

## Chapter 4

### Story Telling

"You had quite a day yesterday, didn't you Susan?" her mother said as she leaned over the edge of her bed, and placed the back of her hand on her forehead. The stormy weather was past, and the morning sun was flooding in her bedroom window. Everything was brightly lit up in her yellow, pink, and white room.

It was a drastically different world from the one she had been dreaming about. In her dream she was in a dark and damp place, with water all around, and she was being comforted by a strange dream creature whose face she couldn't see. She had felt confused about what she should do.

As she woke, she first put the dream from her mind, glad to be able to wake from it, and find herself in her own room, ready to start on a day of familiar activities. But the dream feeling wouldn't completely go away. The fact her mother had come into her room to wake her, which she didn't do anymore, and the look of concern on her face reaffirmed the confused feeling Susan had, a sense of strangeness. As her eyes struggled open a little further, she started to remember enough of what had really happened the day before to give herself a shivering start. She was unsure what she should say to her mother, who was still standing next to her bed, and looked like she expected a reply.

"You should have come home sooner Susan. Didn't you hear the storm approaching? We were very worried about you, especially when it started to pour and you were nowhere in sight. Your father went out in that rain, and looked all around the park for you, then all around the town. Were you hiding somewhere to keep out of the rain?"

"Yes" she said, drowsily, still confused as to what else to say.

"Where were you hiding Susan?"

Honesty was a habit with Susan. "Under the bridge" she replied.

"Under the bridge? Oh my, Susan! Don't you know something awful could have happened to you down there? You could have slipped and fallen into the river. Or you could have run into people you'd rather not meet. Have you gone down under that bridge before, young lady?"

Slowly Susan asked "What kind of people, Mother?"

"Oh, hmmm, oh, well, just the kind of people you'd want to keep away from, I mean men who would be strangers, not from our town, who would be hiding out there so no one would see them. Anyway, do you play under the bridge often young lady? I don't think you should be doing that, because it might not always be safe. Promise

me you'll stay out from under there unless your Dad or I are with you."

"Yes, Momma."

"All right then" her mother said, with a big sigh, and Susan felt relief as she realized that her mother was satisfied for the moment. "Hurry up and get ready for breakfast. I've made your favorite, blueberry pancakes!" And with that, Susan's mother left her bedroom, hurrying downstairs to the kitchen.

Now Susan finally had a moment to ponder what had happened to her the day before, and to think over what to tell her parents. She saw that her mother was not going to take the story of Babu very well. If she was worried about strange men, she probably wasn't going to be very calm about strange trolls. Maybe her father would understand, because he was a physician, and saw lots of strange things every day. Maybe he really knew all about trolls, but had never let on when her grandfather was telling those stories. And with that thought she hurried out of bed, got herself dressed, and ran downstairs to the breakfast table. Or rather, limped quickly downstairs, as her ankle provided a very real reminder of yesterday's events.

Her father was absorbed, as usual, in the morning paper. He read it carefully, from the first page to the last, every morning, as the rest of the family ate their breakfast. Each day he would have exactly two cups of coffee, always getting his second cup before starting in on the sports section. He liked having breakfast every day with his family, but he shared his attention between them and the paper.

However, this morning, when he rose to get his second cup of coffee, he put down the paper on the kitchen counter, and returned to the table without it. Susan squirmed in her chair, because she knew what that meant. He wanted to have a serious discussion with one of them, and she was pretty sure it was going to be her.

"So Susan, how are you feeling this morning?" her father said, with an authentic tone of concern that comforted Susan. Maybe her father would understand. "How does your ankle feel?"

"She's all right Dad, can't you see?" chimed in her brother, as he forked an oversized slice of blueberry pancakes into his mouth, "serves her right for not getting home in time to beat the storm. Got pretty drenched didn't ya Susan?"

"Tom, how do you know what Susan feels like" piped in her little sister Veronica.

Susan's father waited for her siblings to be quiet, and after Susan said "I'm fine Dad" went on with "Your mother says you were hiding under the bridge to keep out of the storm. You know how dangerous that could have been, don't you Susan?"

"Yes father" Susan said, with a sinking heart. She realized it wasn't very likely her

father would want to hear about Babu either.

"Though I'm glad to see you had enough sense to take shelter when the storm began. That bridge is made of mostly stone, so it is safe harbor against lightning, and I dare say it is probably sturdy enough to hold up against a tornado if it had to. Actually, your mother and I were wondering what made you decide to leave the shelter of the bridge when you did, before the storm had really subsided?"

"The river was rising, Dad. It didn't seem like such a good idea to stay under there much longer. I remember what you and Mom told me about flash floods."

"I see." her father said, apparently satisfied. "Well in the future, young lady, you will be more careful about getting home well before any storm breaks out, won't you?"

Slightly stung by her father's reproachful tone, Susan mumbled "Yes father", then after pushing around a few uneaten pancakes on her plate asked "May I be excused?". She was anxious to get away from the breakfast table, to get outdoors, where she could think. And maybe when she was outdoors she would consider going back to the park, to see Babu.

"All right Susan, you may be excused. You won't be going down to the park by yourself for awhile, ok?" her father said.

"But Daddy" she wailed, surprising herself with her own intensity.

"No buts, young lady -- you just had a close call with bad weather, and the stormy season is just starting."

"But I have to go" she said, chewing on her lip. And after an anguish filled pause, "I just have to. I have to."

"And why is that?"

Thinking faster, Susan said "I need to meet a friend there."

"Can't you meet somewhere else?"

"No, we have to meet there."

"Now Susan, you can surely call your friend and agree to meet at their house, or they can meet you over here."

"No, no, we have to meet in the park."

"And do you mind telling me why that is so, young lady?"

Susan couldn't twist out of having to explain why she needed to meet a friend in the park. At first she thought she could just say, ok, she would not go to the park, then worry about what to do next. But her father wanted an answer for why she was so adamant about the park, for he suspected that something else was going on that he didn't know about.

So in an anguished state, still confused by everything that had happened to her in the past day, Susan started in explaining about Babu. Her parents were astounded by the story, to say the least.

First they listened with a sense of humor, trying hard not to chuckle at the amazing fantasy constructed by their story-telling daughter. But after Susan tenaciously defended her story, they decided to discipline her by confining her to her room for the day. At supper that evening she was still sticking by her story, filling it out with more details as she remembered them. They were at first inattentive to this new bout of storytelling, then finally ran out of patience. They put her to bed without her supper, rationalizing that all this story making must stem from some pent-up need for attention. They resolved to do something to improve the situation.

Later that evening, Susan heard a knock on her bedroom door. She was too angry and frustrated to answer it. Too angry and frustrated, that is, until she heard her grandfather's voice call out her name. "Susan, I stole some cookies from the kitchen. Do you want any?"

Susan sprang for the doorknob (her ankle was feeling better all of a sudden), then remembered her foul mood, and stopped short of the door. She knew her grandfather would allow her a moment to pout, and wouldn't leave right away.

"Ok, I guess I'll just go out on the front porch and eat them myself." Susan hurried into the hallway, but her grandfather was already a few steps down the staircase, and she was forbidden to leave her room without permission. She quickly closed the door and ran to her bedroom window, which she flung open far enough to crawl out onto the roof. She made her way over to the edge of the porch roof, then swung down on the climbing ivy that wrapped around an ornate porch column, then scrambled down to the porch swing built for two. In half a minute her grandfather came out through the screen door, and closed the heavy front door behind him, even though a cool breeze would have felt real good in the house that night.

He came over and sat next to Susan, and handed her a cookie. She took it with lots of thanks in her eyes, and started to rock her dangled legs back and forth under the swing. She smiled at her grandfather, all the more happy that he had come to visit her on this day.

"Pretty good climbing for a girl with a bad ankle," her grandfather said as he carefully eyed her. "So Susan, I hear you've been telling quite a story to your Mom

and Dad." He was talking in that gruff suspicious way of his that always made Susan feel free to say whatever she wanted in return. So Susan told him the whole story, starting with her singing down by the river, and the hat blowing away on the river, her twisted ankle, Babu's fear of crossing the bridge, and his overcoming it to carry her to safety.

The story became much richer with the retelling, and her grandfather's attentiveness led her to embellish emotions she remembered. "And its all true," she said, and smiled and pouted at the same time.

Her grandfather's eyebrows shot up, and he tilted his head and stroked his chin with his right hand, with a look of great interest. The look in his eye was as far off as Susan had ever seen. It seemed like he was thinking of something long ago or very far away.

Susan's grandfather had lived up and down the Blue River most of his life, having been born in a little town just north of Stone City. Stone City was the major city located where the Stone River ends its journey, not at the sea, but halfway to the sea in the colder waters of the Blue River.

Farther down the Blue River, near the mouth, sat the almost foreign city of New Delta, a wild and untamed harbor town that sweltered almost year round in the hot sea breezes of the Salton Sea. To the far south, in more temperate climates, were the towns of Plainview and Forestville, separated by less than 10 miles of river. And in-between was the bustling, industrial Stone City, which had become the fastest growing metropolis in the nation by the time Susan was born.

But it was nothing more than a roughhewn river town when Susan's grandfather was born, a place where steamboat pilots and Indians and Indian fighters would share the same tavern, or even the same jug of locally brewed firewater.

"Oh why don't my parents believe me?" Susan finally yelled out, anger and hurtfulness and frustration in her voice. "I really did meet a troll, Grandpa, and he really carried me home after I sprained my ankle during the thunderstorm. I couldn't have walked home by myself."

"Well, I could believe that Susan, I really could. But you have to understand that most adults, like your Mom and Dad, are not likely to believe such stories. So you have to be careful about who you go around telling this to."

"But Mom and Dad told me always tell the truth, Grandpa. Don't you believe in telling the truth? You were the one who told me about trolls in the first place, Grandpa. Weren't you telling the truth?"

With that Susan's grandfather strained his head and neck backwards and fixed his eyes wide open, staring for a moment at nothing, and at everything. Susan had

seen that look before, just the day before actually, when she had peered into Babu's face, as he sat on the rock next to her, when the water was rising, just before he picked her up and carried her over the bridge. Then her grandfather swallowed and gulped once or twice, just like Babu. The stare of his eyes was very intense, and Susan understood he was looking inside himself, not at her or the porch or the night sky.

After a long moment, and one more swallowed gulp, Susan's grandfather finally did look up into the night sky, where a full moon was high enough in the sky to almost disappear behind the porch roof. Then he looked directly into Susan's face, smiled, and with a sigh relaxed, and put his arm around her, leaning back in the porch swing.

"Well, Susan, I wasn't so much telling the truth about trolls, as I was telling a story that someone else swore to me was true. And I heard the story from someone who knew lots of things other people didn't know, things that were really true, so I always thought there was a chance the story about the trolls was true as well. Though all these years I've never seen or heard anything to prove it was anything but a story."

"Who told you about the trolls, Grandpa?" Susan asked as she shifted excitedly in the porch swing.

"Well, that is a good story in and of itself, young lady, and its getting to be time you climbed back into your room and went to bed."

"Who, Grandpa, who?"

"Hmmp, um, yes well, although what I'm going to tell you is true, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you not to tell your parents about it."

"It wouldn't be dishonest if they never ask me, right Grandpa?"

"Ahmm, uh, well, Susan, I think you're going to have to figure that one out for yourself."

"Who told you about the trolls, Grandpa, who?"

"A dwarf."

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