

A girl was once born to an unhappily married couple living in a small home next to the woods. She enjoyed being the only child for only a few forgotten years until a little brother was born. And then a year after that, an even littler sister. The eldest sister, despite her own youth, cared most patiently for her younger siblings. She routinely washed and changed them, cooked and fed them, to the extent that the parents naturally grew unconcerned with their parental duties. They spent little time at home. If they were at home, it was most likely in sleep, or else quarreling over matters the children could not understand.

This life was not made easy for the eldest sister, the two little ones were difficult to look after. They seemed to her just about spoiled by her own unconditional care. They picked at their supper and would always find ways to blame her for why it was inedible. They were always up to all sorts of trouble inside and outside the home. They cried unbearable cries when they did not have their way. And sometimes, when her patience nearly ran out, she would threaten to leave them and never come back. Then the children would look at her with such fatally pleading eyes that she would immediately feel awful for even having thought of abandoning them, and come up with all sorts of excuses for their behaviour to rationalize her sympathy. They were still so young after all. Were we not all a bit foolish when we were young?

She was initially excited by the thought of meeting other children her age, people who she could enjoy the company of as equals. Yet, when it came time for her to go to school, she found herself all alone once again. The people at school turned out not to be so different from those at home. The teachers acted like her parents, assuming that they understood her without actually and always preaching about matters they did not understand. Her peers were no different

from her younger siblings, so care-free and thoughtless. When the boys fought over a ball or a rule on the playground, or the girls cried over a minor bruise, she could not help but sigh. She sighed with the sinking realization that she would not be understood among these peers. She sighed too for a secret envy that the greatest of their worries was so small as a point in kickball or a scrape on the knees.

This inarticulable solitude she would have to carry with her on the long, cold walk home along the border between civilization and the vast boreal forest. Here, staring into its hypnotic depths, her only comfort was the fantasy that one day she would run away into that forest and never return. So it went that every day she would daydream her way home. The trance only interrupted by the familiar sight of home where she would once again be bound by endless chores.

Many years went by like this. Troubled at school, no less at home. Caught in the merciless tide of constantly being brought to the verge of giving it all up, only to be brought back by the children's tugging at her tired heart. And those brief flashes of parental joy, the ones that nearly filled her eyes with tears and the air with the two children's delighted laughter, those moments were too few and far between long days of thankless labour. The occasional times she had no choice but to discipline the children, it made her silently furious to hear them cry that their own lives were unjust, that they were the victims of her injustice and not the other way around. All the while, their actual parents seemed too engrossed in their own spousal crises to give a damn.

As the children grew older, the responsibilities she was tasked with only grew greater. By the time that her mother and father had a fight so violent that they broke all the dinnerware she could hardly afford to replace, and then separately stormed off never to be seen again, it did not even matter to her where

they went or if they came back. She only put her head down and bore all the weight that she was determined stoically to carry. She stopped going to school, pricked her fingers on the roses she grew to sell to the florists in town, patched leaks in the roof to keep out the rain and snow, mended the boy's clothes that he carelessly tore playing with other boys at school, braided the young girl's hair who wanted to impress her friends too, passed her days wondering what it would be like, among the trees, where perhaps she too could be a child, not a care in the world.

One particularly harsh winter, she set out to town with many bundles of camellias to sell.

She dreaded having to cut them from her snow-covered garden because their defiant pinks were a most comforting sight amidst the snow-white sea. These were the only flowers that would grow during such hostile months. She admired that about them.

Perhaps if she had heard the word in town of the impending snowstorm, she would have left them in her garden for a while longer. Instead, she found herself watching her own frozen breath get picked up by the wind and carried away into the flurry. A sudden gust nearly knocked her over but managed still to send the camellias scattering across. Struggling to keep her heading against the wind, not even able to see the two unmitten hands out in front of her, she stumbled off the gravel trail and into the depths of the woods, where, exhausted from the fight against it all, she collapsed in the deepening snow.

So very tenderly, the snow blanketed her, tucked her in. She felt so warm here, for once, at rest.

She awoke to the call of chickadees and robins. It felt, strangely, as if the weight of the world had come off her

shoulders. All the snow had melted to give way to lush green. She heard a creek nearby. She was curled up just as she had fallen asleep, except now loosely covered in soft loam and fallen pine needles.

She got up and brushed herself off. She crouched by the creek and drank from it. In the clearing by the creek, she looked up and saw that she was at long last where she had always dreamed to be. All around, the trees watched over her. Hemlocks, firs, cedars, standing tall and only swaying so very gently. She returned the trees a reverence that she had never before in her life felt toward anybody. These trees were not like anybody she had ever known, for they were far wiser. They did not cry nor complain. They saw and understood everything, passed no judgment, offered only their wordless wisdom. These trees, after all, had stood here, watching, for decades longer than all the people she knew and loved and hated, and would be there for decades more after those people had all died.

'Go on then, go play with your friends,' the trees whispered to her.

And so she did. She ran and ran through the endless forest. She flung off her jacket, kicked off her boots, and splashed about in the creek. She tried to catch the little salmon fry in her hands, marvelled at their frantic motions, and released them again. She spied on the grey heron preening by a marsh. She climbed a very tall Redcedar and saw what the tree saw, how beautiful it was from way up there. She saw how it all was, how every mountain, tree, animal, insect, fern, moss, drop of water, went about its own little way. And she saw how it all fit together, each living, breathing, flowing thing so concerned with its own direction, formed something so much bigger that it never even realizes.

She saw herself as a speck of pigment who knew only her own colour, but who, by some chance gust of wind, found herself blown off the canvas to see what picture it was that she was only a small part of, and oh how much more beautiful it all looks from here.

She climbed back down Redcedar having gained the tree's perspective, and was immediately drawn back to the worldly joys of chasing squirrels, waving around horsetail, and picking ripe salmonberries. She made a habit of climbing trees to steal their perspectives whenever she felt that she had forgotten her place, and every time, she would come back to the ground with a refreshed conscience with which she could go about her play.

Every night, she let the trees bury her in a bed of loam and pine needles. While the trees kept watch, she fell asleep to their thousand hushed lullabies.

She forgot how many weeks or months she passed like this, only that, after a while, the weather began to chill once more. The salmon had already gone out to the ocean and come back to spawn, filling the air with the scent of their decomposing. The few maples and oaks had begun turning yellow and red. These days, the loam and pine needles were not enough to keep her warm at night. And she awoke against frozen eyelashes to the squawk of crows who had gathered to peck out dead salmon's eyes. She knew she could not stay, the trees told her as much.

'Where shall I go?' she asked an especially wise-looking Douglas Fir.

'Come, take a look,' Douglas Fir said.

So she climbed up Douglas Fir as high as any squirrel could. She saw, shimmering by the setting sun, that this creek drained into a great river which flowed between the great

mountains and out over the horizon. She knew exactly what to do.

That night, Douglas Fir let her fall asleep right there in the branches.

The next morning, she woke up and climbed down.

'Thank you,' she told the wise Douglas Fir, who swayed in return.

She went on her way, following the creek downstream for many miles, hearing the great river's rapids grow very gradually louder. When she reached the river at last, she was once again at a loss as to what to do. The trees here were of little help, they only swayed to and fro. She was quite cold and hungry by now, so she sat very still on a rock by the river, wondering how she would ever get home.

Beaver saw the girl sitting on this rock very sadly and decided to help her. So, Beaver found a fallen cedar and carved a canoe and paddle out of it. The girl was delighted when she saw this and thanked Beaver. She tried with all her strength to push the canoe into the water, not making much progress. Too weak to help much, Beaver did a little Beaver-dance and left. Alone again, she kept pushing as hard as she could but hardly moved it an inch. She grew tired after trying for hours and eventually fell asleep.

She woke up, startled, to the nudging of one Coyote and one Blacktail Deer. She was afraid at first, but this fear did not last long, for Coyote and Deer began together to push the canoe towards the river. With the girl's help, they moved it steadily into the current. They all hopped on the moving canoe except for Deer who grabbed a mouthful of thimbleberries before leaping on with them. Coyote, not about to be outdone, watched patiently over the side of the canoe for a while before managing to catch a rainbow trout in his mouth. Coyote looked very proud of himself.

Coyote and Deer watched dutifully, steering the canoe as needed. The landscape began to look strangely familiar. The sun was already setting again, but she felt, somehow, gradually warmer. The river came to a wide area where the current slowed down and no boulders broke the water's surface. If they kept going here, they would eventually see where all the mountains' runoff emptied into the great big ocean, but Coyote and Deer guided the canoe to the rocky shore instead. It had been a long journey for the girl, so Coyote helped put her on Deer's back and, together, they walked on away from the river.

The trees here seemed to recognize her, she felt warmer still. Eventually, the three of them came upon a small house next to the road that led back to civilization. The house glowed a warm, fiery glow through the front window and its billowing chimney. There were already tracks in the snow that led to a sled leaned against the wall next to the front door. The girl got off of Deer. Coyote opened the front door. Deer walked in. Coyote followed Deer and looked back, as if to invite the girl in as well. The girl walked in and sat down next to the fireplace.

Her brother comes over with a bowl of warm oatmeal. He still has his boots on. Her sister comes up behind her and wraps a blanket around her. Over there, her winter clothes have been hung up to dry. The camellias have been gathered into a bundle again and are sitting neatly next to them. She notices the fire dying down, so she puts down the oatmeal to reach for the stoker, but the sister grabs it first and tends the fire herself. The brother throws in another log and the fire crackles in response. She watches the hot ashes rise. The brother and sister both watch carefully how the fire reflects in their older sister's tired eyes. Outside, it's still snowing.

She turns to their flickering faces and asks, 'So, do you know any stories?'