

Chapter 6

Back To The Park

The morning was dazzlingly sunny, the second nice day of weather after the storm. Susan's grandfather had barely enough time to share a cup of coffee with his daughter, Susan's mom, before Susan bounded down the stairs. No more sore ankles as far as she was concerned. She had only the patience to eat half a piece of toast. Susan's grandfather tried to continue with the "adult" conversation, but eventually gave in to Susan's incessant pleas about getting started. He rose from the kitchen table, and with a wink to Susan's mom, placed his hat on his head, and followed Susan out the slamming back kitchen door.

The lawns of the town were very green. The streets had been swept clean by the storm. The sun was at their back as they walked along the cobblestones. After a little while, Susan's grandfather needed to slow down the pace. He started to point out flowers along the way, asking Susan if she knew what they were called. Susan did, but she didn't have any interest in such familiar sights. Instead her mind's eye was on the bridge and the park. And what was under the bridge in the park. She thought if her grandfather really believed her story he would want to hurry too. So she started once again to try and convince him of its truth.

"Grandpa, there really is a troll under the bridge."

"Hmm, yes I know, Susan" he replied, in a way that made it seem like he was tolerating her story, but not really believing it.

"He has rough skin and big rough hands, but he isn't really that big" she said. "I mean, I don't think he's that old."

"Well, how old do you think he is Susan?"

"Maybe my age, maybe half my age" she said, and then in frustration, "oh, how should I know, he's a troll!" After that Susan walked along with her head downcast, with a hurt feeling inside. She scuffed her shoes on the pavement as she walked, and her face was twisted into a grimace. She wanted to convince her grandfather that Babu existed, so she could reassure herself that he was for real. But now she was having difficulty picturing Babu, and couldn't remember all that they had talked about at their first meeting. She was momentarily angry at her grandfather, and turned to look in his eyes as they rounded a street corner that afforded them a distant view of the river and the bridge. The look she saw made her forget her anger. Her grandfather was studying the river ahead, his eyes wide open in anticipation and his forehead wrinkled in concentration. He gave Susan a quick smile, then almost skipped a step as he started to walk a little faster.

When they came near the bridge, Susan's grandfather couldn't really see what was sitting under it, but he could tell something unusual was there. His rational side

told him that it wasn't a troll, just some out-of-luck wandering hobo with a funny look about him.

When they crossed the bridge and climbed down to the water, they found that whatever it was, it was reluctant to come out of its hiding place. For a long while, Babu sat very still in the shadows, while Susan pleaded with him to come out. She assured him that this was her grandfather, that he was a nice man, and that he wouldn't do anything bad to him.

Susan's grandfather was staring hard into the dark, with an amazed and quizzical look on his face. He squinted his eyes, trying to make out the details that would allow him to understand what he was seeing. The shape of the head and body did not seem normal to him. But perhaps it was a problem with his eyes, he thought.

Finally Babu responded to Susan's urgings by moving a little closer to the edge of the shadow. Now her grandfather could see this was not a regular human. And whatever it was, it was still acting shy.

"Hello there. Err, uh, my name is Samuel Hopcroft. My granddaughter says she made your acquaintance a few days back. I'd like to make your acquaintance as well. What do folks call you?"

"Grandpa" hissed Susan, "I told you his name was Babu Bishka." Her grandfather looked at her for a second, then back into the shadows.

"My parents called me Babu."

The voice was child-like, Susan's grandfather thought. It didn't quite fit with the outline of the large bulky body he could see.

"Babu, hmm, that is a nice name. And what are your parent's names?"

"Mom and Dad."

"I mean, what are their given names?"

At this Babu seemed to grow confused. In reaction, Susan's grandfather took a step into the shadow. Finally he could see the troll, and he was overcome by awe and pity simultaneously. Happy to see such a wonderful interesting thing, he also felt compassion for what was obviously a juvenile or infant of some strange species.

"Where are your parents?"

"I don't know."

"When did you last see them?"

Little by little, Susan's grandfather got Babu to tell the story of how he had become separated from his family, and how he had come to live underneath this bridge.

It turns out that Babu's family had been exploring south of here, farther upstream in a more wild part of the river. They had travelled at night by boat, a hand-carved dugout. It hadn't looked like much more than a floating log when seen from a distance, so it was easy to conceal in the daytime. They had spent all winter far from home, frozen in by ice, surviving by wit, by fire and by the furs given them by native Indians. When the spring thaw came, they had headed north, back down the river, toward home.

Babu said that he did not remember his home that well, because he had been gone for such a long time. He knew it was a long ways downstream, because they had travelled several weeks upstream to where they wintered. He remembered that they had lived in a wooden shack built inside some sort of underground brick cavern near the river. He said he could peer out a metal grate at one end of the cavern, and see lots of people walking by, carrying boxes and wheeling carts with large crates. Off in the distance he could see big boats, with tall white sails (or so Susan's grandfather guessed, given his description of the rigging and cloth).

When they had started for home, the waterways were swollen with snow-melt and had been tricky to navigate. At one point a set of rapids, running higher than normal, had eroded the river bank and caused a tree to fall down in the middle of the rapids. Their boat ran up against this tree and got stuck. His parents had him climb out of the boat onto the tree, while they struggled to free it from the force of the rushing water.

All at once, a large section of the bank had given way, and a new branch of the river was created as huge torrents of water leaped over the edge. One sudden swell of water uprighted the tree Babu was on and threw it over the bank. Somehow he had held tight to the tree, and rode it down a violent cascade of water into the middle of a flooded forest.

He had lost sight of his parents and their boat. In a short while he floated free of the forest and found himself on a river again, but he said that it seemed to be going in a different direction than the river they had just been on. He had paddled to the other shore, and climbed out on the bank to wait for his parents to find him. But they had never come.

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