

Fairy Fingers

The boy skipped through the tall grass of the field, approaching Alice as she knelt to pick some mushrooms. They were long and slender, and ghostly white, almost translucent.

“They don’t look like mushrooms,” said Cash, slightly out of breath from skipping. “They look like worms.”

“They’re called fairy fingers.”

“Why?” said the boy.

Alice took a bite of one, pretending that it was delicious even though it tasted like cardboard.

“Because if you eat one, a fairy will visit you in the night and grant you a wish.”

The boy scrunched his eyebrows together, as if deciding whether or not to believe his aunt.

He took a reluctant bite of the mushroom and spat. He rolled his eyes to Alice and asked, “How much of it do you have to eat?”

“One bite is all it takes.”

“And the fairy will give me a wish?”

“Anything in the world.”

He let out a soft laugh and his face lit up like a jack-o-lantern, a gap in his front teeth where the adults hadn’t yet come in.

“What are you going to wish for?” Alice asked.

“I can’t *tell* you.”

Cash’s mother was undergoing chemotherapy for colon cancer, so Alice temporarily moved into her Tuscan-style house in an outlying suburb of Austin. Alice, like her sister, was divorced, and although not having children made the divorce much cleaner, she regretted never having a brood of her own. Cash was the next best thing, and she spoiled him every chance she got.

Rain clouds rolled across the sky as she watched the boy collect handfuls of fairy fingers into the picnic basket. What amazed her most about Cash was that even though his father had long since abandoned him and his mother’s health was deteriorating, he never got visibly upset or melancholy, as Alice often did. He was an old soul, she would tell him, to which he would only shrug.

During the car ride home a warm, spring rain fell. Alice was about to pull into the driveway when she shrieked. Her sister was standing on the lawn in the pouring rain, wearing nothing but a soaking wet oversized tee shirt, hair matted to her face like river-moss, veins webbed across the back of her legs.

She had been increasing delirious in the previous weeks, fabricating encounters with people who weren't there, hallucinating other people and sometimes animals. Alice supposed this was due to exhaustion, but she had her suspicions that her strange behavior was a product of deeper psychological issues. Whether it was the treatment, or the pain, or the cancer itself, Alice didn't know, but her sister was losing it.

Alice wanted to shield the boy's eyes. Wanted to throw her coat around her sister and make the situation go away. She wished she knew what to say to Cash, that he could not see his mother in this state, a deranged mad-woman standing naked in the rain.

Cash opened the car door and moved slowly through the rain, his every movement careful and decisive. He took off his rain jacket and threw it over his mother's shoulders, then he took her hand and spoke softly to his mother. Her grey eyes examined him, as if seeing him for the first time in years. She looked as though she might stumble as she shuffled behind her son, who guided her by the hand up the concrete walkway and through the front door.

Minutes passed by and the rain poured even harder. The front door opened, spilling red light over the dark, wet concrete. Cash emerged wearing his raincoat, paused, then dashed out to the car. He opened Alice's door and found her with tears streaming down her face. She didn't want him to see her like that, but she couldn't hold it back anymore.

"When she's gone, what are we going to do?" Alice sobbed.

Cash wrapped his thin arms around her. "Everyone's going to be alright," he said.

From the passenger seat he took the picnic basket and peered into it, flashing his devious, jack-o-lantern smile.