

So, do you know any stories?

Me?

Do you see anybody else around here?

Okay well, yeah, everyone knows some stories. Who doesn't?

Okay then tell one.

Right now?

Yeah, that's what people do around campfires right? They tell stories.

Do they?

I think so, or at least that's what they do in the movies.

What kind of stories?

Usually funny ones, or scary ones, something like that.

Hm, I'm not much good at those.

Well then what kind of stories are you good at?

I don't know. I don't know any stories that I can just tell, I only know ones that you have to read.

Why don't you just tell one of those then?

That's not how it works.

Okay fine, just make one up then, you're good at that right?

That's also not how it works.

Just do what you would do if you were writing a story, but instead of writing it, say it out loud. You don't even have to worry about spelling.

...

Come on just try it.

Okay well, um, once upon a time—

I've already heard this one.

Shut up.

...

Once upon a time, there were two friends sitting around a campfire on a warm summer night, and one of them asked the other one to tell them a story.

Hey, you're supposed to make it up!

I am.

No you're not, you're just describing us right now.

Okay fine. Once upon a time, there were two friends sitting around a campfire on a crisp autumn night.

I'll accept it.

And one of them starts telling a story. The story goes: 'Once upon a time, there were two friends sitting around a campfire—

I'm going to stab you with this roasted marshmallow.

—on a cold winter night, and one of them starts telling a story. Except this friend doesn't know any stories by heart, at least not any made-up stories, so they have to make it up as they go, from bits and pieces of other stories, real stories they've lived or made-up ones they've heard. And so this story goes:

'Once upon a time, there was a boy who still slept with his mother even though he was old enough that most of his friends at school slept on their own already. He can never explain it to his mom, why he still can't sleep on his own, why he comes running to her room after ten minutes every time he builds up the courage to even try sleeping on his own. He knows that she can't see the monsters in the closet, nor the one that guards the little bit of hallway between his room and his mom's. How it lunges at him out from the shadows of the stairwell and just barely misses his heels as he slams the door shut. He knows that she can't see them because they don't exist. But no matter how many times he tells himself that they don't exist, a small, childish part of him still believes that they do. He doesn't try to explain any of this to his mother, she doesn't mind the company anyway (in fact, one day when the boy has grown up and moved away, the mother thinks of all these sleepless nights and wishes those monsters had never left his mind at all). And so he lays there wide awake, tossing and turning, and his poor mother who needs to wake up for her work tomorrow squeezes him tight so that he stops moving, but he wriggles and squirms and still can't fall asleep.

'Tell me a story mom,' he whispers while breaking free from her legs, 'maybe then I'll fall asleep.'

'Okay, okay, promise me you will?'

'I promise.'

'Alright, here goes.'

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

'Once upon a time, there was a girl who belonged to a poor family near a small town. She lived with her two younger sisters and both her parents. Her father worked from dawn until dusk and she can't even remember ever seeing what he looked like. By the time he got home, the whole family was asleep and, by the time everybody was awake, he had already left for the day. Her mother took care of the three of them but she only barely managed. Every day the roof leaked a little more and the pantry got a little bit emptier.

What seemed quite inevitable finally happened one bleak midwinter when the mother fell ill and could only lay in bed. The oldest of the three daughters was not much older than you, but she had already started taking on more and more of the work around the house and taking care of her two little sisters. With her mother in bed and her father at work, no longer making enough to feed even one hungry mouth, the oldest sister had no choice but to go out and see what she could do to help. So she put on her thickest sweater and her warmest boots and headed out towards the town.

She had been walking through the snow for nearly half the day and the sky was starting to dim when she finally encountered another person. The man was walking the opposite direction, huffing out of a pipe whose smoke mingled with his frozen breath. He hauled a large sack on his back.

‘Excuse me sir, do you know where I could find some work?’ she asks him.

‘What’s a girl like you doing out here looking for work?’

‘Well, my mother is very ill and I have to feed my two younger sisters. Please, we’re very hungry.’

‘Ah, I see. Well, I’m sorry I can’t do much to help you. I’ve my own family to feed. But here, take these matches. Maybe you can sell them at the market to buy some food.’

She thanks him earnestly and takes the matchbox, three matches left inside, and she heads into town where she might be able to sell them.

By the time she reaches the market, it was already quite dark and the market was closed. Everyone had gone inside to their cozy homes. Most of the people she runs into are hurrying back inside and uninterested in her matches. One little boy, no more than five or six, comes up to her and asks her:

‘Excuse me Miss, could you spare a match please?’

She looks at him curiously, his nose is running and his lips are blue.

‘Our fireplace has gone out and we’ve nothing to start it with.’

And the boy leads her back to his house which is a bit of a ways away from the centre of town and even farther from home. Maybe they’ll trade some food for the matches, she thought to herself. At the boy’s house, she waits at the doorstep and a kind lady opens the door a crack and lets the boy in but not her.

‘I’m sorry Miss, last time we let a stranger in he stole our matches and all our food.’

‘Oh that’s terrible, I’m very sorry.’

‘That’s quite alright, it’s not like you’re the thief.’

‘Yes of course, but I’m still quite sorry to hear that. Here, I’ve only got three but I guess you can have one.’

The girl handed her a match and a piece of the matchbox to strike it with. The lady thanked her earnestly before closing the door. The girl now only had two matches but it made her feel a little bit warmer to have helped the boy and his family.

Now the girl had to find her way back home, empty-handed except for the two remaining matches that she had gotten from the man. It was dark already and she was quite positively lost. The moon was hidden somewhere up above all the thick clouds. Here and there, little spots of light from the distant houses' windows flickered dimly and a very faint glow could be seen from the smoke of their chimneys. She picked one distant house that she thought was in the right direction to go back home and she made her way towards it.

It took a long time to get there, but when she finally did, she peeked through the window to see who was inside. There was another family in there, a mother, a father, one boy and one girl, sitting around a table enjoying a whole roast turkey. The walls of the house flickered warmly with the crackling fireplace. Curly wisps steamed off of the turkey as they cut into it. She liked to imagine that the boy and his family back in town were warm at least because she gave them the match. Maybe not enjoying a big feast like this family was, but crowded around the fireplace telling stories to distract from their rumbling stomachs. Or sleeping soundly in bed, that would be nice. She lost herself in these thoughts for a minute before remembering that her own family may have run out of matches and food too and were probably huddled together in front of the unlit fireplace for warmth right now. Her house was not too far now, so, she journeyed on.

She was very tired, she felt like falling asleep, right there in the snow. She couldn't feel her fingers. Two matches, that was all she had. She could afford to use one, just to keep her awake, remind her what warmth felt like. And so she struck one of the matches and watched, mesmerized, at the brilliant light that lit up her face. She let it burn nearly all the way down to her fingers which felt so warm for those fleeting seconds of heat. And then it was gone, and it felt even colder still as she continued on her way back home.

She walked and she walked for what felt like an eternity until she felt like she absolutely could not go on any longer. She felt that she must have been very close to home though, she was almost certain that this was where it should have been. Yet there was no light from any windows nor smoke from a chimney. If only she had a bit of light she could see if the house was there, and so, quite reluctantly, she reached for the final match with her numbly frozen fingers and struck the match against the coarse side of the matchbox, only, the head of the match snapped, and it tumbled unceremoniously into the snow. The girl in the pitch blackness felt the matchstick snap and was paralyzed by the realization. She stood there a while, staying very still and not knowing what to do. Strangely enough, though, after standing out there in the cold for so long and holding her broken matchstick, she began to feel quite warm inside. A very pleasant kind of warmth that started in the centre and spread slowly, slowly outwards until it consumed her whole body. And feeling this comforting warmth at last, the girl laid down in the snow and went to sleep.

The End.'

'That was a sad story.'

‘No it wasn’t.’

‘Did the girl reach her home at the end?’

‘I don’t know, maybe, it was too dark to tell.’

‘Did she die?’

‘She just went to sleep is all.’

‘They must have found her there outside the next morning right?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Who stole the boy’s stuff?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where did you get this story from?’

‘I made it up.’

‘Why did you make it up so sad?’

‘Look, you promised me you’d go to sleep.’

‘I thought you’d tell me a happy story.’

‘I did, now hush, good night.’

‘...’

‘...’

‘Mom?’

But Mom had already turned over and gone to sleep.

The boy couldn’t sleep even more now because his mind was racing, wondering what had happened to the poor girl who went to sleep in the snow. But only because he promised, and because he knew that mother had work tomorrow, he stayed totally, perfectly still. It was snowing outside, he could tell, by the slowly falling fluttering shadows on the wall opposite the window. He laid there with his eyes wide, staring at the ceiling, and on it he could see the girl, not much older than himself, fighting off the wind and the biting cold while trudging through snow that came up to her knees. And he saw the girl laying very still, just like himself, in the unlit snow. And he wondered what happened to her. And he imagined himself in the story now, not much younger than her. He sees himself wading through the snow that comes up to his waist,

I’ve got my red winter hat on that my grandmother had knit for me. With one mittened hand I wave at the falling goosedown in front of me. With the other mittened hand, I drag my trusty toboggan with me. The clouds have cleared up just enough that there’s a bit of moonlight coming through and I can see her there. She’s curled up in a girl-shaped hole in the snow that’s already starting fill again.

I grab her by the shoulders and shake her. ‘Hey, wake up!’

She opened her eyes slowly.

‘Oh my god, you’re alive.’

‘What do you mean, of course I’m alive, why would you imagine me dead?’

‘Um, I dunno.’

‘Wait, who are you?’

‘I’m here to save you!’

‘Well I don’t need to be saved.’

‘But you would have frozen to death if you had stayed there!’

‘I just went to sleep is all, just like you should be. And now you’ve kept both of us up’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I guess I should just go back to sleep then.’

‘No, no, it’s fine. I don’t think I can fall back asleep now.’ She pointed at my toboggan.
‘What’s that for?’

‘Oh, I was going to put you in that and take you somewhere warm.’

She laughed as she heard this. ‘That’s silly, where would you even take me?’

‘Um, I dunno. Somewhere warm, I guess. We haven’t got that far yet.’

‘Here, I know a place,’ and she gestured for me to pass her the rope to the toboggan.

‘Huh, you’re not quite how I imagi—whoa!’ She flung me onto the deck and started running, dragging me along with her. It was strange how effortless it became. The clouds had disappeared so the moon was in full view and the dunes of snow and drooping tree branches that once seemed so treacherous looked beautiful now, surreal in the way of a winter morning you wake up after the first big snowfall. The scenery sped past as she ran in the snow that seemed to lift her up with every step rather than letting her sink. Eventually, the ground ahead seemed to drop off and I couldn’t see what was beyond it. Before she got to the edge, she grabbed the nose of the toboggan and swung herself up onto it, landing seated in the spot in front of me.

‘Hold on tight!’ she commanded.

I complied as hard as I could.

The world sped past faster than ever now. Everything became a moonlit blur except for the moon itself, which watched from the same spot as always. I thought maybe the moon grew a face and winked at me, or maybe that was just one of a million snowflakes that kept running into my eyes. We kept getting faster and faster and I had no idea how we were ever going to stop. Up ahead, I began to see that the hill ended in a sheltered clearing. I still didn’t see how we were going to stop and was thinking hard about the problem when she, just before we got to the clearing, stuck one foot in the snow and pulled hard on the rope so that the whole sled was turned sideways, spraying up big clouds of powder. The last thing I remember from this part was flying through the air, thinking to myself, ‘huh, that’s a neat way to stop.’

I woke up in a boy-shaped hole in the snow, a girl was shaking me by the shoulders telling me to wake up. I did, albeit quite confused.

‘Hey, you’re awake!’

‘Wha—who are you?’

‘I’m here to save you!’ she laughed.

‘Oh, really?’ I rubbed my eyes and saw her wearing my hat, then I remembered everything that had happened. ‘I was, uh, I was just sleeping.’

‘Right, maybe hold on tighter next time. And do you want your hat back?’ She gestured twenty feet away where there were two tents set up and a campfire. “It landed way over there.’

‘How did you—’

‘I come here often.’

I noticed the tree-stump with the axe still sticking out of it and the tiny wooden shed full of firewood and some food. The firepit had a ring of rocks neatly placed around it and there was a log next to the fire with the snow brushed off.

I got up and followed her to the campfire. I sat down beside her on the log. We both stared at the fire for a while, wordlessly. It crackled and popped but never seemed to die down. The night wasn’t so cold anymore, it felt just right sitting here by the fire, like a warm summer night. It took me a while to think of what to say but I was quite proud of myself when I finally did.

He turns from the fire to look at her flickering face and asks,

So, do you know any stories?