worlds

(CSOW); once all have returned the analysis of the information collected can begin.

#### HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF PLANET EARTH:

Since the time of the Great Expansion, our scientists have been seeking other worlds to study and catalogue, in this galaxy and others. One of the most recent to be studied has been Rargon 3/ Earth (in the Vitirugl/ Milky Way Galaxy). Most study has focused on observations and measurements of atmospheric and environmental conditions. Such information is crucial to an assessment of the planet's potential for future colonization. Data is recorded directly into the neuronal tissue of a local life-form. Typically the species known as humans is chosen as it has the most complex (though not necessarily most intelligent) brain. To make observation easier our field researchers take on the appearance of an unobtrusive life-form, often one associated with the dwellings of the humans (commonly a plant). This is achieved by the transference of consciousness to the chosen host.

The human data recorders must be kept in close proximity to the researchers; for this purpose the probes carrying the scientists to Earth are often themselves disguised as a local place of habitation (house, apartment, cave etc) and the humans kept there. On return to CSOW the data is recovered from the organic recording device (human brain) for analysis, after which the probe is returned to Earth. The resident human is usually reprogrammed before the return to remove all memory of its time away, a process which is not always successful.

It should be noted that objections have been raised regarding the process of downloading data to organic

tissue. It may result in the removal of some information already stored there (usually long-term memories) but this has been deemed to be of no real concern. To appease those do-gooders who feel it is unethical, the humans worst affected may – as a reward for their contribution to our science – have their consciousness transferred to the nervous system of a more intelligent and cheerful species upon the probe's return to Earth. This will give them a much happier life than they would otherwise have had ...

\*

The rabbit hopped across to an area of lush new growth and began to nibble. The grass tasted sweet and succulent, and the sun was warm upon its back. Although it had to keep one eye out for predators life was good. There was plentiful food and its young were starting to look after themselves. It lived from moment to moment, unconcerned with thoughts of the past or what the future held, though from time to time dark memories stirred that troubled it. It did not know where they came from. They were memories of things with which it had no familiarity:

... a vast, endless darkness ...

... a ground that moved and glistened and was not solid ...

... and most troubling of all, a plant with blood-red leaves ...

# Bill and Sharon

## (a tragedy in five parts)

*Scene 1: A suburban garden.*

*Bill – an overweight, bespectacled man in his mid forties – stands reading a note he has just taken from his letterbox. It arrived in an unstamped envelope, addressed simply “To Bill”. He reads it aloud ...*

BILL: “Dear Bill, you don’t know who I am but for some time now I have admired you from afar. In that time I have come to fall for your quiet strength and simple honesty, your generosity with your friends, as well as the gentle and compassionate way you deal with everyone you meet. I think I can even say I have grown to love you. I am sick of denying these feelings. It is time you knew how I felt. I am unsure if you even know I’m alive, but the risk of scaring you off or being rejected is one I am willing to take.

I am considered good-looking but not in a showy or unapproachable way, and I think you will find me to be a warm and sociable person who has a good sense of humour and gets on with most people. Some friends might call me a little untidy at times, but I lead a busy and full life that includes time to pursue the many things I am passionate about – the outdoors, movies, music and gardening. However it is not complete without someone special to share it with.

If you like what you have read, then meet me tonight at the Golden Phoenix restaurant at 9pm. I will be waiting for you at the table nearest the bar. Please come and learn more about me. I already know much about you.

Love, Sharon.”

*Bill looks up with an incredulous look on his face. He smiles and clutches the letter to his chest.*

*Scene 2: A cafe, downtown. Bill sits at a table with his best friend Roger. He holds the note and looks sheepishly smug. Roger looks sceptical.*

BILL: Well, what do you think?

ROGER: You can't be serious? You don't know anything about this woman. She could be a nutcase – a complete loony or something.

BILL: Or she could be the woman I've been waiting all my life to meet. She sounds wonderful.

ROGER: She sounds mad! Get a life! What's all this about admiring you from afar? Do you know her?

BILL: Well, I meet so many people through work – it could be anybody. I can't think of anyone specifically but there have been a few women I've had my eye on.

ROGER: Sounds creepy. You I mean. And her, come to think of it. People just don't send these kinds of letters out of the blue.

BILL: What about in that movie, um ... what's it called?

ROGER: This is real life Bill! It's not normal. It's weird. It could be someone pulling your leg – have you thought of that?

BILL: No one would be that cruel ...

ROGER: Oh Bill, you've a lot to learn about human nature.

BILL: She certainly seems to think I'm pretty special.

ROGER: I still think she sounds loopy.

BILL: She's hot. She's just what I've been looking for all these years. You heard it – she loves the outdoors and gardening, just like me. She's passionate about things, just like me ...

ROGER: (*snorts*) You, passionate?

BILL: She's the woman of my dreams ...

ROGER: Nightmares more like. You sound like you're in love, in love with a woman you've never met, in love with a letter!

BILL: (*dreamily*) Maybe I am mate, maybe I am ...

ROGER: So you're going through with it then? You're going to this place, the Golden Phoenix, tonight?

BILL: Yep. (*he looks away wistfully*)

ROGER: Good grief. I'm getting another coffee! (*he leaves in disgust*)

*Scene 3: The same cafe, the next day. Bill and Roger are seated again at their favourite table. Bill holds another note. He looks morose, and reads the letter aloud.*

BILL: "I'm sorry Bill but I don't want to risk being hurt. I guess it was all just a childish idea to start with. Please understand my feelings about you haven't changed, and I still love you with all my heart. Your secret friend, Sharon."

ROGER: So it was just left there on the table? No sign of Sharon?

BILL: Yeah, left in an envelope with my name on it. Roger, how am I going to get to see her now? How will I show her I'm not going to hurt her feelings? That I won't let her down?

ROGER: Whoa, just hang on a minute there. You're not still serious about all of this are you? I mean, it's just some sort of cruel joke. You must realize that?

BILL: You're wrong. I just know – call it a gut feeling. This is no joke. She just got scared, but she had no need to be. I have no intention of letting her down. I care about her too much.

ROGER: Listen to yourself, Bill! You're not making sense. You sound as though you're in love with the woman.

BILL: But that's the thing Rog – I am. I can't explain how or why but I love her madly.

ROGER: That's right – you're mad! For pity's sake Bill, you've never met her. This is insane! If you could hear yourself ...

BILL: I don't care, and I don't expect you to understand. I feel as if in some strange way I already know everything about her. This just doesn't happen to me that often; actually it never happens. I'm not like you – I'm not confident around people. I can't pass up a chance like this. I might never have this opportunity again. She needs to see I'm lonely too, and if she'll just give me the chance I could make her happy. I know I could.

ROGER: Please Bill, you're making a big mistake.

BILL: Do you believe in people knowing each other from past lives?

ROGER: Get a grip ...

BILL: Twin souls?

ROGER: This is getting ridiculous! I'm getting another coffee.

*Scene 4: Bill's place. He is seated on a sofa, a stunned expression on his face. Opposite him is Roger, looking flustered and concerned.*

ROGER: Bill, you're not listening to me.

BILL: But what do you mean I put that letter in the box? It was from Sharon.

ROGER: I told you. There is no Sharon. I talked to Mrs Chan next door and she said she saw you put that letter in the box yourself.

BILL: That's ridiculous. I don't remember doing that.

ROGER: And the owner of the Golden Phoenix – I talked to her too. *You* put that note on the table.

BILL: That's insane. Why would I do that? You're just jealous Rog, jealous that I've got this hot babe interested in me and ...

ROGER: Bill listen! This is serious. There's more. When I came over this morning you weren't yourself, you were ...

BILL: But I haven't seen you today.

ROGER: Shut up and listen! You were raving, in some sort of delusional state. Said you were Sharon – even put on a woman's voice.

BILL: What? That's crazy!

ROGER: No Bill. It's true. You were Sharon, and you talked as if Bill was another person, saying you loved him. It was scary. I couldn't get through to you; you were lost in your own world. So I fetched Dr Sharif and she had a look at you.

BILL: (*grunts in confusion, speechless*)

ROGER: Bill, listen. I'm saying all this as your friend. It's hard for me to understand too. She says you've been under a lot of strain lately and, well you're suffering from an illness – a mental illness – what they call “Multiple Personalities” or “Dissociative Identity Disorder”. It's like there's another person inside you. There may be more.

BILL: You mean like *The Exorcist*?

ROGER: No, that's possession and there's no such thing. This isn't like in the movies. It's still you doing this – it's a way you've learned to deal with things. You take on another personality to help you get through things you don't want to face. You really believe you're another person for a while, act it out and have no memory of it afterwards. You aren't even aware you do it.

BILL: Like schizophrenia then?

ROGER: No, that's a little different Bill.

BILL: And I was a woman?

ROGER: Yes, like I said there can be a whole host of different personalities in there: male, female, old, young. Some people have had dozens. Some of the personalities might be based on you at different periods of your life – times in the past when something significant happened to you.

BILL: I was a woman ...

ROGER: Look, no one's blaming you for anything. You've had a lot on your plate lately with the changes at work and the deaths of your parents last month. This is your way of coping. But you need to find better ways of dealing with it. You can get well again. Bill, I want you to go and see Dr Sharif as yourself. We've made an appointment to see her today, and I'll come along to support you. She felt it would be best if

I explained it to you first. She said the shock would be less if it came from a friend. But she wants to see you to talk about getting a proper diagnosis and then sorting out some treatment. I need to go and take care of some business, but I'm going to come back to pick you up at 2. Okay buddy?

BILL: (*looking bewildered and lost*) Uh-huh ...

ROGER: Will you be all right till I get back?

BILL: (*seeming to rouse himself momentarily*) Yes, yes. It's a shock, but I understand what you've said. I'll be here waiting for you. I don't know what else to do.

ROGER: Good on you. Stay strong. I'll be back at 2.

BILL: Okay, I'll be waiting ... and Rog?

ROGER: Yes, Bill?

BILL: Thanks.

ROGER: You're welcome. We'll get through this. I know it's a lot to take in at one go, but Dr Sharif will tell you more.

BILL: Uh-huh ... I'm okay. I'll be here.

ROGER: Good. I'll get you a coffee.

*Scene 5: Bill's place later that day. Roger has just walked into the room and stands gasping in shock at the sight before him. Bill lies on the floor, his body sprawled awkwardly and blood staining the carpet around his head. A hunting rifle is on the ground beside him. He is dead. On the table is a note, next to an opened envelope with Bill's name on the outside. It appears there has been a struggle – chairs are overturned and ornaments broken. Roger reads the note aloud, his voice quivering ...*

ROGER: “Word is you and Sharon have something going on. I can’t have that – I love her and I always will. We have been together since long before she even knew your name. Don’t mess with what isn’t yours. If you know what’s good for you leave what’s mine alone. I’ll be around this afternoon if you need further convincing.  
Ben.”

*Roger looks with an expression of extreme sadness at his friend's body.*

ROGER: *(tearfully)* Oh Bill ...

*The End.*

## The Island

Lucille looked out across the water and wondered what lay beyond the hills that rose on the far horizon. She lived with her father, Tom, on a small island covered with forest and grassland and fringed by beaches of creamy-white sand. It sat in a calm sea whose waters lapped gently at the shore and hissed softly on the sand. They would always sit on the beach at the end of each day, under the palm trees, and the hushed breathing of the sea lulled them to sleep at night. Far off in the distance green hills could be seen, seeming to circle the horizon on all sides.

Lucille had always lived there with Tom, and she knew of no other place but that stretch of earth forming the island. She had been born there and supposed that one day she would die there too. Lucille's mother died when she was young and so Tom was the only person she had ever really known. Lucille remembered her mother only vaguely; in fact much of her past seemed like a dream at times. Occasionally she would ask Tom if there were any other people in the world and he would reluctantly dig deep into his memories and tell her about the few he could remember.

"There were more of us here once," he told her, "and your mother was like a queen among them. But that

was a long time ago and my memory grows dim. I'm not a young man anymore you know."

"But what happened to them?" she asked.

"Well, some died and some disappeared, and more than that I can't really say."

"What about when you were a boy growing up? Don't you remember your parents?" persisted Lucille.

"As I said, my memory gets worse with each passing year. I don't remember much at all of my childhood and perhaps it was an unhappy one. As far as I can recall we've always been here. What became of my parents has been lost inside an old man's head." Tom looked away as if admitting to any sort of senility or forgetfulness was shameful.

Still Lucille was not satisfied. "But what is out there over the sea? You must know something about what lies behind those hills."

"Perhaps I did once, but no more. I'm sorry Lucille – I can't tell you any more than I have. Why not just accept the world as it is and stop daydreaming about what we have no way of knowing?"

"But there must be others like us out there," said Lucille as she gazed out to the horizon, "and one day I intend to go and find out."

Tom looked up sharply as if this last comment had shocked him. "The sea is dangerous even if we had a decent boat. You will not get far in our tiny one. No, I forbid it. Put away these foolish ideas. There is plenty of work to do in the gardens and with the animals without thinking of heading off on wild goose chases!"

The sea was so pleasant in mood that to imagine it being dangerous seemed impossible. "One day I will

go to find out what is beyond the sea,” said Lucille to herself. There had to be more to life than the endless drudgery of housework and farming. She needed excitement and new experiences, and this unchanging existence was suffocating her with its tedium. But she knew she must keep such thoughts from her father, and let him think she was happy with the simple life they led.

Every evening she would sit on the sandy beach waiting for nightfall as the gulls flew overhead to their roosting places. She looked out to those far-off hills and felt an urgent need to find out what the larger world was like. She had read in storybooks about other lands and towns where large groups of people lived together. Those tales of princesses and heroes, magic and mystery made her even more determined to see for herself if such places existed. She decided one night she would sail across to the other side of the sea. Her father would be fine by himself for a few days and she might even come back with things that could help them. It was decided. She would go the next day.

The following morning she completed her farm chores by mid-afternoon and waited until Tom had fallen asleep on the pier with his hat on his face and a fishing rod in his hands. He always fell asleep when he fished and would wake up panicking when a fish tugged sharply on the line, thinking he was being attacked.

She crept past him quietly and loaded their small, wooden sailboat with a bag of food and water as well as warm clothes and blankets. She slipped a note into the band around Tom’s hat explaining she would only be gone for a few days, climbed into the boat and

untied it. It had an open deck, a single mast and a tattered sail, and her father had taught her how to sail it on their fishing trips around the island. But she would be going much farther than they had ever gone before.

Lucille rowed out from the pier, making sure the sound of the oars dipping in the water was gentle enough to join with the lapping waves. A short distance from the shore a gentle sea breeze filled the sail and the boat pushed its way slowly through the water.

She felt like a caged animal that had been set free from years of imprisonment and an intense sense of joy and excitement filled her. To be away on an adventure like those she had read about – what could be more worthwhile? Looking over the side at the sparkling sea and up at the sky with its blue depths and the odd cumulus cloud, she closed her eyes and smiled. The breeze was warm and soothing on her face and when she opened her eyes a pod of dolphins had appeared to swim around the boat for a while before disappearing into the distance.

Lucille reached the mainland by late afternoon and set up camp on a beach beneath some sheltering trees to await nightfall. It was best to be ready when the sun went out because it could become suddenly dark, and the timing could never be predicted exactly. Its reappearance could be just as sudden in the morning and it never seemed to move in the sky. Along with frequent earth tremors and strange booming noises in the distance it was something she and Tom accepted as part of the mystery of their life.

She had never slept away from home before and the thrill of it, mingled with nervousness at the strange noises from the undergrowth, kept her awake well into the night.

The next morning she ate a small breakfast and walked along the beach. It was backed by thick forest but before long she found a trail that led away from the shore and she followed it through the trees. Soon it joined a stream and wandered through tall grass filled with wildflowers. The stream gurgled softly over rocks, and birds she had not seen before flew among the trees.

At one point along the trail Lucille made an important discovery. A flash of light drew her attention to a small object half-buried in some soil among the roots of a tree. With a gasp of astonishment she realized it was metal. She dug it out with trembling fingers. Although it was old and grimy and caked with rust it was clearly a cup. At last she had proof other people were around in the recent past. With a sense of pride and new hope she put the cup in her pack and walked onwards, humming as she went.

The day grew hot and she rested by a small pond and ate lunch. A brief shower wet her but she soon dried off. The forest had thinned out and grassy hills spread away into the distance. After another hour of finding her way through the hills, following the stream, she still had not found any sign of other people apart from the cup and the trail, which she supposed could have been made by animals. Although the cup suggested people had once lived nearby she did not know if they were still around and had found nothing to suggest they were. Perhaps she and her father really were the

only people in the world. The thought of it filled her with loneliness.

It was later in the day that she came upon a remarkable sight. The land ahead had flattened but seemed to suddenly end with only blue sky beyond. Perhaps there was a cliff below or the land sloped away sharply but it seemed odd there was no land visible in the distance, especially since the stream came from that direction. As she got closer it appeared as if the land just stopped suddenly. Maybe the world ended there and it really was as small and limited as her father imagined. Lucille felt certain there must be more and she strode purposefully forward to where the grass finished. It was then she realized that what she had thought was sky was in fact a wall coloured in exactly the same shade of blue. It had fooled her into seeing distance where there was none. She followed the wall a short way to the left and then to the right and it seemed to go on as far as she could see. There were a few trees and a small waterfall tumbling out of a hole in the wall, feeding the stream she had followed.

Sitting down to think Lucille felt a sense of disappointment. Unless she could find a way onwards this was the end of her journey and her life really would consist of cooking and farming and dreaming of adventure.

Just as she was about to begin the long trek home Lucille happened to notice a square hole in the wall large enough for someone to crawl through. She had seen it because the shade within the hole was slightly darker than the wall, but it was placed several metres above the ground and beyond her reach. Looking left

and right she saw other holes spaced regularly along the wall at the same height and disappearing into the distance.

Lucille was intrigued and felt these holes were the key to the mystery of her life. She noticed that some of the scattered trees grew near the wall and one in particular seemed to be close enough to it that she might reach one of the holes by climbing the branches.

Hoisting herself onto a branch she began to climb and soon was level with a hole. She peered down it but gained no clues as to what was at its end. The hole formed a tunnel and she climbed carefully into it, amazed at her own bravery. A short crawl brought her to the end of the tunnel – it stopped at the edge of the other side of the wall and with a sudden jolt of fear she realized it dropped sharply down as far as she could see. Above her there appeared to be no end to the wall either, and clinging nervously to the side of the window-like hole she closed her eyes and calmed her breath. The wall seemed to be transparent from this side and she was able to look back through it and make out the shapes of the hills she had just come from.

When Lucille looked outwards again she could see dim forms in the distance that made little sense – huge, angular mountains with lots of straight lines and sharp corners but made indistinct by how far away they were. And then with shock she realized one of the mountains was moving towards her. A deep thudding noise filled the air as the vast form approached. Things became even more astonishing. As the titanic figure came closer she could see it was

in fact a person, but a person so enormous she was like the tiniest ant in comparison! She was gripped with fear as the giant looked straight at her and bent down towards where she was. A hand the size of a hill reached out and waved around in front of her, almost making her fall with the wind it caused. She clutched the side of the hole in panic.

A voice like thunder seemed to be coming from far away. “Now, now,” it said. “Get back in the tank. Can’t have you escaping, can we?”

A second voice came from even farther away. “Honestly, I don’t know why you keep those things. They give me the creeps.”

The first voice spoke again. “Well I think they’re cute. And nobody else has ones quite like these.”

“Just make sure they don’t get out. I still don’t feel comfortable since those last ones escaped.”

“Yeah, sure. It’s just curious and hanging round one of the ventilation holes.”

The words made no sense to Lucille – it was a language she had never heard before, and she thought anything must be better than the frightening new world that had opened up before her. With shaking limbs she went back through the hole and climbed clumsily down from the tree, picked up her pack and ran as fast as possible until she was completely out of breath.

When she reached the boat at nightfall she was so despondent she threw herself straight down upon the sand and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning she still felt shock and disbelief. The world was not as she hoped it would be and all she had found was danger and confusion. The only

other people in it were monsters. Maybe it was time, as her father had said, to give up childish dreams and stay in her own limited but safe home. At least then you did not run the risk of being eaten by giants or falling off the edge of the world. She took out the cup she had found and turned it over in her hands. It had been a false hope to think she would find companions and with a sigh she placed it in the bottom of the boat.

Lucille rowed back to the island feeling sadder and lonelier than ever before, but as she neared her home and saw the small figure of Tom waiting on the pier she could not stop a smile from creeping across her face.

“Hello father,” she said as the boat glided in towards him.

“Hello, did you find what you were looking for?” he asked.

“I suppose I found my answers, although they weren’t the ones I hoped for,” said Lucille softly.

“Well then, come in for a cup of tea – I’ve got some lunch ready for you.”

So this was her life, and she would make the best of it. Tom had been proved right and she should focus on the world that was immediately around her. But that cup – surely it meant something! She picked it up and gazed at its rough surface.

“Ah my old mug,” smiled her father. “I wondered where it had got to.”

Lucille looked at Tom who was grinning cheekily at her. Suddenly she understood why he had warned her so strongly against needing to seek for answers to her questions, but perhaps he had known she would go anyway, and in doing so find out for herself.

“Let’s eat,” she said, returning his smile, “and then I guess I had better feed those chickens.” She followed her father up the pier and onto the island that would always be the only world she could know. Dangerous adventures belonged in the storybooks and real life demanded toil and hard work.

But maybe one day two might search and find where one had failed. Somehow that thought was comforting and she knew it would sustain her through the years ahead.

## The Gift

“Come on you lot, stop pulling each other’s hair and sit down. I’m going to tell you a story.”

Mr Johnson gathered his three lively children together. With them were the even rowdier Butler boys from next door.

“Put that biscuit back in the tin and leave the cat alone Tina. It’s not play dough! Now listen carefully because this story has a very important message.” The children settled into place at his feet, jostling each other for the best position. Then they grew quiet, for they did love Mr Johnson’s stories, even if it could be hard at times to know which bits were true and which made up.

“It is about a mountain and as you’ll learn mountains can be very angry if you get on the wrong side of them. But if you treat them with the right amount of respect they can be your friend for life, and a mountain is a very powerful friend to have don’t you think?”

The children giggled, amused at such a funny idea.

“Now this story starts with a girl named, um, let’s say ... Vicky,” Mr Johnson began.

“Aunty Victoria?” interrupted Cameron, the youngest of the children.

“No, no,” continued his father. “I told you it’s just a story. It’s made up. Now, one day Vicky’s family went to live on a farm near a mountain.”

“Mount Taranaki?” asked Tina, the middle in age of the Johnson kids. Mount Taranaki was the name of the tall volcano that rose above their farm.

Mr Johnson looked exasperated. “No, another mountain.”

“What was its name?” joined in Michael Butler.

“I can’t remember.” Before any more questions could be asked Mr Johnson went on. “Vicky couldn’t wait to get out and explore the tall peaks rising over the paddocks. And where the green fields ended the thick bush began, full of dark trails and moss-covered trees dripping with the morning’s rain. It looked as if it might hold all kinds of secrets. She waited until she could get away – her mother always made her eat lunch first and wash her dishes – and then walked excitedly up the nearest slope and into the forest. It was like another world, full of fascinating things: the smell of damp earth, the sound of trickling water, animals rustling among the leaves, and the feeling you might see something exciting at any moment.”

“Like an elephant?” asked Robert, one of the Butler boys.

Mr Johnson continued, ignoring the silly question. “Vicky made sure she stuck to the path, and this was not just to avoid getting lost, but because she loved the forest and mountains so much that she didn’t want to disturb them any more than necessary. After a while she came to a small creek shaded by trees that dipped their branches into the dark water. She sat on a rock and ate some food she had packed, making sure

she put all the wrappings back in her bag to take home with her. She even picked up a piece of litter someone else had dropped.

“When she walked on she came to a lookout down to the rolling fields below, and across to the sea gleaming in the distance. She looked up at the mountain behind her with a smile, as if to thank it for such a wonderful sight.

“Continuing on she came to a small clearing in the forest, with the sun shining down onto a small tree at its centre. And she noticed it must be an apple tree because a single large, golden apple hung shining from its lowest branch.”

“A Golden Delicious!” burst in Tina.

“That’s exactly right,” said Mr Johnson. “And as she picked it and ate it, and let the juice run down her chin and onto her shirt, she thought it was the sweetest, juiciest, most fantastic apple she had ever tasted. She decided it must be a gift from the mountain itself, thanking her for being so careful inside its forest.”

“Was it really a gift?” asked Melanie, his eldest child and thus the most sceptical of mountains bearing gifts.

“I don’t know, but I think you’ll agree she certainly was considerate and respectful when she was on the mountain. When she returned to the farm she told her brother Brian about the marvellous apple.”

“*Your* name’s Brian,” called out Michael Butler.

Mr Johnson looked momentarily lost for words. “Yes, but this was a Bryan with a ‘y’. Now Bryan, with a ‘y’, was very intrigued by the news of the apple tree and he wanted to know more about it. ‘It was a gift from the mountain,’ explained his younger sister.

‘It liked the way I appreciated its beauty and it gave me the apple as a present.’

“‘What rubbish!’ sneered Bryan, thinking it was the silliest idea he’d ever heard. ‘You’ve had too much sun.’ He didn’t believe in mountains that gave you things, or even fairies and elves which just about every child has seen.

“But Bryan was a very curious boy, not to mention rather greedy, and so he left straight after dinner (without washing his dishes or telling anyone where he was going) and followed the path into the forest.

“He was not as considerate as his sister I’m sorry to say, not really caring much for nature and things like that – the kind of boy in fact who thought animals were for throwing things at. He broke off twigs, dropped the wrappers from the chocolate bars he had brought (which were meant to be saved for Easter presents) and even threw stones at the birds by the creek where Vicky had so carefully packed away all her rubbish. And finally he stamped on an ants’ nest he found until all the ants were running helter-skelter, thinking it was the end of the world.”

“*Ugh!* I hate ants,” said Tina. “I’m glad he did that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with hating ants,” said Mr Johnson, “but they have just as much right to life as you do. If you don’t like them you should just leave them alone.”

“But you sprayed last week for ants,” said Robert, thinking he had asked a thorny question and feeling quite proud of himself.

Indeed Mr Johnson did seem to take a moment to collect his thoughts. “That’s different,” he began, “because this is our home. But Bryan was in the ants’

domain and he should have respected that. The mountains belong to all living things.”

Robert looked suitably impressed so Mr Johnson continued. “Finally Bryan came to the sunlit glade deep in the forest, with an apple tree in its middle, and sure enough a single huge apple ...”

“Golden Delicious!”

“... yes, Golden Delicious, hanging from a branch.”

“But Vicky ate the only apple!” interrupted Melanie.

“Hmmm,” said Mr Johnson grinning from ear to ear. “So she did. But all the same there was a bright, shiny apple, and Bryan plucked it off with eager hands and bit into it as fast as he could, unable to wait to taste the succulent fruit.”

“Was it nice?” gasped Tina, who realized she had been holding her breath.

“*BLERGH!*” shouted Mr Johnson suddenly, making everyone jump. “It was the most foul, disgusting, horrible thing he ever had the misfortune to subject his taste-buds to! As he looked at the apple do you know what he saw?”

The children were silent, completely enthralled.

“A bunch of slimy maggots writhing about in the middle, some with their ends missing where he had bitten them in two.”

“*Urgh!*” cried Cameron, pulling a face.

“And what’s more there was even a fat, hairy caterpillar chopped in half and oozing green goo. The other half was wriggling about between Bryan’s teeth, and the green goop had squirted down his shirt.”

All the children pretended to be sick.

“Bryan was so revolted he threw the apple into the bushes and began to run away as fast as he could. As

he ran there was suddenly an enormous rumbling and growling, as if the mountain was roaring in anger, and dozens of black wings and claws began beating all around him. Bryan thought he was being attacked by bat-like creatures from the depths of the mountain; there seemed to be talons and glittering eyes spinning everywhere and a harsh cackling in his ears. He ran home in terror. When he got there he spent twenty minutes washing his mouth out with soap. But guess what ...”

The children stared and leaned forward a little, waiting.

“... he can still taste the apple to this day!”

Melanie licked her lips with a screwed up nose, as if she too could taste the squirming maggots and the hairy caterpillar dripping goo.

“When Bryan found his sister he angrily told her about the rotten apple and the frightening sounds and animals. He accused her of lying about how good her apple had been.

“Vicky guessed her brother had not treated the forest with much respect (she knew him very well you see) and said, ‘You made the mountain angry and it taught you a lesson. If you had been kind and careful you would have been given a delicious, juicy apple.’

“‘What rubbish,’ sulked Bryan.

“‘How do you explain the noises and the bats?’

“‘There was a thunderstorm today,’ said Bryan, ‘so that could have been the rumbling I heard. And this explains the things I thought were bats.’ He picked a feather out of his hair. ‘I must have disturbed a flock of birds.’

“I still think the mountain was trying to tell you something.’

“Bryan sneered in derision, but he thought about what his sister had said, and although he didn’t really believe it he found himself following the small path back into the forest the next morning. Something about what Vicky said must have made him very curious, until he felt he just had to see the apple tree one more time. And something about her words must have had an effect on him, because I am pleased to say he was very careful as he walked through the forest. He kept to the trail, did not break any branches, and even picked up the rubbish he had carelessly dropped the day before. When he saw the birds he had thrown stones at previously he threw bread instead. As he reached the mysterious clearing in the centre of the forest he saw an amazing thing. *Two* large, shiny and perfectly round apples were hanging from the tree. He plucked one and slowly brought it to his mouth, but he stopped for a second because, remember, he still had the taste of hairy caterpillars and maggots in his mouth. Perhaps the mountain was still angry with him. Perhaps this apple would be filled with twice as many maggots oozing green and black gunk! Carefully he bit into it.”

Mr Johnson could hear the children take a deep breath, waiting to hear the end.

“I have told you that mountains can be very angry indeed if you cross them, but they are also extremely forgiving, and once befriended they will always be your friend. The apple tasted like fruit from the Garden of Eden itself, juicy and sweet, with a sharp crunch when he bit into it. Bryan decided to leave the

second apple there for someone else, and walked home through the forest. It suddenly seemed a friendlier place and even the breeze between the trees felt warmer and gentler as it touched his face. He went home feeling very happy; perhaps you could even say he was a changed boy, a little wiser and more caring than before. And since that is the end of my story you can all show me how much you have learned by going and washing the dishes for me.” This included the Butlers who had stayed for dinner.

As the children began to get up Robert pointed at the table and asked, “Did the apple look like that one Mr Johnson?” On the table was a large, shiny, golden apple.

“Now who put that there?” said Mr Johnson. The children all shrugged their shoulders and looked a little spooked.

“Come on, it must have been one of you.” But no one would own up to it, and the children left chattering excitedly into the kitchen. Melanie was shaking her head and talking about “Dad and his tricks”, but Cameron looked back as he left and gave Mr Johnson an odd look as if he suddenly saw his father in a new light.

Mr Johnson walked to the table and picked up the apple, a thoughtful expression on his face. He turned it over carefully in his fingers, as if it was a precious, almost sacred thing. Slowly he brought it to his mouth, but stopped. Would a mountain still be forgiving after all these years?

There was only one way to find out and quickly he bit into the apple and swallowed. Delicious juice trickled down his throat in waves of sweetness. It was

the tastiest, crunchiest and most satisfying thing he had ever eaten.

With a grin he walked into the kitchen to tell the children the dishes could wait. Perhaps they should instead go outside and watch the sunset over the mountains. When the sun sets there are a precious few moments when it seems all the world is your friend, and such a feeling cannot be bought with all the money in the world. The children left with a cheer, running outside to the back porch which looked towards the mountain. Mr Johnson walked slowly out to join them, with an odd feeling as if he had suddenly stepped back many years. While friends may be hard to come by, he thought, they are even harder to lose. He looked at the clouds above the mountain lighting up in bands of gold, pink and apricot and changing in hue as they watched.

“Thank you old friend,” he said quietly, looking towards the mountain’s steep upper slopes that rose above the thickly forested ridges. As he looked the last rays of the sun reflected off the few strips of ice that still clung to the top of Taranaki in mid-summer, giving them a soft, silvery sheen. He almost fancied it was a last gift from the mountain.

When the sky had darkened to the deep shade of blue that tells you the day is at its end the suddenly quiet children and an even quieter adult turned and walked inside, and indeed they did feel a warm glow of friendship that seemed to come not just from each other but from all around them. On the very top of the mountain a final flash of light winked at the green plains below, like a mother giving her sleeping children a last kiss goodnight.

# Satori

From: Detective Jan Wilson  
To: Paul Dermott, Centre for Research into  
Paranormal Phenomena <[pdermott@crpp.com](mailto:pdermott@crpp.com)>  
Date: 27 October, 2023, 3.46 PM  
Subject: Please have a look at this

Hello Paul

I hope you and your family are well, and thanks once again for your useful information on aerial phenomena that helped us make sense of the happenings on the East Coast last year. Although we've been criticised for using information from outside of mainstream science before, I know that your organisation uses a critical lens drawn from hard science to investigate unusual phenomena, and we have found your help invaluable in the past.

I am writing to you because I would love to have your assistance with another case that I have been working on, and it is certainly a strange one. This one could be just the sort of bizarre thing that you like to wrap your head around - if you could have a look and let me know what you think from your perspective as an investigator of the strange and mysterious, it would be really appreciated.

The case involves a local woman, Emma Harrison, who went to a psychic in July following the disappearance of her son, John. That disappearance is part of a missing persons case that we are also investigating – her son, who usually maintains good contact with his mother, went missing last year. A friend of his who went missing at the same time is believed to be connected to this disappearance.

His mother sought to make contact with her son through the services of a spiritualist medium, Sarah Orsi, and arranged for a session at the premises of a New Age store in Auckland. Police were called to the store when Emma was reported as having passed out. She was found unresponsive and has been in a coma at Auckland Hospital since then. The medium is being investigated by our department to ascertain her role in this, but charges are unlikely at this stage.

I have attached a transcript of part of the recording of the session that the medium made. If you could have a read and tell me if you have ever come across anything like this in your experience it would really help to make sense of things. It's one of the weirdest things that I've come across in all my years of

policing and I have a strange feeling we are dealing with something here that might lie more in your field of expertise. Let me know what you think.

(Excerpt from attached transcript)

*The medium, Sarah Orsi, has entered a trance and appears to have made contact with the client's son, John, who went missing the year before.*

EMMA: John, is that you?

SARAH: Mum, I can hear you... *(long pause)* Where am I?

EMMA: Oh my darling, is it really you? *(breaking into tears)* I've missed you so much.

*(silence)*

EMMA: Are you there John? What's happening?

SARAH: So cold...it's dark...alone.

EMMA: Where are you? What happened to you? We all want to know what happened? I have to know.

SARAH: I don't know where I am. I can't see anything. So tired...

EMMA: Just try and think back. You were going out with Tane last year. Did something happen to you boys? Did you get hurt?

SARAH: *(appears stressed and anxious)* So hard to remember...

EMMA: Try my darling. We all miss you so much.

SARAH: *(long pause)* Yes...I was out with Tane. I remember now...

EMMA: Where did you go? You didn't tell me where you were going.

SARAH: (*appears to be struggling to recall*) I remember...we went down to the military facility near the mountain...it's meant to be secret and no one knows about it, but...we heard they were keeping something there...something big...

EMMA: Oh John, this isn't one of your UFO things again, is it?

SARAH: The government knows stuff...they aren't telling us...we just wanted to know for sure. To see once and for all.

EMMA: What did you do? Did you break in there?

SARAH: Yeah (*chuckling*). We got in there all right.

EMMA: What were you boys thinking? That's so dangerous. How did you get in?

SARAH: The security was useless Mum... (*laughs*) we almost strolled right in. I don't think they thought anyone knew they were there. Just cut the fence with some bolt cutters, avoided the cameras and we were all sweet. Snuck into a big hangar – they didn't even have the door locked – losers!

EMMA: What did they do to you, my boy?

SARAH: (*her body convulses; she begins recalling events as if reliving them*) We're hiding behind some crates, looking into the hangar. No one knows we're here yet. Tane is giggling like a schoolboy but this is serious stuff. They're hiding something big here, I can just feel it...what *is* that?

EMMA: What can you see? Tell me what you see. (*getting increasingly agitated*)

SARAH: ...It's so weird...

EMMA: Focus my boy. What can you see?

SARAH: (*screwing up her face in concentration*) It's the most bizarre damn thing I've ever seen...like a gigantic egg – huge! Almost to the ceiling of the

hangar and it's big enough to fit a building in...maybe two or three stories tall...

EMMA: An egg? What are you talking about?

SARAH: Yeah (*giggling*), a giant egg. But not smooth and hard – it's all bumpy and glistening like some sort of body organ. And it's coloured like skin, but all pimply and wrinkled.

EMMA: What?

SARAH: That thing's alive, I swear it. I think I can even see it moving...throbbing...like it's breathing.

EMMA: Alive? This doesn't make any sense...

SARAH: Wait, what's that?

(*long pause*)

EMMA: John, talk to me! What's happening?

SARAH: This is so weird Mum... there's a hole in the side, at the bottom, like a door...

EMMA: And...?

SARAH: And there's a line of people walking slowly into it...but something's not right...

EMMA: What John – what's not right?

SARAH: They look like they're in a trance or something, or all doped up. They're not speaking to each other, just shuffling along with no expressions on their faces, staring straight ahead...oh wake up – don't go in there!

EMMA: (*talking as if this is happening now*) Get out John. I'm scared!

SARAH: Oh no...

EMMA: What... what's happening now?

SARAH: Tane's gone. He was here just a minute ago, but I turned around and he's gone... where is he? Oh, wait; there he is! He's in the line of people, looking just as spaced out as they are. He's almost into the opening in the side of that thing! (*becoming agitated*)

EMMA: Come back to me John. (*sobbing*)

SARAH: (*calls out*) Tane, get back here. I'm going after him!

EMMA: No!

SARAH: I have to; I can't let that thing take him!

(*long pause*)

EMMA: (*tearfully*) What, what's happening now?

SARAH: I'm beside him, talking to him, but he's not listening. Why won't he listen? Won't even look at me. Tane! It's John! Don't go in there Tane. I grabbed his arm but he's too strong – it's like something has control of him, of them all...

EMMA: Oh John!

SARAH: Why am I not affected? Why...I can't think straight...whispering in my head...

EMMA: Please John – come back to me!

SARAH: I have to go after him! I'm going in.

EMMA: No, this is madness! I'm scared John.

SARAH: I'm walking in – it's a tunnel but the sides are all wet and slimy like flesh. It looks like a throat.

EMMA: Get out John – that thing will eat you!

SARAH: I'm just following the others – no space to turn around now – just keeping on going ahead. The passage is narrowing and there are a few branches off in different directions. This place is like a maze.

People are going different ways. And there's music – such beautiful music, but just on the edge of hearing, like it's far off in the distance.

(*long pause*)

EMMA: (*sobbing*)

SARAH: I've lost Tane! I didn't see which way he went. I'm going on down a passage...so tired...can't think straight...

EMMA: Wake up Sarah! Wake up! I can't take it anymore!

SARAH: Just a bit further. It's narrow now; I have to crawl on my hands and knees. The sides are all soft and sticky like it's alive, like it's organic. How come I can see? It's giving off some kind of light – some kind of bioluminescence maybe. I feel like I'm inside the body of a living thing.

EMMA: You're in its stomach John – it's going to eat you!

SARAH: No, no – I can feel it, hear it in my head. It's talking to me, willing me on. I don't think it means me any harm.

EMMA: It's a trap – it wants you to go deeper. Get out of there! Turn back while you still can. Please!

SARAH: ...so tired...just a little more... (*suddenly convulses*)

EMMA: (*panicking*) What happened?

SARAH: The tunnel has turned downwards - I lost my grip... I'm falling!

EMMA: No!

SARAH: I'm stuck, but this thing is squeezing me, pushing me along, going deeper...

EMMA: I told you it's like a stomach - like a digestive system. You have to get out John!

SARAH: Oh! (*sits upright in seat and tenses*)

EMMA: Tell me what's happening!

SARAH: The tunnel is going almost straight down now. I'm falling, shooting along like I'm in a hydroslide. The sides are so slick and slimy - I can't stop. (*falls forward*)

EMMA: John?

SARAH: I've stopped falling and landed in some kind of chamber; yes it is kind of like a stomach. It's so

cozy and soft though. I feel I could lie down here...go right off to sleep. I can touch the walls - they are rubbery and warm, and I can feel a pulse like a heartbeat. I can sense its thoughts. It wants me to join it. To be part of it. It's not a stomach – more like a womb.

EMMA: Don't listen John!

SARAH: There's a kind of white powder at the bottom of the chamber and I'm sitting chest deep in it...I'm sinking in...deeper...deeper...it's telling me not to struggle...almost over my face now...I think this is the end...goodbye Mum...

EMMA: No, John, no!

*(silence)*

EMMA: John what's happening? Speak to me. I need to know!

SARAH: *(suddenly calm - her voice sounds dreamy and hushed)* Oh Mum - it's so beautiful. I never thought that it would be so beautiful...

EMMA: What is – what's beautiful?

SARAH: Everything. Everything is beautiful. I can see it all now - I *am* everything now.

EMMA: What did that thing do to you?

SARAH: I became part of it - we are one now. I'm absorbed, loved. Part of its consciousness. It's old, very old, as old as the stars. And yes, alien. It's been so lonely.

EMMA: *(breaking down)* I'm so sorry, John!

SARAH: Don't be sorry mum. It all makes sense now. I am everywhere, I am everything. I remember it all now; I don't know why I closed myself off from this. I'm no longer cold and alone. And the music – I've never heard music so beautiful before, and the music is part of me. The colours are the most vivid I've ever

seen, swirling all around me. I can feel myself expanding to all of space, all of time. I am floating in it like an ocean, but an ocean that's alive. An ocean of light, and it goes on forever. I can't tell where I end and the ocean begins.

EMMA: But where are you. *Where* are you?

SARAH: I'm with you Mum. I'm part of everything. There is no separation, no multiplicity. I see the truth, and you can too. Come join me. Join us.

EMMA: (*suddenly calm, as if losing some internal struggle*) But how? How can I be with you? I miss you so much.

SARAH: Just open your mind, let him in. He will listen. He will welcome you. You can become part of the One too. You already are part of him; you just don't know it.

EMMA: But how...?

SARAH: Just clear your mind...call to him...he will answer...then you will understand too. You'll understand everything.

EMMA: I'm frightened.

SARAH: Don't be. Just give in, surrender. It's so peaceful here...

After a long pause the recording breaks off. Police were called to the premises and found Emma Harrison unresponsive at the scene. Attempts to revive her were unsuccessful, and she remains in a coma to this day. Sarah Orsi was present but appeared confused and could not recall the events of the previous hour. She is assisting with enquiries and at this stage no charges have been laid.

Let me know if this is like anything in your experience, Paul. I'm at a dead end and don't know where to go next on this one.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards  
Jan Wilson

*Update:* Dr Paul Dermott, director of the Centre for Research into Paranormal Phenomena, was found comatose at his residence in November 2023, and is currently under medical care. He continues to be in a coma but is stable, and no cause of his condition has been established.

## The Great Gorilla Getaway

Once there lived three gorillas named Fuzz, Grizz and Marmaduke, in a small cage at a small zoo.

One day Marmaduke was reading the daily newspaper and had just finished the crossword, when he said to his cellmates, “Boys, we need a vacation from this place. I’m going stir crazy.”

Grizz put down the banana he was eating and looked thoughtful. “I suppose it is about time we got out for a bit. We’ve been indoors long enough, and I’ve often thought I’d like to see something of the world.” Fuzz looked unsure but decided he did not want to be left behind by himself if the others did go. Although he did not tell them, he found the idea of the outside world a little frightening.

In fact they had spent their entire lives inside the small, cramped cage. I am sure that if you are stuck with even your best friends for long enough you can begin to get on each other’s nerves. Well Fuzz, Grizz and Marmaduke were definitely the best of friends,

and had been cooped up together for about fifteen years. So you can see why it was indeed time to get out for a bit of a holiday.

They had to wait another week for their chance. One day the zookeeper came in with two assistants to make the beds as they did every day, but also to give the cage a good wash.

“Morning boys,” he called cheerfully. “I won’t be long.” He set a long, thick hose down in the corner and went to begin making the beds.

“It’s now or never lads,” whispered Marmaduke with a twinkle in his eyes, and he grabbed the hose and spun it above his head like a lasso. He suddenly felt a surge of excitement as if realizing he was about to do something that meant their lives would be forever changed. He almost fancied himself to be a famous cowboy like those he had seen in the old Westerns on their television.

The zookeeper appeared in the doorway and the broad smile on his face quickly turned to astonishment. Marmaduke tossed the hose over the zookeeper’s head with a quick flick of the wrist and pulled it tight.

“Sorry Boss,” called Grizz. “We’re just popping out for a while – no hard feelings.” With another flick the other end of the hose was spun around the assistants and pulled taut.

The gorillas made sure the zookeeper and his assistants weren’t hurt, because whatever you may have seen in old Tarzan films, gorillas are very gentle animals and wouldn’t harm a hair on your head. They would give you their ice-creams if you looked hungry and always ask politely if you need help with a heavy

load of shopping. What's more they wouldn't run off with it like some nasty humans might. I think sometimes we could learn a lot from our gorilla friends, don't you?

Anyway, as I was saying the zookeeper and his assistants were trussed up so cleverly they could not move or even speak, and people passing by thought the hose was a python and the captives were the python's dinner. One little girl even remarked she thought the zookeeper might be a water buffalo, as he was rather large and hairy. Because of this the zookeeper and his assistants did not get released for several hours. They looked even more like wild animals, which most of us are after all, because the gorillas had stolen their clothes (being considerate, polite creatures the gorillas did leave the poor people wearing their underpants. A large crowd was attracted, and one rather rude man roared, "Look, those funny monkeys have got undies on!").

Meanwhile Fuzz, Grizz and Marmaduke walked out the front of the zoo. They had the zookeeper's keys and were wearing the clothes they had taken, though Grizz was complaining miserably about how tight his were. "Trust me to get the skinny one," he moaned. Because there are many people who look much like gorillas anyway (you may know a few) no one so much as gave them a second look as they strolled nonchalantly out the front gate. They hopped into the zookeeper's convertible, using the keys from the front pocket of his jacket, and drove off with Marmaduke behind the wheel, his long, shaggy hair streaming out behind him. The tires squealed and a cloud of smoke

poured from the burning rubber. The gorillas hooted with excitement.

Now you may be thinking it was rather naughty of Marmaduke to be driving a car without a driver's licence, and you would be right. Just because he had seen a few James Bond flicks on the t.v. in their cage he believed he could drive, but you should always learn from an expert and make sure you get a proper licence. He was swerving all over the road, causing people to jump out of the way and he knocked over three rubbish bins and two letter boxes.

The first place Marmaduke, Grizz and Fuzz headed for was the local shopping centre. They decided a change of clothes might help them to look a little less conspicuous. Using the zookeeper's wallet (but promising each other to pay him back for all the money they borrowed) they kitted themselves out at a small fashion boutique. Grizz bought a slick pinstripe suit and shades. Marmaduke opted for a clinging sweat-top and cycle pants and several hairclips for his long flowing hair, while Fuzz was drawn to a colourful tartan kilt, flowery top and high heels.

As they left the store other people could only stand and stare at the odd-looking trio.

"It was a good idea to get into some plain clothes lads," said Fuzz to the others. "We don't want to go drawing attention to ourselves."

Grizz had also bought some cans of spray-paint, and painted "Gorillamobile" on the side of the car in fancy gold letters, as well as some red-hot flames. They vaulted into their seats and took off once more, heading onto the highway. The three gorilla friends settled back and really began to enjoy their new-found

freedom. The radio was turned up to full volume (“Born to Be Wild” was playing) and they hooted loudly at passers-by, rather like a lot of rude young humans sometimes do.

Suddenly they heard a loud wailing noise that reminded them of the monkeys living in the cage next door at the zoo. Looking behind, Fuzz noticed a police car racing up behind them with its siren blaring. The police had been given a description of the car and it had not taken long for a patrol car to spot it.

“Looks like it’s all over chaps,” said Fuzz. “It was fun while it lasted but we’d better pull over.”

“Never!” screamed Marmaduke. “They won’t take me alive!” As you can see he had been watching far too much television. Pushing the accelerator to the floor he sent Grizz tumbling into the back seat as the car jumped forwards. Fuzz stuck his fingers in his mouth and looked frightened.

Grizz was greedily eating his way through 300 bananas they bought at a market, and a large pile of skins had formed around him. He had a sudden idea. “Don’t worry boys. I’ll take care of things,” he shouted.

Scooping up an armful of banana skins, he threw them over his shoulder into the path of the police car. It ran over the skins and began spinning wildly, running off the road and into a hedge (luckily the driver was not hurt and you may be thinking that throwing the banana skins was a very irresponsible and dangerous thing for Grizz to do. He too had been watching too many cop shows on t.v. and fancied himself to be a wrongly accused criminal on the run).

The gorillas decided it might be safest to get off the road for a while and left the highway, driving to a playground where they climbed on the monkey bars and swings while they decided what to do. After a while they sat down, exhausted, and discussed options. Grizz suggested going to watch a game of rugby, but Marmaduke warned his friends that they would soon need a source of money. He knew just the place!

They drove into a busy part of town where some of the people looked almost as odd as they did. The gorillas pulled up outside a large, shiny building with gaudy, flashing signs. It was a casino where people could play games to win a lot of money but usually just ended up coming out with empty pockets. The security guards gave them a long look as they entered, but decided they must be strange-looking tourists from a distant land.

“While we’re here let’s have a go on one of the pokies,” suggested Marmaduke.

“I don’t know,” said Fuzz. “I’ve heard you can waste a lot of money in these places.”

“Come on,” replied Marmaduke, the most headstrong of the three. “Just one go won’t hurt.”

Grizz had such an excited grin on his face that Fuzz gave in and said, “Just one then, and if we don’t win anything we’ll head outside.” As you may have noticed he was the wisest of them all.

Grizz was quite keen on trying the Blackjack table, as he’d just seen a James Bond film the week before, but as no one knew the rules they settled on a turn at a slot machine.

Marmaduke put in a coin, pulled the lever and watched as the dials spun. One banana appeared and he whooped joyfully, deciding that seeing his favourite food must be a good thing. A second banana stopped beside the first – now all three of them cheered. They held their breath, as the third and fourth dials appeared, also bananas.

“I can’t look,” shrieked Fuzz as the last dial spun into place, and he covered his face with his large hands. The other two began jumping up and down gleefully and beating their chests. He looked and saw a row of golden bananas lined up like a gorilla’s Christmas dinner. The machine made a loud noise and money began pouring out. Grizz scooped up a handful and began pouring it over his head, and the money continued to flow until he was buried beneath a huge pile of coins. Marmaduke and Fuzz danced and hooted with delight.

“We’re rich!” they screamed.

The money, once counted and changed for more convenient notes by the staff, turned out to be over \$10,000. They decided to split the money, as all good friends should, and spent a night of luxury in the poshest room of the casino’s hotel. They had room service, ordering five banana splits each and as much lemonade as they could drink, and soaked in the hot spa pool, all agreeing it had been the perfect day. They finished by curling up on the plush beds to sleep.

In the morning the three friends sat and talked over breakfast. They had to decide what to do with their new-found freedom and wealth, after all it was only a

matter of time before the car was found again. They needed to start on their new lives straight away.

“I’m going to Africa,” said Grizz after a long silence. “I’m going to find my roots. I’ll use my share of the winnings to buy a plane ticket.”

Marmaduke looked thoughtful. “I’ve always wanted to be in the movies,” he said. “I’m going to Hollywood.” A dreamy look came over his face as he imagined himself being a handsome action star with a string of celebrity romances behind him.

Only Fuzz looked wistfully into his bowl of cornflakes and said, “You know boys, I kinda miss the zoo. It wasn’t a bad place. I just needed to get out for a bit and now I’ve done that I’m happy to settle back down again in my cage with my t.v. and my morning newspaper.” He looked suddenly sad as he remembered his friend Barbara, the red-headed orangutan in the next cage, and even the zookeeper, who gave the best foot massages one could hope for. “I’m going back lads,” he said. The others looked sad but nodded and agreed they had all made good decisions.

It was a tearful farewell as the three friends parted ways outside the hotel. Marmaduke and Grizz caught a taxi together to the airport for flights to Africa and Los Angeles (the home of Hollywood). They all promised to write at least once a month and never forget the good times they’d had together.

Fuzz gazed sadly at the taxi as it drove away with Grizz and Marmaduke’s faces pressed to the back window, each looking forlorn. He waved goodbye and then used a coin to phone the zoo from a public telephone.

“I’m coming home,” he said once the zookeeper had answered, and there was a cheer of delight from the other end.

“I’ve missed you boys so much,” said the zookeeper, his voice trembling with emotion. “It’s been awfully dull around here without you. But what about Grizz and Marmaduke?” There was a long pause from Fuzz and the zookeeper said, “You don’t need to tell me. I can pretty much guess where those two are off to – wherever the bananas are more golden and the backrubs more frequent. I had a feeling this might happen one day. But somehow I don’t think we’ve seen the last of those two.” And indeed he was right, although that is another story. He laughed and said, “It will be good to have you back.”

Fuzz described where he was, and soon the zookeeper drove up in a borrowed car that belched fumes and coughed like an old smoker. He gave Fuzz a huge hug and a funny look (Fuzz was still wearing his kilt and high heels). Then he saw his car with “Gorillamobile” painted on its side and covered with banana skins. A big grin crossed his face. “What have you boys been up to?” he laughed.

So Fuzz returned to a life of quiet bachelorhood at the zoo. He was happy enough with his friend Barbara next door, his daily foot massage and his morning newspaper. Now and then he would stare out through the bars of his cage and wonder what exciting things his friends were up to, and whether Marmaduke had made it into the movies, or if Grizz had found his family. Maybe one day his friends might even turn up with suitcases and stories to visit for a while, he

thought. But the wondering soon passed and he would return to his simple pleasures.

However there were a few changes around the place. The zookeeper agreed to let him out for weekly visits to wherever he liked (the playground swings were his favourite place). His share of the winnings paid back the money that had been borrowed and gave the Gorillamobile new upholstery and tires, although the zookeeper decided he rather liked the paint job. But best of all a new spa bath and wide-screen t.v. were installed in his cage as well as a big, soft sofa to lie on as he watched his favourite programmes. Sometimes Barbara would come over to watch a wildlife documentary with a big bowl of popcorn.

As for the other two, Marmaduke became a bodyguard for Arnold Schwarzenegger, and even got to show off his gorgeous shaggy hair in an advert for “Super-duper Shiny Shampoo”. Grizz found his family in the rainforests of Cameroon, which called for a huge homecoming feast that lasted well into the night, with more bananas than you could ever eat in your lifetime.

Which makes you wonder what all those other gorillas in all those other zoos are missing out on, and what potential lies hidden and wasted inside the confines of cages all over the world. For, just as you may get bored silly when you’ve been sent to your room for a while, animals too like to feel useful and appreciated, and to “get out” for a bit. Everyone, whether they wear skin, fur or feathers on the outside, likes to have a good time.

So when you next go to the zoo, remember that the gorilla or lion or crocodile you stand gawping at

might like to hear a little bit about you and your interests, or may even like a foot massage.

Or a newspaper.

Or the key to its cage.

## Taniwha

The door slammed so hard the whole house shook, and Malia threw herself onto her bed and punched the pillow angrily, hoping the door slam made her feelings clear enough. Yet again she had to miss out on having her friends over because the baby was asleep, and it seemed as if these days everything revolved around him and his needs. The house had to be kept quiet so he could sleep; they had to wait for him to be fed before their own meal could begin and when they went out now it was always to a place where he could play safely, which usually meant somewhere dull and full of other babies. It was infuriating. She never got to do what she wanted anymore and wished for once someone would do something for her. What about buying *her* nice things and cleaning up after every mess she made? But no, she had to start helping with the cooking and cleaning because now there wasn't time for Mum and Dad to do it all themselves.

“Babies are a lot of work,” they had said, “and you will have to do much more around the house to help out.”

Even worse, they hardly ever had time for Malia anymore. Dad never came out to throw the rugby ball around with her in the garden since the arrival of Siali, and Mum always seemed too busy to teach her how to

weave traditional mats as she had promised. At the end of each day her parents were too tired to read her a story like they used to; sometimes they were even too tired to give her a simple smile and in fact more than once she had ended up being yelled at for nothing.

*Why can't things be the way they used to?* thought Malia. She missed cuddling up to Mum in front of the t.v.; now Mum was busy feeding Siali or dashing around the house doing something for him, and Dad too seemed to take less notice of her. Why did that little brat have to come and change things? She hated him – no, that was too harsh, but certainly she disliked him.

What she needed to do was make them miss her, make them sit up and take notice of her again. She was going to punish them for taking her for granted, and show them what it would be like if she was not around. Yes, that was it – she would run away. Malia decided she would go into the forest that began on the edge of town and stay there all day, but certainly no longer because the thought of being in there after dark was terrifying. She intended to stay just long enough to teach them a lesson they would not soon forget.

She started out straight away, packing a small lunch, putting it into a backpack with some books and cycling to the end of the park where the bush began as a dark, forbidding wall of crowded trees and matted vines. It was a place Malia was not allowed to go into by herself. The forest was big and people got lost in it sometimes, but that made the idea of telling her parents she had been there all day even more appealing.

As Malia entered the bush and followed the muddy track there was at first a lot of light sifting its way through the branches. It caused the droning insects and floating motes of dust to sparkle in front of her. Farther in, however, it became darker and gloomier. Suddenly the forest seemed less friendly, somehow alien and dangerous – a wild place where people did not belong. She began to hear strange noises that unnerved her – rustling in the undergrowth, sighing in the trees – and she began to wonder if she had made the right decision. But no, she couldn't go back. That would be even worse.

Suddenly there was a loud thud as a branch dropped to the ground near her, and it gave Malia such a fright that she took off as quickly as she could, running faster and faster down shadowy tunnels until she stopped, trembling and afraid, with no idea of where she was. The twisted branches, with their dripping veils of moss, seemed to grope for her, and the eerie silence sucked up every sound.

Malia wanted to go home more than anything else, but realized she no longer knew which way to go. She was lost. In fact the bush seemed strangely different, and she did not remember ever having been in this part before.

When she could almost bear the dark and chill no longer she came upon a still pool in a small, grassy clearing, awash in a silvery moon-glow, although it seemed far too early to be night. The pool was choked with weeds and ringed by boulders and fallen logs. Some of the logs protruded from the murky water, and Malia chose one to sit on while she caught her breath.

As she sat there she felt a growing anxiety at being alone in such a creepy place, but also a strange drowsiness as if she was almost on the verge of sleep. Something about the forest seemed slightly unreal, and she found it a little hard to focus on anything. She became aware of a sound like a gentle sighing, but then realized it was more like singing. It was a song sad as summer's end, and it seemed to come from the very air around her. It caused an inexplicable sorrow to stir within her.

Malia looked around to find the source of the singing. "Is there someone there?" she called nervously. The mournful song sounded far away now and yet she felt like she was the one slipping into the distance.

It was as she stood up to get a better look that the log she was on broke with a loud crack and she fell into the pool. She felt herself sinking and began to thrash wildly with her arms. She had never been a strong swimmer and the fact she could not feel the bottom of the pool terrified her. To make things worse weeds seemed to have got tangled round her legs and she was struggling to keep her head above the surface, swallowing one mouthful of water after another. Her head would break into the air, giving just enough time to splutter and cough, before she went under again. The weeds wrapped tighter around her legs like rope, restricting her movements and a rising panic was taking over. The thought entered her mind that she could drown here and no one would ever know. As she grew weaker she began to relax and give in to its inevitability.

Suddenly something rose up underneath her and she grabbed it with her remaining strength. It felt solid but covered in matted vegetation – as she broke the surface she realized it was a large log. Gasping in relief she used it to float across to the side of the pool and dragged herself onto the bank.

She lay there awhile coughing painfully, then sat up to squeeze the worst of the water from her clothes. Mud stained her t-shirt and weeds still coiled around her legs. It was as her eyes came to rest upon the moss-covered log floating at the side of the pool that she got the surprise of her life. She was sure it had blinked at her! For just a moment she had seen two glistening eyes open and look in her direction before the moss closed over them once more. She gasped and stood up. Could she be certain of what she had seen? Surely the log could not be alive.

“Did you just blink at me?” she asked and immediately felt silly for talking to a piece of wood. The forest was suddenly still and unnaturally quiet. She could hear her heart thumping in her chest.

She had just decided she must have imagined it when an amazing thing happened. The log moved, rolling over in the water as if suddenly top-heavy with a soft gurgle that sounded like it was chuckling. The movement had the appearance of belonging to a living thing. Then it was gone, disappearing beneath the surface of the pool and leaving only a few ripples behind.

Malia was unnerved and decided it was time to start heading home, but she still had no idea which way to go. All she knew was she did not belong in this place.

It was when she turned to go that a voice seemed to whisper into the air around her, so softly she could not be sure she had heard it.

“Wait,” it seemed to say.

Malia looked back towards the pool. The water was dark and calm, with a thin mist beginning to curl upwards from its surface. She screwed up her eyes to see better. Was that a face just beneath the water? One second it was there, and then it was gone. Perhaps her mind was playing tricks on her.

With more gurgling and bubbling the log broke the surface. This time there could be no mistaking it – there was a face peering from beneath a scruffy layer of moss and lichen! The wood was dark and crinkled like the leathery skin of a very old person, and it glistened with wetness. Two glittering eyes looked out from between the convolutions of the wood, and a crooked gash below looked just like a mouth split into a cheeky grin. It smelled strongly of rotting earth.

Malia was so shocked she could only stare open-mouthed at the odd creature.

It seemed to giggle to itself again and then spoke in a burbling voice like water running over stones.

“Hello,” it said, and its words were delivered slowly and deliberately. “I don’t often see your kind here. The last person I saw was a young man on his way to fight for the honour of his tribe, and I have slept for much of the time since. What brings you so far into the woods?”

Malia was not really surprised that such a strange thing could speak. It was just one more oddity in an increasingly surreal day.

“I-I’m lost,” she said.

“You must be lost before you can truly find yourself Malia.” It spoke in a voice as wise as time and gentle as sphagnum moss but its large eyes gleamed coldly.

“How do you know my name?” asked Malia.

“The trees whispered it to me.”

“I ran away from home and now I don’t know which way to go.”

“Your parents and baby brother will be missing you. One should not leave its place of belonging.”

“You seem to know a lot about me. What are you?”

The creature laughed, a sound like a rushing stream. “I am known as taniwha to the people who have grown old in this land. I am as ancient as the forest. I am wise as the largest tree that sends its roots far below where we stand, and know many things. Some of them I wish I did not know.” It gave a sad sort of sighing noise that seemed to come from the depths of the pool.

“Taniwha,” whispered Malia to herself. She had heard her Maori friends speak of taniwha as frightening monsters that lurked in rivers and lakes ready to drag people in and drown them, and even in the islands where her family came from there were stories of similar creatures. But nobody believed them; they were told as entertainment. Surely taniwha did not really exist. And yet here was proof before her. She could hardly discount the evidence of her own eyes. Despite the grisly details of some of the stories she did not feel afraid. The taniwha was certainly strange and rather ugly, but it did not seem to be threatening her at the moment. She knew she should be cautious though. Its eyes sparkled with all sorts of secrets.

“Thank you for saving me. I was sure I was going to drown.”

“You are welcome.”

“I thought taniwha were only make-believe.”

The taniwha seemed to find this thought very amusing, trembling with mirth. “Yes, well I suppose once there were a lot more of us around, but we have become fewer and fewer over the centuries. People drain our swamps and lakes and burn our forests, until now it has been many years since I have met another of my kind. I am not surprised you have never seen one before – for all I know I might be the last of the taniwha. It is a lonely existence.”

“That’s sad,” said Malia, genuinely moved. “How is it you can talk?”

“If you had lived long enough to see even the mighty kauri trees rise and crumble back to soil you too would find that such knowledge is all around you if you know where to look.”

Malia was not really sure if that answered her question. She did not know if she should believe anything it said. How could something be as old as the forest?

“Aren’t taniwha meant to kill people?” she asked.

The taniwha looked upset for the first time. “I cannot speak for all of my kind, but know that I would never hurt another living thing as long as it lives by the rules of the forest. I am one of its many guardians and those that seek to harm it might have cause to fear me I suppose. Do you seek to harm the forest?”

“No, not at all,” said Malia quickly, detecting a hint of menace creeping into the taniwha’s voice. One moment it could seem so friendly, but she was in no

doubt she would not like to get the taniwha cross. She did not want to find out what might happen then. “I just got lost in the bush. I’m trying to find my way back to my family.”

“I had a family once. But that was many of your lifetimes ago. I miss them.”

“Well, my family doesn’t take any notice of me anymore – all they care about is the baby,” said Malia with a sulky expression on her face.

“Sometimes the ways of old things are hard to understand, but there is wisdom in age and if you are willing to listen much can be learned. But being old can be so terribly lonely if all those you love have passed away.” It paused awhile as if thinking. “I would like to show you something – it is not far.”

The taniwha dredged itself from the depths of the pool and dragged its heavy weight onto solid ground. Malia still thought it looked like a large old tree trunk covered with a mass of vines, moss and fungi. One large fern sprouted from its back like a head of hair. She could not see any legs or other limbs, and if she had not seen it move and heard it talk she would have taken it for nothing more than the sort of rotting vegetation you could find on any forest floor.

The taniwha began to lumber awkwardly down a forest trail. Malia collected her bag and followed. It was clearly more at home in the water and she wondered how long it could spend out of its pool. Although it moved slowly Malia got the odd feeling they were travelling a lot farther than their speed would suggest. It was a warm day, and the walk helped her clothes to dry.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“So many questions,” muttered the taniwha. “Just follow.” The bush was no less creepy with the taniwha as her guide, and Malia had the strange impression the trees were shaking their leaves and whispering to it as they passed.

“They’re curious about you,” the taniwha said as if it knew what she had been wondering. “I told them you are a friend of mine and that means you are a friend of the forest.”

Amy thought it weird she had not heard the taniwha speak, but shrugged and decided it must be a little crazy. Then again, what could be crazier than following a talking log with twinkling eyes down a trail that seemed to be changing even when they stood still?

At last they came to another moon-lit clearing, and hid in the ferns at the edge.

There Malia saw yet another amazing sight. A group of figures sat around the edges of the clearing or stood in the shafts of moon-light. It seemed hard to see them clearly – one moment she would glimpse people at the edges of her vision but when she turned to look they were gone. It was as if she was seeing them through smoky glass that was turning and shifting so the figures seemed somehow insubstantial. Just when she thought she got a good look at one she would find herself unsure whether she had seen anything at all. Some looked like short people with ghostly-pale skin, others more like twisted bits of knotty wood with strangely human faces. Beautiful but haunting voices could be heard singing along with flutes, though Malia could not see any of the strange folk moving their mouths. They seemed to be looking at something

in the middle of the clearing but what it was Malia could not tell. All she could see were some mossy boulders and there was a veil of mist that made everything look hazy.

“Who are they?” she asked, almost breathless with amazement.

The taniwha replied in a whisper, as if it did not want to be overheard. “They are the people of this forest, who live in it and care for it and take different forms. The local Maori know them as patupaiarehe. The name is not important, and people tend to have distorted ideas about them, when they believe in them at all.”

“I thought things like that were made up.”

“Once, long ago, people knew them as friends, but they have forgotten about them until it is now a lucky and rare person who can see them,” said the taniwha. “Unless they choose to be seen, of course.”

It gave Malia a gentle smile and she got the feeling this last bit referred to her. She wondered why the patupaiarehe would choose to show themselves to her. She could sense the enormous age of the forest, although she did not know how. The trees seemed older and wiser than she had ever imagined them to be and beyond that she could feel the forest itself as a single ancient mind, aware of her and everything going on inside it.

“They look sort of weird, like bits of trees and people stuck together,” said Malia.

“Well that is how you see them and someone else may look and see something completely different. Again it comes down to how people in different places interpret what they sense but don’t really

understand. The Maori know them as fair-skinned people who love music and singing and cloak themselves in the mist.”

“How do they look after the forest?”

“They have an even deeper connection to it than I do. They are a part of the whole and so not separate from it.”

Again Malia was not sure if her question was really answered, but it seemed to be all she was going to get. “Do all forests have them?” she asked.

“All of the oldest places do,” explained the taniwha, “though they are fewer in number than in the past.”

“Are you one of them?”

“No, I am made of earth and water and air as you are, though I am not without my own powers that might seem magical to those who don’t understand such things.”

“And you say there may be more of you?”

“It has been a long time since I met others of my kind,” said the taniwha and Malia began to sense a great sadness within it. “As I said, the destruction of our forests has not been kind to us and for all I know I am the last taniwha.”

Malia found this last thing unbearably sad. She looked back to the clearing. “Why are we hiding?” she asked.

“We are not hiding,” grumbled the taniwha. “They are well aware I am here, but I keep out of their way and they out of mine, and it seems to suit us both.”

“Why do you stay out of their way?”

“Questions, questions!” The taniwha paused as if deep in thought. “Like your kind, they have a few incorrect ideas about me. I’ve found it best to stay in

the background. Few creatures will go near a taniwha, even the patupaiarehe.”

“But that’s so sad. If they got to know you like I have I’m sure they would like you.”

The last remark obviously pleased the taniwha. It shivered as it laughed. “Perhaps you are right. Maybe I have been alone in my pool too long. I will think about what you have said.”

Malia studied the figures in the glade. “What are they all looking at?” she asked.

“We forest folk experience time differently to you so perhaps I will speed things up a bit,” said the taniwha, and suddenly she had an odd feeling as if she was somehow moving while staying in one spot.

“Look at the centre of the clearing,” it said.

At first she could see nothing, but soon a small piece of green thrust its way out of the ground and uncurled quickly but smoothly into a small plant that grew taller as they watched.

“That’s amazing! How did you do that?” cried Malia.

“When you are almost as old as the land itself you learn a few tricks,” laughed the taniwha. “If you know how, you can play with time like a child plays with mud, using your mind in place of hands.”

“What is it?”

“It is a young kauri tree, one of the most precious inhabitants of the forest, starting out on its long journey to old age. Of course all this takes many years but you folk don’t have the patience we do. I am showing you a version of what may come to be.” The taniwha looked proudly at the small plant and Malia

noticed that in fact all the creatures gathered there were engrossed in its changes.

“Why is it such a big deal?” she asked.

“New life is always a big deal, whether it is a mighty kauri or a tiny toadstool,” explained the taniwha in a voice hushed with wonder. “Of course patupaiarehe can’t be there to witness the beginning of all new life but the kauris are afforded a special respect. They are the wisest things in the land. No matter how often I see this it always moves me. It is the birth of a new life and although it is happening all over the forest the patupaiarehe treat it as a wondrous thing. It may seem like just a tree to you but it will outlive you and your children and your children’s children. It may even still be here once your civilization has passed into memory.”

“But it’s just a plant.”

“It is life and therefore it is special. Sometimes we lose sight of that but there will always be moments that remind us.”

Malia was beginning to understand why the taniwha had shown her this.

“Your parents are involved with the introduction of a new life into their world, and they don’t mean to ignore you. Bear with them and I am sure they will remember the wonderful thing they already have,” it said.

She looked thoughtful. Certainly it was hard work caring for a new baby, and it was kind of neat having a younger brother. Perhaps she herself had ignored the amazing thing before her. Suddenly a new life did seem to be quite a big deal. If even a small plant was precious, how special must a baby brother be?

Malia felt a sudden desire to be home. It almost seemed she had been away for weeks, though she was sure it could only have been a few hours. “I think I’d like to go back now,” she said.

The taniwha trembled in a way that Malia took to be it nodding its head, and turned to begin walking down another trail. She was sure the path had not been there before, but nothing about this place seemed fixed or certain. She followed the taniwha away from the clearing and down the dark path. Again she had the feeling she was doing more than just walking down a track, and it was not long before they stood at the edge of the pool where she first met the taniwha.

It turned to look at her and she could see what she took to be an expression of sadness on its face. “Do you really have to go?” it asked. “It seems as if you have only just arrived. I could show you so many things – whole worlds contained within a single droplet, lands where even the flowers and trees sing the beauty of each morning and discarded dreams fall in sparkling showers. I could take you to the spaces between leaves and under the bark where only flat people can go, show you how to dance on the wind and sing with the sun.” It seemed to be quite delighted with the idea, getting more and more excited. “I could teach you the secrets of the forest and show you its heart, bathe you in its blood until you feel every cell of your body afire with life.” Suddenly it stopped and looked sheepish. “I am as old as the forest and yet as naïve as spring buds. It is of course almost time for you to leave, and you have your own life to be going back to. But I do get so terribly lonely here.”

“I suppose I should be getting back,” said Malia, feeling suddenly homesick but also sad for the taniwha. She thought it must be awful to think you are the last of your kind, and felt lucky to have people that loved her and a place to call home. “I wish I could stay, but my family will be getting worried about me. You have shown me so much though, and I will always remember you.”

“I will show you just one more thing,” said the taniwha, and after a brief walk that seemed far too short considering how far she had come in, they found themselves at the edge of the forest, looking down on the farmland stretching away across the plains below. Farmhouses and cows dotted the pastures, and smoke rose from chimneys.

“What do you want to show me?” she asked.

“Listen.”

“To what?”

“To the wind, the trees and to the land,” said the taniwha mysteriously.

Malia listened and could hear nothing. She was just about to give up when a stillness seemed to grow inside her and she stopped her thoughts and waited to hear what it said. She was sure she could feel the deep age of the forest around her, stretching back over the years, but the land and people below felt much younger, and much more restless.

“The bush feels like a very old thing,” said Malia. “It looks down on the farms and feels a little afraid of them.”

“Very good,” nodded the taniwha. “The forest has much to teach those who would listen to it, but your people seem like children, playing happily but

oblivious to what is going on around them. They live so fast and so desperately they miss the things they would see if they just slowed down and took the time to listen as you have. Sometimes even children can be destructive without knowing what they are doing.”

“I think I want to go home now,” said Malia, feeling she was slipping ever deeper into a pleasant but strange dream-world. “My parents will be missing me.”

“Of course,” said the taniwha, and when she next looked round she could see a familiar track leading down to her town and home.

“Thank you – I won’t forget you,” she said and she gave the taniwha a huge hug, wrapping her arms around its trunk and laying her face in a mat of moss that felt like fur. It spluttered and gurgled with glee.

“I think you should talk to the patupaiarehe. I’m sure they won’t be afraid of you if you give them a chance,” she told it.

“Maybe you are right. I will try to get away from my pool more. You have taught me much also young Malia. And you will teach much to your new brother.”

“Yes, I think I’m looking forward to it now.”

“You are always welcome here in the forest,” said the taniwha with a gleam in its eye. “Come back and visit me. You don’t know the loneliness of a creature as ancient as the forest and as wise as time.” It paused and then spoke more softly. “But you have your own life to live of course, and I must be alone with the forest, as is my calling. Just listen to the wind and the sea and the stars once in a while and remember the taniwha.”

“I will,” said Malia, looking down towards her home, “I promise.” But when she looked around again the taniwha was gone and all she could hear was its gentle sighing, or was it the wind in the trees?

Sadly she walked back to her bike and cycled home as night began to fall. She wondered if it was the first night since she had left or the second; somehow it was hard to tell. Time seemed to have moved in a different way within the forest. As she neared home she saw her mother and father waiting. They looked worried and close to tears.

“Where have you been – we were crazy with worry?” sobbed her mother, giving her a big hug, and even her father looked shaken.

“I’m sorry – I got lost in the bush,” she said, hoping the explanation would do.

Her mother gave her a tearful look. “Well don’t go there alone again. We couldn’t bear it if something happened to you. Come on, we’ll get you cleaned up. Look at the state of you.”

Malia felt a warm glow as her parents led her inside. Perhaps it was enough to know they cared without needing to be shown it all the time and certain sacrifices had to be made when a new person entered the family. As she looked at the tiny bundle in the cot on the porch she decided it was pretty neat to have a baby brother after all. Besides, Siali would need a big sister to show him the ways of the world and maybe even teach him how to listen to the wind.

After that Malia never ran away again, and she began to enjoy the responsibility of being a big sister. Her dad found time occasionally to throw a ball around and she did learn to weave from her mother. She was

never able to find that particular path into the forest again, until she began to doubt she had ever met the taniwha at all. This is usually the case with children who have met taniwha or patupaiarehe, once they grow into adults. But then Malia had much more important things to think about like boys and exams, so that if you asked her today about the taniwha she would laugh and tell you how cute kids can be with the games they play.

But with a twinkle in her eye maybe.

## The Search for Truth

The search for truth began on a hilltop in central Turkey, on a day that was hot and dusty. It was conducted by a little girl named Fatima. She lived with her father and sisters in the town of Goreme, famous for the many strangely-shaped rock towers that some call “fairy chimneys”. People had been carving out caves from the soft rock for hundreds of years to use as their homes. In some places there were so many towers they looked like an army of misshapen titans frozen in place.

Fatima had often been told about holy men and women who, through years of spiritual discipline, discovered many truths. Although she was not quite sure what sorts of truths they might be, she decided she would really like to find one for herself.

She went to her father, who was busy mending a cart wheel and asked him, “Father, where can I find the truth?”

“The truth about what?” he replied.

Fatima thought for a while. “Well I suppose the truth about all things. I’m not really sure, but I think I will know it when I find it.”

Her father thought carefully as well. "I don't know many truths except that I am old and my daughter asks many questions. But I have heard the truth may be found in the stars, and that it strikes like a blinding light from above."

That night Fatima slept with her sisters on the flat roof of their simple house, wrapped in a blanket, and watched the stars awhile. Although she saw a shooting star and thought the shimmering ocean of tiny lights had an awesome and almost frightening beauty, she did not feel particularly blinded, and did not seem to know any great truths. She decided to ask at the local mosque where people went to have many of their questions answered.

She headed there later that morning, the way shown by a minaret rising as a tall spire above the houses, competing with the rock towers around it. In a cool, quiet room was a woman deep in prayer and when she finished and looked up Fatima asked, "Excuse me, but where can I find the truth?"

"All truths are to be found in the pages of our holy book," said the woman. "Look inside and you will find your answers."

That evening Fatima took her family's treasured copy of the Koran and looked through its pages. She did not yet know how to read so she turned it upside down instead and shook it. No truths fell out. She did not know what one might look like but felt sure she would recognize it when she saw it.

The next day Fatima was walking in a nearby valley collecting firewood. It was filled with tall, mushroom-shaped pillars and high cliffs with many caves. She thought some of the cliffs looked as if the rocks had

melted and oozed down like treacle before setting again in strange shapes. She could imagine some were waves frozen in place or even enormous, soft blobs of Turkish delight. She had almost given up the idea of ever finding the truth.

She noticed an old woman sitting near a cave, leaning against a stick. She had a wrinkled, thin face and looked so wise and so at peace Fatima decided she must know at least one or two good truths.

“Please, where can I find the truth?” asked Fatima.

“Ah, so young to be a seeker,” said the woman with her eyes twinkling. “The truth is to be found within,” and she tapped the young girl on the chest with her stick, before heading off into the bushes after a stray goat.

Within what? Fatima was even more confused than before. There were many caves in the valley, and people had once lived there. Perhaps they had left some truths lying about. Was that what the old woman meant by “within”?

Fatima spent an hour looking inside some caves but all she found were the bones of a dead goat and some plastic bottles left by thoughtless tourists. The old woman had tapped Fatima on the chest when she said “within” but Fatima knew from school that inside her chest were the heart and lungs and other gross things keeping her alive. That didn’t seem to be what she was looking for.

She went back home and talked to her sisters but they were of little help. One said the truth was to be found in silence, but though Fatima went for a whole hour without speaking (with great effort) she felt no wiser. The other had said dreams held truths, but the

only dream she remembered was one of a giant Turkish delight. It made her feel very hungry but just as confused.

She sat on the steps of her house feeling disappointed and frustrated. She was no closer to knowing what a truth looked like and did not think she would ever find one. Instead she became absorbed in watching the activities of the insects and birds in the dust at her feet and around the front of her family's house. She had not really taken the time to study them before and the more she watched the more fascinated she became. A whole world of life and death, struggle and work went on in the small area before her. Birds searched for insects and two beetles fought a battle with each other. A fly was laying eggs on a dead lizard and young spiders were hatching out of a silky cocoon. In an area of plants that had died in the heat weeds were sprouting up to take their place. It seemed that while there was death all around her it was constantly replaced by new life in an endless cycle. Her father was busy feeding chickens nearby and noticed his daughter engrossed in the performance before her.

"You're very quiet over there. What is it you are looking at so intently?" he asked.

Fatima suddenly realized she was being spoken to, and felt like she had just awoken from a long dream. "Oh Father, I never noticed before that there is so much life here at my feet. It seems everything dies but is reborn again like a wheel that never stops turning."

Her father laughed. "It sounds to me like you have just discovered a truth after all," he said.

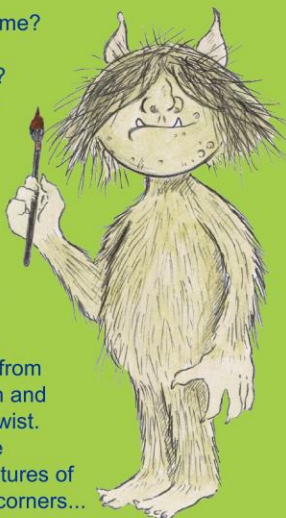
“Is that the truth?” asked Fatima, suddenly realizing her father was right.

“Well a small part of it I’m sure,” her father said, “but it sounds to me like you are well on the way my daughter. Happy searching.” He returned to scattering food for hungry hens and their chicks.

Fatima walked to a nearby hilltop to think, looking down on the valley as the sun set and softened the hills to a warm, yellow colour. The many fairy chimneys were silhouetted in the sun’s last light and looked like countless fingers sticking up from the valley floor below as if dozens of giants were trying to push their way through from underground. She decided she would never take the world around her for granted again. The people she asked had all been right. The answers she sought were to be found everywhere – in the sky and the earth, in the writings of wise people and holy books and inside herself. She had all the tools she needed.

The search for Truth began on a hilltop in central Turkey on an evening that was still and cool ...

How did "Billy of the Flies" get his name?  
Where did the mysterious creature  
washed up on the beach come from?  
What would it be like if you woke up  
one morning to find that no one  
recognised you?  
And why have you never heard of  
Leonardo da Vinci's  
greatest masterpiece –  
*The Madonna and Chicken?*



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