

Gently Down the Stream

I woke up, and I was in bed...I was in bed...but not my bed, I could tell. Oh, you know how I'm a bit of a mess. Here, everything was so clean and so white, like...like a hospital. Some place for the sick. It was funny, because I didn't feel sick. Something must have happened before. Before, but I didn't remember. So I kind of sat up in the bed, not my real bed, and I could see rows of beds like mine, and there were girls like me in them, either lying down, maybe just waking, or sitting up like I was. They were all about my age, too.

Hmm. Exactly what age would that be? I suppose just old enough to be "in between," you know? Either still living at home with their parents or out on their way to start their own family.

And all around, like they were hung from the ceiling, were these sheets of things. Wide, large sheets like you were hanging out the wash, except they weren't any one color or even just a pattern, but they did have patterns on them, except they kept shifting about, like people were drawing crazy things on them and then wiping them away and starting over again. I can't really describe them, I couldn't make any sense of it.

But I do remember one thing, and that was the nurse. Or I suppose she was a nurse. She was old but somehow didn't seem it, or young and didn't seem it, but her face was kind or sad or both, and she sat down next to me and said that I had to pick my color. She said that that was what all the girls waking up were here to do. And those sheets all around started making all different colors, reds and blues and deep greens and

colors you can't even imagine. And I asked her what were the colors for, and she said that they colored your aura. They gave you a tone for how you moved in the world, like how someone playing an instrument gives a tone for the music to follow. And I saw one, it was a deep violet kind of red, and I said "that one," and she smiled, but it was kind of a mysterious smile. And I turned to her and asked her what kind of color that meant. And she said that it meant that I wanted to know things, and I thought that was a pretty good choice.

And then I woke up.

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"In my own bed this time," she said, looking down at the boy of maybe eight as they stood along the main road that ran to mud in late autumn, the rattle of carts as they passed and the smell of horse and hay and firewood in the air. "So what do you think of that, John-john?"

She saw only the round top of his cap, his head hidden under the homespun, but he turned up to look at her and his brown eyes appeared, soft and mild but so like the bold ones of her beloved. She was overcome by the strange hope that her first child would look like him.

"Seems like a strange dream. Do you think figure it's a true one, or a false?" He looked down across the road to where the fields began, the broken stalks drying ragged in the yellow sun. "I liked the bit about the colors. Like bits of rainbows. But the buns are cooling and we should get on."

She bit her lip and shifted her feet. "I know. But first let's do drop by the hatter's. I'd like to look for some ribbons. For tonight."

“And a licorice for me?” John asked.

“To be sure,” she nodded, touching his head lightly. As they went on she asked, “And have you heard from your brother yet? He told me he hoped to be back to see me at the play.”

The boy shook his head. “They haven’t made it back. You know how hunting is. No deer ever kept a calendar. But don’t worry. Aiden’s the truest hunter I know and we won’t go wanting this winter.”

“No, no,” she said. “It’s not that.”

“He’ll be back if he can. Have you ever known him to do different than as he said?”

She smiled, knowing little John was right. At the hatter’s she drifted about, idly fondling colored ribbons for bows, glancing here and there for the flash of golden hair that drew in many of those who looked at hats and never bought. Picking out a licorice piece she asked the old matron, “Charity’s been given the day off, has she?” and then bit her lip a little when the gray head nodded yes, and on it spread what she saw to be a sly smile. She left the two copper pennies staring up from the counter and took the licorice pieces out to John.

The boy skipped along ahead of her and for a while she let her basket swing a little in time with him, smiling as she listened to him hum. Absently she tucked strands of her own dark locks behind her ear, trying not to think of golden hair resting on Aiden’s shoulder, hair that was as hateful to her as it was beautiful.

John-john called from ahead. “We ought to cut through the groves. That cloud looks lonely. There’ll be rain again.”

John-john was right, as he was always right about such things. He could read the sky as well as his brother could read the earth, and as the first few trees closed behind them the sky had lost its yellow and gone gray. There was a chill to the air and she was glad the trees covered them from the rising wind.

It must have been the wind that brought the wisp of firewood smoke to her, and she looked about and for some reason not up but down, glimpsing the little gray trail just before it wavered and dissolved away.

“John-john,” she whispered and waved, catching a gleam through the trees. At the edge of the wood, nestled near a great bumpy root that reached out to the patch of grass of a small glade, was a house only just bigger than John-john’s boot, but all lit with tiny little lights.

“It’s wee folk, John-john,” she whispered. “I haven’t seen any for an age. Maybe when I was young as you.”

She watched while the little man, dressed all in yellow and brown, trundled back to his home. He carried an armload of splintered twigs to keep his fire going, and she could smell the bread baking. John-john came up next to her, still chewing his licorice.

“We could talk to them, you know,” he said. “If you don’t come up on them too sudden they won’t be frightened. They’re very friendly. Aiden said once he filled their troughs from his canteen when it was too dry for dew, and they offered him a drop of honeysuckle wine.”

She shook her head. “It’s all right,” she said. “I don’t want to disturb them. I only want to watch for a while.”

She looked on, curious about their little lives as the door opened and warm light spilled out, and the mother called and tiny children twirled out from the grass like dandelion seeds, back to home and hot suppers, laughing and chasing each other. She watched as they gathered in to sit at table, saying grace and passing thimbles full of steaming stew.

Only when a drop of cold rain touched her head did she straighten from her stoop. She looked up at the dim light seeping through the lattice of branches and wondered how long she had looked in on the little people and sighed.

The gray sky streaked with charcoal rags opened above them as they left the woods and here the ground sloped down in a green swath towards the stream. Standing out against the green, between them and the running water, three or four girls a few years older than John-john were tossing something back and forth to each other, yelling and laughing. But it was a harsh laughing, and she and John hurried to them.

Closer, she could tell that whatever they were tossing about was moving on its own and making little mewling yelps, and the faces of the girls looked dirty and mean.

“What are you children up to?” she called to the girls, and they turned to her with sullen faces and the one who held the thing they were tossing let it fall with a thump to the ground. The girls shrugged and murmured and wrapped their dark weather cloaks around themselves, trotting off without looking back, giggling without joy as they went.

She looked down at what they had dropped. It was furry, curled up in a ball like a cat, and when she reached down she saw that perhaps it was. But there was something very wrong about it.

“Poor thing,” she said, gathering it up to warm it and sooth it. But as her hands went along she felt not only fur but also things slick and plump. She shuddered, and looking closer she could tell the cat-thing was covered by wormlike things the color of its fur. When she plucked at them they pulled at the skin.

She looked at the cat-creature with dismay. “Whatever should we do?” she asked.

John-john looked at the limp thing in her hands, then looked up at her. “We ought to help it. Or put it out of its misery,” he said, pinching one of the sucking worms and pulling. The worm came off, leaving a red, oozing mark. He reached for another, but her hands flinched when the cat-creature whimpered, and she said, “If we pull all these things off she might bleed to death.”

John-john frowned, looking about him, and she saw his eyes light on a stone.

“No,” she said, hugging the thing to her and carrying it down near the stream. She found a hollow and piled up the driest leaves she could for a little nest. “No,” she said again. “We can’t know what’s best to do. So we’ll leave her here. She may yet get better on her own.”

They walked on, the gray rain turning to mist, and she felt an ache in her bones and wondered if she was taking ill. She found herself casting about for a walking stick to lean on, suddenly feeling old and tired, and looked over to John-john. He still skipped along, sucking his teeth for the last licorice taste.

He looked younger than his years. How many years? For a moment she forgot how old he was. Was he eight? Was he six, or four? And how old was she, for that matter? She put her hand to her forehead to check for fever and sighed with relief as the first lamps gleamed yellow in the haze.

Soon the ground dropped away steeply, terraced and laid with white stones smoothed to sit on, and the crescent of the amphitheater opened below them, stepping down to the circular stage set where the stream met the river. In the center of the stage, a man and a woman and a child were speaking over someone lying on a cold slab, but she could not yet hear them. She looked around in a daze, but all the faces seemed unfamiliar, and at last she felt John-john's hand guide her to a seat. She knew it was John-john, but he seemed to be a young man now.

She tried watch but it was a jumble. It seemed to her that the play was already drawing to the close. Had they come too late?

"John-john," she whispered, but then a woman coming down the aisle leaned to her and offered her a slip of paper. She looked down at it and found the program for the play in her hands and looked up to thank the woman. She recognized the face and felt cold, for it was the face of the woman in her dream, the woman from the house of colors. Again she was neither old nor young, neither pretty nor ugly. And all the faces of the women in the audience seemed to be variations on that face, some younger, some older, some pretty, some wise. And all the faces of the men were hidden under hoods.

"Please, ma'am. Have I missed the play?" she said in a hoarse whisper.

The woman shook her head.

"Can you tell me?" she asked.

And the woman said, "It is a very sad play. It is about a young woman who loved a man, and yet she doubts him. In this there are reasons to doubt and reasons to believe, as with everything. She is not unreasonable."

"But he is true?" she asked.

The woman smiled, then nodded. “Yes,” she said. Then she added, “And they marry.”

She swallowed slowly, her mouth dry. “Does she drive him away? Does her doubt... does her doubt make him untrue?”

“No,” the woman said, shaking her head. “No, not at all. They live a life together, they have children.”

“Then...”

The woman looked at her.

“Do to they suffer? Does something awful happen to them?”

“They each suffer in their own way,” said the woman.

She could no longer look at the woman or at the paper or at the stage and so she looked down past the stream and across the river. And there she saw the great house on the hill, the house with wide windows full of many colors.

She gripped the paper in her trembling hands and looked down as her tears stained circles on it, and she saw upon the playlist the name of Aiden and John-John and her own name last of all, looking up to see her own face, paler even than her shroud, lilies resting on her chest. They were lifting her now, she knew to be set to drift upon the water.

She looked at the face of her beloved, she looked at his great grief, unfeigned, vast and true, and now she could see her whole life as one thing.