Raymond Howell
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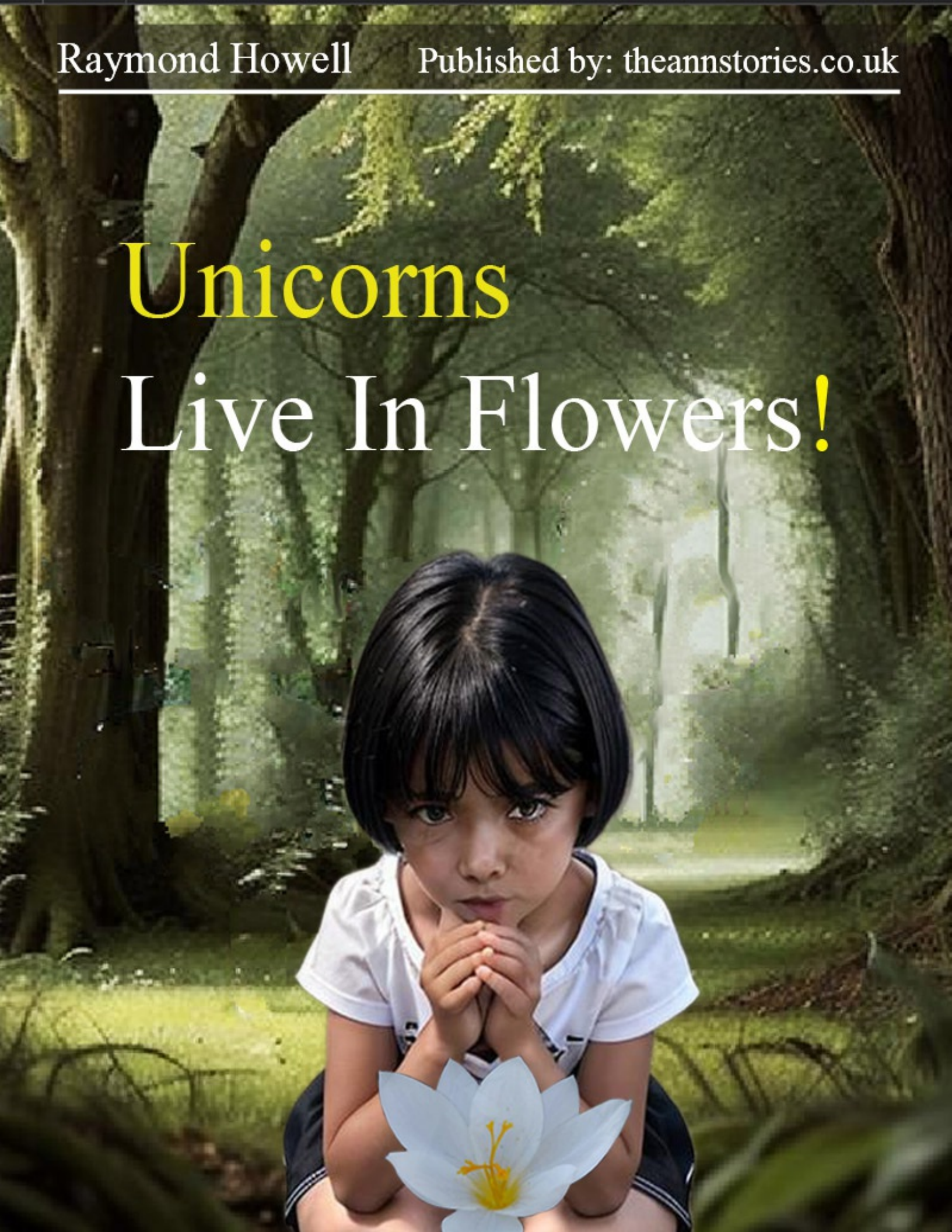
Unicorns Live In Flowers!



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Authors Note

Young Lucy battles to be believed that Unicorns live in a tall white flower that grows on the edge of her special little wood at the end of what she calls her garden...

So much of this tale is true...

Section One

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Young Lucy St. Clair, aged seven, with her cute home-styled pixie hair cut, an ever quick smile and wonder-lit eyes, was returning home after playing happily as she always does down in *her private* 200-acre wood.

While the ancient wood nestles very nearly contentedly down at the side of her parent's farm and official documents and bills and other such boring things state that the wood belongs to it, others, far wiser and older than humans would, if ever asked, suggest something very differently. Regardless of any quarrels of ownership that may or may not have arisen over the centuries, this wood has thankfully largely escaped human axes and other unwanted violations.

That extremely rare occurrence is not down to luck, nor is it an accident.

Oblivious to certain discontented undercurrents, Lucy with the unquestioning wonder of a seven-year-old, simply calls it her special little wood, while instinctively knowing it is much more than that.

Much much more.

Every morning and on most evenings, including Christmas and birthdays and after completing her chores, Lucy, with the unerring instinct of an investigative bee heads off to visit a special flower. It grows in only one place. A deep bed of green, red, orange and brown leaves dropped by the trees in autumn to bless the soil and provide shelter in winter for many
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creatures. Lucy believes it likes it there, for it never pops up anywhere else.

The plant's chosen spot lies near the edge of the wood, a little to one side of a fairy ring and close to a sprawling oak that was ancient even before Henry VIII hastily passed through the area. It is also where the day's sunlight plays the most, the rain falls the gentlest and harsh winds pass it by. Out of all the plants in what she calls her garden it remains in flower the longest.

Whenever Lucy thinks about it, which is often, she is unable to recall a single day when its trumpet-like flower of purest white filled with tall elegantly curved stamens, which she firmly believes are little unicorns, is not there waiting for her.

In Lucy's happy world, the flower is a friend she shares all manner of secrets with. Where to her fancy, the flower nods as if listening while the stamens wave back in answer. Her only regret in the whole wide world, which mainly consists of their farm, her school and the couple of shops in the nearby village, is that regardless of how hard she tries, she can never understand the flower's replies. But that does not stop her from trying. Or from deciding what the flower might have said. Although as an inherently honest child, it irks her to have to do that.

To Lucy's disappointment, her farmer parents have no idea what language plants speak. Their home encyclopedia has no section on the subject and as for her teacher. Well, she is not helpful either - and quite deliberately so, as Lucy was fast learning.

In Lucy's need to know she frequently raises her hand in class to ask, "What language do plants speak miss?"

While the teacher merely replies tiredly. "Yes Lucy you can put your hand down, I heard you."

And that is it.

A few days back when Lucy raised her hand to ask yet again, the teacher went a little further. “I wonder Lucy might the class be encouraged to concentrate on something other than your flower today? Such as this essay I’m about to set.”

“Now children…” the teacher said addressing the wider class. “I would like you to write about your life at home and then you can read them out tomorrow. But please Lucy,” she stressed. “Could you try and write about something besides your… your…, hmmm…”

She then paused, as if trying to control her temper. However she still managed to fill the word, ... *flower* with a lot of venom when it finally left her lips.

Encouraged by the teacher’s disdain, the class bullies flared up to chant.

“Lucy’s in love with a flower. Lucy’s in love with a flower.”

Or some such silly nonsense, while pointing at her as if their fingers were pistols and she their target. Other than to shrug and raise her eyes, Lucy ignored them. But like her friends in the class, she also noticed that the teacher did not immediately tell the bullies to stop taunting.

Fed up with the boy’s stupidity Lucy turned away to gaze out the window, where a slow smile soon blessed her faraway dreamy face. The distant range of blue-grey hills had reminded her of a time when the teacher asked the class to write a story about a mountain - *and not about your flower, child*. Despite the teacher’s scold, Lucy still managed to have her rare flower waiting at the top for climbers to discover.

Aiming her strongly glittering eyes back at the teacher, she smiled again, signalling to those who knew her well that she was even more determined to include her flower in the essay.

Just as the flower’s spirit encourages her to do.

Section Two

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The next day Lucy rose from her seat to take her place at the front of the class.

“Where I Live,” she began.

“I’m Lucy St. Clair. I’m 7 and a bit and I live on a farm that spreads around a special flower…”

That set off a tide of groans from the class bullies while raising a quiet tut from the teacher.

Unperturbed, Lucy read on.

“The flower is tall and white with long yellow stamens that are unicorns in disguise.”

When the teacher then sharply suggested, “That’ll do for today, Lucy.” The child protested strongly.

“But I’ve not finished yet miss. You let everyone else read theirs, so I am going to read mine now.”

With that, Lucy raised her essay higher, shielding her eyes from the ugly faces the bullies were pulling and deliberately read on, slowly.

“Sometimes I dream our farm is inside the flower and protected by its strong petals. And the flower’s soft yellow heart is a carpet of golden moss which
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the unicorns sleep on when the petals close for the night. I love my flower. And I know it loves me. When I go to see it early in the morning the petals open wide and the little unicorns inside rear up in welcome. And the flower lets me know when it's my bedtime, cos its head droops a little and the petals slowly close, just as my own eyes do shortly after."

Then more hurriedly she concluded.

"I live with Mama and Papa and we have lambs, cows and chickens and we grow crops too. Spinach sometimes or broccoli, but I don't like that much. And we always eat in the kitchen. End of essay."

Section Three

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A few mornings later Lucy was running a little late as her list of chores was longer than usual. During the night their small flock of sheep birthed twins and more unusually there were several batches of triplets too, which all added up to a lot of hand rearing and washing and general caring of the baby lambs. But with a good heart, she completed her tasks as caringly but as quickly as she could.

Free at last she rushed off to visit her flower to tell it all about the new arrivals, only to have her heart broken.

The plant had been pulled up and trampled on and her beloved flower ripped off its stem and flung into the grass. Through her tears, she spotted a gang of boys hastily disappearing over the sty at the far end of the field before fleeing - as her closely following angry eyes knew - up the hill and then on down into town.

She wanted to hate them so much, she did, but the plant although crushed still managed to cry out to her for help. The pleas were silent but the plant's distress penetrated a certain sense Lucy never knew she had, where the tingling it encouraged to run through her put an end to her anger. Kneeling, she tenderly gathered up the broken stalk while promising through her tears.

"I will do all I can to make you grow healthy and strong again. I will. And God will you please help me," she pleaded, while gently and carefully carrying the broken stem home.
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“Look, Mama, look what some vandals did to my flower, we’ve got to save it” Lucy wailed as she rushed into the kitchen.

Mama, understanding Lucy’s heart immediately went off to search for a jar to put it in. Her well-meaning but often gruff, blunt and practical farmer father tried his best to prepare Lucy for certain failure.

“It’s not the kind of plant that can grow again from its root, as some do when crushed. Like a tulip or a daffodil might my dearest. And very few plants can grow back from just a broken stem, especially when it has been so severely crushed like yours. But we’ll try, won’t we? How can we let one as beautiful as this die? It would be like leaving you outside for the wolves to take and we would never do that to you, would we?” He declared with a kindly smile, which brought a tear to Mama’s eyes.

He was a lovely man, but not always good with words, or showing tenderness. She even went as far as to wonder, what has just happened to change him?

Dragging out the little footstool her father had made for her to stand on to use at the sink, or sometimes on colder nights to sit on before the fire, Lucy climbed on it. Then with a stretch, she tried turning on the big tap that was so large and stiff for her tiny hand.

“No Mama”, Lucy said earnestly when she leant over to help her. “I must do this for myself. It is my plant Mama who needs the water. And I have to care for it because it has asked me to.”

Puffing red of cheek and with a little grunt, she finally managed to turn the tap all by herself and fill the jar with water. Then she put the broken stem into it before, with another stretch, placing the jar on the window sill behind the sink, where the sun stayed for most of the day. As she stepped down her tears

fell again when she saw just how weakly the stern flopped over the edge of the jar. But despite what her father had just explained, she still took care to whisper.

“You will get better unicorn flower, you will.”

“And that is all you can do,” Papa said as she put away the stool. “Other than to ask for God’s help. But we’re sure you’ve already talked with the creator because you’re a thoughtful child in that way. And who knows? Your wish might be heard and answered.”

Although he doubted it.

Section Four

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To Papa's surprise, but not to Lucy's, over the next week the stalk refused to shrivel up and die.

Instead, the stem showed signs of wanting to straighten. While around the break, just like scar tissue on a ragged cut, a small bump began to develop. Over the next week, the tip of the stem rose higher, while the scar tissue turned into a noticeable nodule which covered the break completely to provide extra support.

Against all known farming rules the stem was healing itself.

Papa had no idea how.

When he mentioned it to Lucy she merely smiled in a way he has never seen her do before. There's knowledge of something deep in there, he decided. But not the sort that secretly knows how to add one and two together and is waiting for the right moment to reveal their cleverness.

It was obvious she was not willing to share whatever she knows because she simply replied.

"It's because I change the plant's water twice each day Papa. That's all."

As a farmer, he knew only too well that Lucy's kindness could not account for the almost miraculous change he was witnessing. But being a practical man he left his wondering unexplored, so the word 'magic' was not able to
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enter his head.

Had she been of a certain mind Lucy could have tagged onto the end of her reply, '*it is what the fairies told me to do, and I sing to it too, just like they do*'. But of course, she did not. How would her father ever understand such an idea? Or so her eyes and smile said for those who knew how to read them. Like Mama. Where nicely she began to wonder about her daughter.

Soon the stem was standing as straight as could be, considering that it was still perched against the lip of the jar without roots or leaves or soil to help it along.

As wondrous to her father as its recovery was, he was still a farmer. One who expects things to be whole and provide something, or at the very least, have a use. Like it or not, Lucy's plant was simply a flowerless, rootless stem plonked in a jar of water on the windowsill.

During a rare idle moment sat in the kitchen chatting with Mama he aired his farmer's heart.

"It'll never be more than a wonky stem will it, that plant. So, oughtn't we just put it out of its misery dear, like I might a sickly lamb?"

"Oh, let it be," Mama said from her seat before the fire.

The fast clickety clack of knitting needles paused mid-purl as she wondered again about the secretive look that blesses their daughter's face whenever they mention the plant.

"Em," she murmured as thought a little more about it. You're not the only one who can keep secrets my little Lucy and I think I know what it is. She decided as she started knitting three. Keeping her idea very close to her chest,

she replied.

“Just a stem or not, Lucy obviously loves it. And it hasn’t died on her yet, has it? And I wonder if you know this my dearest, our Lucy before she leaves for school hums to it as she changes its water? And rushes to it as soon as she returns home. And again she hums as she freshens the water. Sometimes, she’ll even change the water before she settles for bed. You know what dear,” she laughed softly, I rather fancy it’s becoming her pet."

“And at least it doesn’t worry us for a walk, or piddle on the floor.” She then offered with a grin.

“So leave it be, dearest husband of mine, for it’s doing no harm on the windowsill. I’m rather getting used to seeing it there,” she said lightly.

Then more sternly she scolded, but with a hidden twinkle. “So if you do anything horrid to it, you’ll have me to answer to, as well as our Lucy.”

Besides husband of mine, she thought, I don’t think you’re ready to hear what Lucy might have to say should you dare throw it on the compost heap.

Only to gulp, and I’m not so sure I’m ready to hear it either.

Section Five

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Another week saw a small root appear just slightly above the stem's ragged bottom. Even Papa could not help but be impressed.

“Well blow me down,” he said when Lucy proudly revealed it.

“I don’t know what you’re doing with that plant of yourn,” he exclaimed with the same delight that was dancing in his daughter’s eyes.

“But whatever it is, it likes it.”

Then his eyes glazed slightly over as he plucked out a childhood memory.

"You know, it reminds me…", he said as they began eating supper, “...of watercress me mam and I pulled from the water meadows near to where I grew up. She would place it in a jar just like you did and if left long enough it would occasionally show signs of wanting to root.”

“And did you let it root, Papa?” Lucy wondered brightly.

“Oh no,” he replied. “Watercress likes running water and we had none of that on ma’s farm, so we’d feed it to the pigs.”

“But why not take it back to the water meadow Papa and let it grow again with its friends as I think it might have wanted.” She wondered with a frown, suggesting she was thoroughly perplexed by the situation. Which showed itself in the way she thoughtfully toyed with her swede and potato mash.
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“I’m sure those other plants would have welcomed its return, Papa.” She eventually said as she fashioned her mashed spud and swede into a mountain.

“Plants do have their place…, don’t they?” She declared planting her fork in the top so it stood up like a flag pole.

“And I know the wood will happily welcome my flower back when I replant it there at the right time.”

Taken with Lucy’s ideas Papa said, “I’m impressed with your thinking Lucy.”

Being the sort of a man who carried few encouraging words about his person while labouring around the farm that was indeed a rare moment. Lucy could not help but swell with pride when he said.

“You’re growing into a very bright young girl and I am impressed with how you have nursed your plant. And one day I hope you’ll tell me what your secret is.” He teased.

“Because I can use those skills you’re developing to help me out.”

Again Lucy said nothing. She simply smiled that new knowing smile of hers which slightly intrigued her father, but not her mother, not any more. She was fastly coming to believe she understood the origins of her daughter’s silent language. And she rather hoped she was right!

Later that evening bearing her own knowing smile, Mama kissed Papa good night. It was his turn to start the morning’s milking so he decided to retire early. But instead of going up with him as normally Mama would, she remained downstairs.

“I’ll join you shortly dear, but I have a few things to sort first,” she said.

“Lucy’s uniform for one,” she fibbed a little guiltily. But she felt sure if he knew why she he would not mind. Or most likely, he’d be too stressed about the why of it to find room to worry over such a trivial fib.

After he left the kitchen, rather than fetching out the ironing board as her words suggested, Mama stood there, quietly. Not caring to be caught before her plan was put into action she listened out for the sound of his heavy footsteps crossing the bedroom’s wooden floor, which lay directly above the kitchen. He did not disappoint her. Those steps were followed by a series of creaks from the iron bedsprings as he sat down heavily to put on his pyjamas. A few more protesting creaks signalled he was under the covers and rolling into a comfortable position. Then all fell nicely quiet. A few minutes later she fancied she heard snoring, but instead of murmuring sleepily, ‘You’re on your back dear’ and nudging him, she simply smiled.

Now then, she wondered, where best to hide? But there were only two options. It was either, crawl under the kitchen table or dive into the walk-in pantry. After a very short consideration, the pantry won the limited contest. If I leave the door open a tiny bit I’ll be able to see, she decided. Now for the rest of the plan. Quietly, so as not to wake her husband, she placed a handful of wood kindling and a few pieces of coal onto the fire’s still glowing embers. That’ll help me see for a while once I switch the overhead light off.

Then as silently and as busily as a spinning spider, she muddled around in the kitchen drawer until she found an old bottle of smelling salts. That’ll keep me awake she thought as slipped it into her pinafore pocket. Then she draped a thick shawl around her shoulders - it was always chilly in the pantry. Now for a stool to ease my back and feet for who knows how long the wait might be.

After setting the stool down she carefully adjusted the pantry door to make it appear closed to a pair of eyes expecting to see only a dark empty kitchen.

Having made her preparations Mama settled in to wait. Very quickly the cold which so helpfully preserves her jams and hams, wickedly as it does, began biting her toes and cramping her calves, encouraging her to wonder.

Am I correct about Lucy? Am I doing the right thing? Or might I cause her trouble by being here?

Section Six

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Shortly after the new wooden sticks ceased crackling and the fresh coals caught and were glowing heartily, she heard the muffled sound of dainty bare feet scurrying down the stairs. Then a pause, as if their owner was looking through the kitchen doorway. She smiled when they started up again and again when the little footstool scraped slightly on the hard floor as it was moved.

Then Lucy came into view where she watched her daughter carefully place the stool in front of the sink before standing on it. But instead of reaching out for the tap, Lucy climbed into the sink!

It's a good job I did the washing up, Mama smirked as Lucy carefully moved her plant to one side before slowly and quietly opening the window.

Oh, you clever little girl, you're your mother's daughter alright… Mama thought with a proud smile as Lucy set the window stay lest any wind might care to come along and loudly rattle it, or even rip the window off.

As the cool night air flooded into the kitchen, it added a little welcoming roar into the low burning fire, helping Mama to see Lucy as she leant slightly out of the window to wave at something outside.

Mama silently gasped. I knew it! Her heart began beating excitedly as hundreds of little fireflies came dancing into the kitchen.

"Shush you lot," Lucy whispered in a giggly voice as the kitchen filled with
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joyous but soft singing and music.

Tambourines, Mama fancied. And bells and pipes and strings. Oh Lucy, how wonderful, her excitement exclaimed. You've found the wood fairies, where her heart happily sang along with the muted music as she watched them play.

Only to come over all drowsy.

The fairies were working their magic, sending those to sleep who might see them without invite. But just like Lucy, she met them as a child and was fully prepared for their naughty, but necessary tricks. Opening the bottle of smelling salts she sniffed deeply, gratefully breathing in the sharp tangy fumes. As she hoped the salts sharply chased away her the need to sleep. With bright slightly teary eyes and a tingling nose, she peered once more through the crack in the door.

She nearly gave herself way by laughing and sighing happily as she watched Lucy giggling and playing while softly singing along with the fairies while they tended the stem and encouraged it to heal and grow. Then, just as quickly as they arrived the fairies left and Lucy was waving goodbye while carefully closing the window after them.

"Let me help you with that stool," Mama said as she issued silently and as smoothly as a ghost from the pantry, causing Lucy to gasp guiltily. But there was no following scold or stern look as the child expected, just her loving mother whispering.

"Now it's your turn to Shush."

Then smiling she added. "We don't want to wake your father up now, do we? Just wait there while I light a candle then we'll take it into the pantry with us. Then we can close the door and talk without waking him up."

And the light will help me read your eyes and catch you out if you fib my dearest Lucy… she thought as a tingle of something as yet unrealised grew in her mind. But she was not angry.

Some secrets are so fantastic they are nearly impossible to admit, even when revealed. Or in Mama's case, she thought with a smile, to even admit to myself. But now I have to, she decided, as she ushered Lucy into the pantry.

Section Seven

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"And now," Mama said, setting the candle down on a jar of her home-made pickle. "You can tell me all about them, as I'm sure you're dying to. When I met them I was about your age," she confessed dreamily.

“But unlike you, I had no one to share the wonder with. And as I grew up”, she reflected, “I was scared to admit they were real and so I sort of forgot about them, until you and your plant made me remember. And let me tell you dearest child of mine. That is not a nice thing to do to fairies because it saddens them to be forgotten. And I regret doing that. So make this promise and they’ll hear your heart’s wish for sure, for I know you are blessed. Are you ready?”

Yes, Lucy nodded solemnly with big round eyes.

“Promise me,” her Mama urged, “that you will never forget the wonders they represent.”

“Oh I won’t,” Lucy said brightly. “Not ever ever will I. And I promise you and the fairies that, Mama.”

Then she giggled, “And I know you’ve met them. They told me all about you as a child. They said you had long pigtails and they used to swing on them.”

“Oh, the naughty things did too!” Her mother laughed.
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“Oh gosh. How could I forget that? But yet I did…” she added remorsefully.

“Oh, I’m glad you found them, Lucy. And I think I understand about the plant now and why it stays in flower all year round. It is one of theirs isn’t it.”

“Yes!” Lucy confirmed with a series of excited nods.

“They have a long strange sort of musical name for it Mama, but they are happy for me to call it a unicorn flower. And they also said I am bright and gifted in the old ways. And those stamens I told you looked like unicorns, are really truly little fairy unicorns, honest Mama! They really are.” She said excitedly with brightening eyes that so wanted to cry happy. She had always known the truth but no one until now cared to believe her.

“They are their queen’s special treasure and the unicorns let her ride them whenever the moon is full and high. And she is so sad Mama about what those wicked boys did to the unicorn’s home.”

“Oh dear”, Mama uttered, suddenly very concerned.

“Things might not go too well for those boys if the fairies ever find out who they are. And I sincerely hope Lucy…,” she said seriously with awakened tingles as she studied her child’s eyes for traces of guilt.

“...that they don’t find out… Although I the boys do deserve to be punished.” She added sternly.

“Just not in a fairies way, which can be very harsh when it’s aimed at us humans…, right?” she asked.

Section Eight

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Lucy nodded yes, I agree, while offering no opinion about the boys. Whatever she knew she was keeping to herself.

“It saddens me,” Mama suddenly said, “to know that over the centuries we have thoughtlessly destroyed so much of their way of life. We have chopped down forests and woods, torn up meadows and polluted or altered rivers and lakes. The fairies told me that once they were as tall as us humans, but they shrunk in size to hide from us. We in our fear and envy of them were hunting the fairies down and doing our best to kill them off, rather than taking time to learn their ways. Which Lucy, are more ancient and wiser than ours.”

“I know Mama,” Lucy said with tears dampening her eyes. “It’s horrible what we did.” Only to correct herself.

“What we do to them, Mama, still!”

At that, Mama cocked an eye enquiringly, but otherwise, she waited for Lucy to reveal her heart, as surely she will. Otherwise, this is not her Lucy but a fairy copy like the old stories often spoke of. Where worriedly she recalled.

Fairies intent on mischief in the very dead of night, creep in through cat flaps, or windows carelessly left open to steal babies within and leave a pile of animated twigs and old leaves in their place.

But her heart said. This is my Lucy. While her eyes urged. Look, there are no twigs poking out of her hair. Or leaves sticking to her feet, where her eyes are
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not two dull pebbles either. See, they glisten with tears and temper.

Instead of the dry rasp of twigs rubbing together like a fairy's copy, Lucy's voice issued in a fierce whisper.

"Like them businesses and those authorities people do to the indigenous tribes in the rainforests, the ones you told me about in that picture on the wall by the fire Mama. And the fairies told me they are their distant cousins. And they are really angry about how we treat them, Mama. Really angry!"

Instantly Mama worried for the boys. Fearfully, she quietly suggested. "For the boy's sake Lucy, I do hope the fairies don't find them…"

"Mmm," Lucy merely murmured, while tearing her eyes away from Mama's enquiring gaze to look down at the tiled floor.

She's being thoughtful, Mama hoped, and not acting guilty. But with a shrug, she then decided Lucy needs to be in bed.

The matter was left to lie but it still troubled her as she followed Lucy up the stairs. The fairies were capable of seriously harming the boys. And what will happen if the townsfolk find out about the fairies? Will they burn down the wood? The farm? She was a mess of worries as she tucked Lucy in and kissed her goodnight.

Slipping into her own bed she snuggled up to Papa who flinched when her cold feet nudged his. But instead of laughing and placing them on his back to provoke a play fight, she murmured into the pillow.

"If you think my feet are cold and uncomfortable dear, you just wait for what I think is about to break out on the farm…"

"Don't fret dear. I'll sort out whatever's worrying you right after the morning

milking", Papa mumbled sleepily… "Good night my love."

"And good night to you as well my dear," Mama replied with a smile for her caring and unsuspecting husband, who she knew in ignorance and fear would happily squash a fairy dead. As many humans would.

As she gave herself up to sleep she thought. I hope it's all easily solved and I'm worrying for nothing. But I doubt it. And I pray, that if my husband finds out about the fairies please let him see their wonder and not react from fear and with blind temper, as he does sometimes.

Section Nine

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Those poor poor boys, Mama worried again and again as the days passed. Which also saw the stem potted up using soil taken from the spot in the wood where it grew. But afterwards, instead of placing the plant outside as Papa expected Lucy to do, she returned it to the window sill.

When he wondered why, without thinking Lucy replied.

“Oh, the fairies are worried that the boys will return and crush it again.”

“Pardon!” He gasped, a little gruffly as his admiration for Lucy turned to concern.

“Did you just say, the fairies?”

Suddenly worried that Lucy might be losing her mind - well… his inner voice reasoned, they do push them over hard at school. He asked crossly.

“What on earth did you mean by the fairies girl? Explain yourself!”

“Oh!” Lucy exclaimed. “Did I just say fairies, Papa” she offered vaguely, hoping he might believe she was merely being childish and silly. Except, just like Mama, he has also noted her secret smiles these past few weeks. So rather than accepting it was a childish fancy, he suddenly worried that she might be going a bit waffy. Or even light in the head, as some unkindly say.

Or so he explained later to Mama after Lucy had gone to bed.
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Oh dear, she fretted.

She loved Papa dearly but would be the first to admit that once he gets an idea into his head it takes the devil's own to remove it. And she certainly did not want him to believe that Lucy was not bright and clever and gifted as the fairies said she was. She knew that in his determination to correct what he might explain as, our Lucy's shortcomings, he will pull her out of school and send her to a special one far far away. How humiliating that would be for Lucy! And terrible for our relationship she decided. We will argue which is something we rarely do! So, she acceded to an urge she had been putting off.

"Ask me no questions my dearest husband" She suddenly said. "And do not overreact to what I'm about to say", she asserted sternly which he found disturbing.

First, his daughter is acting strange and now his wife is bossing him about. This was not the way he had expected this conversation to go.

"Hey…" he began to protest, but to his surprise, Mama cut right across him to say.

"Do as I tell you and you will see a wonder and then you will understand everything. But if you so much as cough accidentally it will be impossible to say what harm you might do us, or Lucy. And that starts from now. Nod if you understand me?"

Suddenly fearful because Mama has never acted so determinedly or mysteriously before, he meekly nodded yes.

"Good," she said chirpily. "And remember, ask no questions," she said warningly. "Just do as I tell you…, for once!" She added with a smile and a kiss to his cheek to soften the blow.

“And if you can manage to do that simple thing without exploding and ranting, as you do when you don’t understand something, then soon my darling, your fears for our daughter will be over.”

She swallowed the urge to add, you’ll be too bothered by what you discover to worry anymore about Lucy…

Instead, she explained. “And now my husband…, while I encourage the fire into a little life go fetch two stools and place them in the pantry.”

After collecting up a shawl for herself and a cardigan for him, while not forgetting the smelling salts, she pulled the pantry door too, just like she did last time, before settling him down.

“Remember”, she whispered, “make no noise whatsoever - from either end!” She teased, hoping to lighten his mood.

But his worries only deepened. She never jokes about bodily functions. Never!

Section Ten

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In the pantry Mama smiled while Papa frowned inquiringly as they listened to the patter of tiny bare feet coming cautiously, but quickly, down the stairs. Mama put her finger to her lips to shush Papa when the little stool scrapped against the floor slightly as it was moved to the sink. Nodding, now, Mama knelt by the opening and indicated he should stand above her. Pointing to her eyes and nodding towards the kitchen, she mouthed silently. Just watch.

Instead of climbing into the sink and opening the window like she had on the previous evening, Lucy froze mid-step. Raising her nose like an alert matronly meerkat she seemingly sniffed the air. Or is she listening? Mama wondered.

A moment later with an impish smile blooming on her, she turned quickly to face the pantry. “I know you’re in there! And so do the fairies.” She said with a light giggle. “But it’s OK Mama you can come out. And you as well Papa. They’ve just told me they’re happy for you to see them.”

Aware that in farmer’s old lore, which Papa followed religiously fairies were dangerous creatures Mama ushered her bewildered and scared husband out of the pantry while chuntering reassuringly.

“Just be calm. It’ll be alright my dear. Trust me and them.”

Using her new gift of empathy Lucy quickly came to the same understanding as Mama. Taking her bewildered Papa’s hand reassuringly she wheedled
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gently like he was a stray cat she was desperate to feed.

“It will be alright Papa, it will, I promise.”

Then encouragingly she said.

“Why don’t you open the window, Papa? And if you wave in welcome with an open heart the fairies will come to you.”

Soon the kitchen was full of little dancing lights and fairy music that was all the louder and bolder and more joyous as there was no need for secrecy. That freedom added lots of extra sparkles and happiness and zing into the meeting and greeting. Truly astonished Papa’s immediate fears turned to charm as he watched the fairies gather playfully around Lucy and Mama.

While Mama caught up with old friends a colourful cloud of little fairies gathered about Lucy and the table, where Mama had thoughtfully moved the plant earlier. Almost immediately choruses of sweet voices filled the kitchen as they arose in a soft but urging song. He knew they were speaking of many beautiful things but it saddened him a bit as he was unable to make out a single word.

And our Lucy’s voice is the sweetest of them all, he decided swelling with parental pride. Only to grin and then nearly laugh loudly when he realised, that’s how the plant managed to survive! Their song is encouraging it to grow. Maybe you’re not so clever after all my darling little Lucy, he grinned. But there again, he reasoned, she not only found the fairies, she has learnt their ways and language. And well too, by the sounds of it. He decided. Only to worry a little for it was all so new and untested, much like when a new bull arrives on the farm and he watches it closely to see how well it settles.

As he looked about he noted one firefly was glittering more brightly than the

others. It was not as small either. And to his amazement, it was growing in size and rapidly so. Where it did not stop until it was as tall, if not taller than Papa. Then the fairy turned to face him full on causing Papa to loudly gasp.

Section Eleven

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Concerned, Mama glanced over quickly, only to laugh brightly when she saw why. Not only was the fairy astonishingly beautiful, but she was also very nearly naked.

Well… my… what an unexpected sight, for him! Mama grinned mischievously as she returned to her friends, happy that Papa was about to be kept busy for a while.

She was right.

Nearly naked fairies pouncing around the kitchen was not something Papa ever expected to see. ‘Oh my, whatever next…’ ran nervously through his mind, followed immediately by, ‘I’d best put the kettle on then’ as his mouth dried and gummed shut.

Suddenly desperate for a brew, his feet refused to move while his wide-open eyes cared only to stare, at her. But not rudely as he will decide the next day when he mulls it all over as he works the fields. Close up and very immediate the fairy was simply mesmerising and not quite as naked as she first appeared.

She’s wearing a gown at least, he noted with relief. Spun by spiders maybe, he mused as the fine, light almost transparent weave shimmered with her every movement while attracting all the colours in the kitchen before releasing them as a host of glitters. Otherwise, disturbingly the gown did little to hide what lay beneath. Then to his astonishment, he realised the gown was
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seemingly flowing off her shoulders and down her body, sparkling all the while like pearls of water escaping a pure snow-fed waterfall. Uneasily and worried about being called a pervert he tried hard not to notice how the flow parted momentarily around the swell of her small but hugely obvious breasts.

Don’t look, Papa! Don’t look, his censorious inner self yelled. But how could he not follow the flowing material? After re-converging in shimmers it tumbled down her body to ripple about her feet in a glittering pool.

Trying hard to look beyond her nakedness, he fancied the shimmers then rode up her back to gather around her neck before falling off her shoulders in an ever-continuing cycle of wonder. Just like water does. He decided, before the worry of Mama’s, as yet, unspoken nag, *your gawping Pa*, encouraged his gaze to avert to the fairy’s delicate bare feet.

To his amazement, they were not moving in a heavy human way but skimmed lightly across the floor. In another fleeting fancy, he compared her liquid movements to the light fluttering of butterflies foraging for nectar. Or the delicate swirls of falling leaves. She was simply all the beautiful and wondrous glories of nature personified and there they were walking towards him.

He was as Mama predicted, truly captivated.

Section Twelve

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Regardless of how much Papa might boast *I'm no stranger to spectacular films and their special effects*, as his gaze rose to fall upon the fairy's beautiful face and to swim in her pellucid green eyes, he sighed.

“Never in all me days have I ever seen the likes of her. Not on or off me farm. Never!” He decided with an awestruck gawp that was easily read.

Praise indeed coming from you, a human farmer in touch with the wonders of nature, the fairy smiled inwardly. But I wonder if you’ll still think that way after you have met me properly?

Entranced, he failed to notice the slight lizard-like flicker of her eyes. Lost in the hues of her skin he watched as she reflected or absorbed every colour she passed by. Or should that be, she passes through, he wondered with a silent nervous whistle. The idea she was almost translucent was not only marvellous but also deeply disturbing.

Alarmingly disturbing.

He had just decided, well blow me down… she’s just like living water… when instinct suddenly reared up to kick him hard with a sense of a swelling quarrelsome storm. She’s not marvellous, she’s beautifully terrifying, he quelled while beginning to thrum nervously.

Primal-like grunts arose in his throat. With nowhere else to go they gushed out as deep splutters and oh-help-me-do-hums which rudely clashed with the
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high-pitched excited chatter of hundreds of tiny fairies and Lucy's happy shrieks, his beloved wife's sighs and chuckles as she gladly mingled. He just caught a snatch of Mama's laughter as she said, "Yes sadly my days of pigtails are long gone" when the apparition already so startling and disturbingly revealing and now covertly frightening, laughed.

Her notes as they struck the air created the sort of music a heart yearns to hear, but which disappointingly lays tantalisingly hidden within or masked by other inferior scores. Like those classical pieces that never quite deliver on their promise, he mused fleetingly.

The sound was the whip of teasing breezes, the crackle of a comforting fire, the gently moving earth, the enchanting tinkles of water, the happy mews of new parents, the rustling of grass and so much more. There was a touch of mockery in there too, dismissive of his kind - who are you when compared to me?

Her unshielded musical peals were beyond beautiful and the skill of human composers to ever truly capture. Or so his heart decided with quickening beats.

Still fearful of her and now overcome by her laughter's beauty, his strong legs buckled, while his robust stomach knotted before flipping in awe and bizarrely with fear and love.

Yes, love, his spirit cried as her deliciously bursting carillons so wondrously chased away his immediate fears.

Who could ever write such music his spirit demanded to know, that speaks so vividly of flowers opening? Of seeds disbursing. Worms filling their larders with leaf litter? And mushrooms rising so gloriously and quickly to send the sense of sunlight down to feed their ancient underground networks. While

raising the spirits of humble beetles scurrying on happy missions that we know so little about. Spiders spinning webs that glisten beautifully in early morning frosts. And of course the thrill of butterflies, the trill of birds and hum of bees and scampering of ants. All playing together harmoniously as part of nature's orchestra. While the soil like an entranced audience gladly breathes in the fresh air the trees freely send down as a thank you for the gifts their roots have received.

No one can reproduce that magic, he decided, except for this fairy. This glorious personification of nature's wonders and beauty.

And as for her nakedness?

Well… why not? He decided. Isn't that all part of the beauty of nature? Only to realise, a nature which men turn into something to be defiled or reviled.

Her ringingly clear peals, like the undulations of her gown, rippled and seemingly shimmered as they blessed the kitchen and chased away the sad echoes of his last thought. Everywhere suddenly seemed so much brighter and far more alive than it had ever been to Papa. Even, he reluctantly admitted, more alive than when me darling wife sings happily to herself and I'm sitting outside beneath the window listening to me heart's joy expressing hers so freely.

Or so his thoughts went in a newly humbled but enlightened way. But then the fairy spoke… and a whole new fabulous orchestra struck up to capture more than his breath.

If she shivers and says I'm cold, his soul and heart responded, then I'll jump into the fire for her I will, just so me burning body can keep her warm.

Section Thirteen

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"This lot...," the fairy said, with sing-song light laughter as she stopped before him, "...are my gang. They call me their queen and I believe you're known as... Herbert... St. Clare..."

Her delightful pronouncement of “Her-Bert” lifted and floated the syllables, turning them into a celestial score, which his spirit dreamily chased after, only to turn quickly about when he wondered.

How does she know my name?

The section of brain activating his left big toe into wiggling uneasily was the memory of the last time Herbert was given to that air which his Sousaphone hooter, (Mama’s affectionate description), greedily imbibes when he sets to work first thing in the morning, especially on a bright but crisp one. It was on their wedding day and she promised faithfully then that she would never use it again. Just as I agreed not to call her Ethel, the memory relayed. It’s Rose or dear or Mama for her, and Papa, Pa, darling, dear, love or Oi, for me. Or even Sidney, me middle name, when she’s cross.

But the surprise at hearing his name so beautifully expressed by such gracious lips duly smothered further questions. With a bemused smile, his toe relaxed and the wonder of the moment took over. Just like those many little fantastic things do that have begun to occur daily around the farm. Crops sprouting earlier and disease-free. Lost lambs finding their way home and swathes of wildflowers blessing the fringes of the fields out of season. And now here he was blithely accepting the presence of a Fairy Queen. A flipping
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glistening glorious, musical and far too much in the flesh, Fairy Queen.

After the Queen's Her-Bert sailed away on merry eddy's her tone altered. The benign light trickle suddenly surged powerfully into an awesomely terrifying gush.

"And… you… are… the… *man*… of… this… farm," she said strongly as that storm he had sensed moments ago gathered itself about her.

Papa shivered. Never has he heard the tiny word 'man' resonating with such contempt. Each musically off-key vibration spoke of her need to punish men and her deep anger for the wicked deeds committed against her people and nature by mankind, not humankind but mankind.

As quick as a thieving weasel, Papa's smile disappeared, taking along with it the light and the kitchen floor. Suddenly his feet lifted and he was tipping backwards. A sense of icy fingers then pushed hard, sending him tumbling into an impenetrable blackness.

Helplessly down and down he fell, twisting and rolling and spinning. Petrified, Papa royally screamed and squealed like one of his poor pigs suddenly aware it was about to be slaughtered when only that morning it had been fed and petted.

But his screams were in vain. No sounds left his throat, they remained embedded inside his head. In that new time and space, he was rapidly hurtling through human speech had no worth or place.

Having reached that point in a long seemingly endless fall where a human might black out and thankfully unlike the poor pig be unaware of a sudden abrupt stop, his descent slowed. Gently he touched solid ground to be met by an eerily faint greyish light. It was as pale as the relief he assumed was

colouring his face right then.

Peering hard into the indistinct light he managed to make out a tunnel. It seemed to run through a type of soil and not rock or chalk as he would expect. With fingers trailing along the side he stepped forward in what he hoped will be the right direction to take him out. The walls were gritty to the touch and not the soft or crumbly kind of soil he generally tilled. But before he had chance to gather wits enough to wonder, is this tunnel man-made? And might it collapse? And am I about to be buried here forever? An instinctive twinge urged him to look closely at the walls.

Only to wish he had ignored it.

Section Fourteen

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The soil was alive. Each grain teemed with purpose. A few fell before his feet or onto his head. Others seemingly trembled as his fingers touched them. Grains began shifting as if to ease the passage of some grey-silvery-white filaments he spotted creeping through the soil as if to knit it all together to create one huge living organism.

When more of the strands appeared he was able to sense the life within, pushing them silently but resolutely onwards - some even passed by his feet to climb into the other wall. Or above his head to entwine themselves in the tunnel's ceiling. Then with a fearful shudder, he realised he was being woven inside a silvery-white cocoon teeming with life he could feel but not see. Strangely, he was reminded of the Queen's gown and then the kitchen and Mama and little Lucy.

Overcome with a sudden longing and sense of helplessness, he screamed again. But just like before it was soundless. Desperate to get out and home he panicked and stumbled forward in what he hoped was the right direction. But the tunnel shifted and closed in. Turning quickly he fled the other way only for the tunnel to peter out. He was the proverbial rat caught in a trap.

But whose trap was he in?

There was only one answer… the Fairy Queen's!

What does she want of me? He wondered fearfully. But what can I do but blooming wait here until she cares to explain herself? But what if I'm
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smothered or starve?

Then he wondered shrewdly. But how will she explain my absence? And if it’s a punishment for something, then how can it truly be one if I don’t know what it’s for?

So he hunkered down to wait for the Queen to reveal her purpose, as he felt sure she would.

Where he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

“I could be here for flipping ever,” he was grumbling when drops of water landed on his head and ran down his face. When they touched his lips he licked them greedily. He had not realised just how thirsty he had become. It was a beautiful moment and the water tasted as he imagined it does when it’s new and untouched by man or beast. Or as he suddenly thought when more water dripped into the tunnel, pure and unpolluted.

The silvery strands are gorging on it as well, he thought as he noted them swelling like parched plants. He almost fancied he could hear their joyous exchanges. ‘Drink kin of mine and enjoy’.

Then he was filled with a sudden almost primal urge. He had to lick those filaments and take them into himself. Before he knew it, he was. Only for his head to spin as he thought wow. They’re sweet and full of… full of vigour, he decided.

He almost laughed when the filaments spread across his mouth but not to smother him but to feed him. Under their care, his moroseness disappeared

and like them, he started to swell with a need to grow, to find light and become something beautiful.

But to do that he will have to break through those filaments and the soil. Only to be frustrated by a feeling that he did not want to harm them for they were now his carer and friend.

As if understanding his needs the filaments parted above his head, just enough to allow him to scrabble at the soil. It came away easily in his hands and he rapidly worked upwards to head, or so he hoped, towards the light that he knew was out there waiting.

The higher he clawed and scrabbled the more hopeful he became while the network of filaments continued to feed and encourage his efforts. On he went, through various seams until he came upon one where the filaments were fewer and their sustenance weaker. But determined to strike out into the light and become something wonderful he kept going. Only to hit a patch of soil that was as dense as concrete and filament-free, while possessing no sense of life whatsoever.

Not a single blip.

Nothing. And it utterly refused to yield.

As he wiped sweat off his face he caught a taste of the soil. “It’s foul and sour,” he sputtered. “And dead. So dead that I can’t get through it. Not even me tractor could till this. And it’s probably toxic too and it might even burn the tyres off. But if I can’t go through it, how do I go on?” He wondered, suddenly feeling tired and spent and completely useless.

He needed the filament’s help. He needed the sense of hope and purpose they had filled him with. But with none to be found he soon collapsed. Weakly, he

wondered, can I or should I even try to go on?

Other than to retreat inwards and fall into a deep depression there was no answer. Even the urge to become something beautiful deserted him. He was as useless as a seed encased by thick concrete.

He even forgot about Mama. And Lucy. His beloved farm. And to keep gripping the soil.

He slipped and fell. But not too far. Just enough to fall into the filaments welcoming embrace where happily they fed and encouraged him once again.

Section Fifteen

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Newly strengthened he underwent an epiphany. Whether those filaments encouraged it, or it arose from that invisible life he sensed teeming all about him, he had no idea. But it was a bold one. Suddenly, he understood that he had just encountered the ravages humans inflict upon the soil, daily.

Pressed into that compacted, impenetrable, dead seam he guessed were traces of war. Pollution. Micro-plastics. Rusting tin cans. Broken ceramics. Old trainers. Toys, cars, motorbikes, rubble, oil spills and more. The decay of overuse. Of pesticide poisoning. Radioactive particles and the lack of general care and other abuses of the planet. All heaped in with the buried evidence of how wickedly children and women and all that other life that simply tries to get by are exploited and treated for someone else's gain. And broken down bones, he then shuddered. And unhallowed bodies along with the ruination of forests and layer upon layer of grief and shattered dreams.

Reeling with humankind's abuse of the earth the Queen's contempt for his kind struck him as hard as an angry boxer's fist. Staggering, he both imagined and felt the weight of a massive mound towering above him. And just like Lucy often does with her fork when playing with mashed potato, planted on top of it in proud domination was a huge flag emblazoned with every form of currency known the world over. But instead of gravy encircling the island, it was surrounded by benches hued from crying trees for people to sit on and worship the god of excess. Or to kneel before their twin altars of want and greed.
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Then the idea came, if you want to be free Her-Bert to flower you need to break through that seam and in doing you will change it. Although how he might accomplish such a feat neither he nor the epiphany's source had any idea. Thoughts of evolution arose, which he quickly dismissed. He would die long before chance happened along to help. And anyway, wouldn't I need to be above ground and flowering and seeding to encourage evolutionary changes to take place?

Almost back to where he had started, he waited for chance to come his way.

Chance, he mused chant-like.

Chance…

I just need a chance. That's all.

Then I'll show the world how beautiful I can flower. And I'll show 'em what I can give back, cos it ain't all take, is it… Not with nature it ain't. And I'll show 'em how much they need me and all these brilliant life-sustaining filaments. And not forgetting this invisible life I feel teeming around me. I reckon it's feeding the soil and the filaments which then feeds them. Together they keep nature running properly, somehow.

Just a chance…

That's all I ask.

A chance for me and for them, he implored.

But then he blacked out.

Section Sixteen

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"And so you shall have it, Her-Bert my little seed," the Queen said lightly as he suddenly returned to the loud, bright, cheerful familiar surroundings of the farmhouse kitchen.

Her eyes sparkled, while her voice sang like a bubbling brook rushing happily by to join the sea when she added mischievously.

“I thought it was only right to introduce myself properly and to say hello to you in my special way…”

She’s just played a fairy’s wicked mind trick on me, he decided angrily. He knew he ought to scream.

What right did you have to do that to me? Who do you think you are?

But instinctively he felt sure that she was that flower he had just yearned to become. But before he could react she laughed into the face of his anger, causing his fear of her to rise quickly.

She’s able to do such terrible frightening things so easily!

His fear then shot into the stratosphere when he noticed that his hands, knees and feet were covered in soil. And so was his hair, he discovered as he ran a nervous hand through it.

It had not been a vision at all!
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And her use of the word ‘seed’ was dammed deliberate, he decided just as her light tone turned hard yet again.

“Especially ...as… you… live… here… on… my… land… And now that we’re more properly acquainted…”

She intoned, fixing him with her toe-curling almost defiant stare. He looked away uneasily, scared of what might follow, only to see the kitchen in a new way.

Maybe it was her doing? Who knows? But it did not change the fact that he suddenly saw the kitchen as a tidier and slightly more practical version of a stone-age cave. With a sinking heart, the idea that we humans have learnt little about our home, or each other in all those intervening years bullied his eyes and conscience until he turned to face her again.

Somewhat sheepishly.

Thankfully her voice skipped from heavy to light as she offered with a smile.

“But don’t worry Her-Bert. I do not mind you being here…, for now. I feel sure you will tend and care for the land well…”

Right?" she added meaningfully.

“It is a trait your daughter carries with her well.” She continued.

“But just so you know. Understand that we have chased people off this farm in the past for not caring, or for failing to look after the wood as it rightly deserves.”

That was revealed far too brightly for his comfort and strongly suggested she would quite happily take the same action again. But to Papa’s relief, she then

declared with a half smile.

“But I’ve decided you can stay.”

Once more her tone grew serious as she issued a warning.

“Though do be mindful of how you treat my wood. It is our home and I will not stand for it being destroyed or harmed in any way. Treat it well and we will treat you the same. OK…?” She suggested commandingly.

Papa felt compelled to obey with a dumbly nodded yes, nervously delivered several times while she explained further.

“If a tree gives up a branch, use a piece of it, by all means. But otherwise do not be greedy. Leave some of it to nourish the creatures and the soil. And don’t clear the autumn leaves away. Let them lay where they fall for they do so with purpose. And do not cut down any trees or plants. Understand, that you are merely a part of the cycle which you should neither try to control nor own. Simply leave nature to grow as it wants, free and uninterrupted by the bad habits of you human fleas.”

She then washed away his stress with another beautiful warm smile before glancing over at Lucy, where with softening eyes and a widening smile she revealed her fondness for the child.

“Lastly, I would like to thank you for the gift of your daughter.” She declared.

That ought to have set his worries twinging even more, except, he was far too stressed to think clearly.

Had Mama heard the Queen’s words she might well have worried, are they going to take Lucy from us? But Papa less familiar with fairy ways merely

smiled weakly when she murmured.

“In many ways, Lucy is almost one of us and you should be proud of her.”

She fell silent for a moment as if lost in thought. Then turning to face him again she stated strongly.

"I believe we are now properly acquainted and that we understand each other. And we do, don’t we? She asked sternly.

Then she smiled satisfied when he nervously nodded yes.

“Good. Now then Her-Bert, do feel free to tell me all you know about those boys who destroyed the unicorn flower, as your darling daughter so knowingly calls it. That flower…” she explained with another flash of incredible gem-like eyes that spoke so loudly of her wonder for the planet. “...is a rare gift. There are only a few like it around the world and what those boys did to it was… terrible… But even more… *terrible* ...is…”

Section Seventeen

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The Fairy Queen's bitterly spat "terrible" sent cold shivers rippling through Papa's body and spirit. As the Queen's mood turned ugly, her thick silky slightly wavy rust coloured hair erupted like plumes of angry fire around her head. The intense flames coloured her transparent gown which suddenly billowed about her like a fiercely raging forest fire as she leaned into him. Their noses almost touched as her fire spitting eyes locked onto his.

His mind exploded into a vision of the planet screaming in outrage and agony while Humanity’s tools shaved the surface and viciously bit into or harshly slashed its skin. Then another equally horrible vision replaced it. Gaping holes and deep mines appeared everywhere, turning this glorious hotbed of fantastic life into a more tattered version of the Swiss-cheese-like moon illustrated in one of Lucy’s many picture books.

He gulped hard when a third vision arose to bully his sense of human conceit.

She forced Papa to watch rising swelling seas come surging across the continents. They flattened the few remaining forests, swallowed valleys whole and relentlessly destroying every town and city the world over. The many gaping holes and miles upon miles of tunnels were filled with thrashing water. The raging force tore the Earth apart and collapsed mountain ranges. In a series of violent shudders and screaming roars huge plumes of dense steam gushed from the Earth’s wounded bowels. Then suddenly the Earth fell in upon itself. To his abject horror it then fragmented as thousands of furious tornados rushed in to tear up what little remained. With a bursting heart, he watched solar winds carry off the last shattered traces of planet Earth. All that
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remained was a new comet which life forms elsewhere will one day idly wonder about.

As the earth ingloriously died, he recalled those tiny harmless silvery-grey-white filaments that had run through the soil and unselfishly nurtured him when he needed it, simply because they wanted to. And this is the fate that awaits them. And us!

Filled with remorse for humanity's thoughtlessness, grieving for the loss of innocent lives and burdened by the weight of a new repulsion for his kinds destructive ways, he staggered blindly backwards.

Striking the counter he instinctively clutched onto it for dear life as he awaited the Queen's next assault. But her face bore neither a smile nor fierceness as she watched him closely. A few shades of pity may have passed fleetingly across it as her hair and gown returned to normal. But otherwise, he had no idea how to read her. All he could do was fear those other horrors she might send to assault his mind. But other than to smirk knowingly, she made no attempt to ease his fears.

As far as she was concerned, her visions were merely some of the many fates awaiting this Earth, dealt out by the hands of uncaring humans. She would quite happily send him more and was toying with that very idea even as she stepped closer to peer even harder into his frightened eyes once again. This glorious personification of wild and freely running nature then seemingly reached right into him to pull his quacking spirit out. Squeezing it hard she declared softly, but commandingly.

"...As for those boys who callously destroyed my favourite plant… Know this, my dear human neighbour, Mr Her-Bert St. Clair. I'm disappointed to see they are continuing the traditions of destruction so willingly practised by many males of your kind. They seem to know no better way of behaving in

my home… Do they…! She declared menacingly.

“But now it has to stop! And you… Her-Bert… need to listen well…”

He winced and she paused while the kitchen fell dark as if she had just reached out and gathered all the world’s thunderstorms together to generate the energy to power her next command.

“...Between us, we will make sure that it stops… right?”

Having made her intentions clear, the storm abated as quickly as it arose. The sun came out to shine once more in the kitchen when the Queen explained with obvious respect.

“If it were not for your daughter’s caring heart and her quick reactions we fairies, even with our many gifts, may not have been able to save our revered flower. So we owe her a deep debt of gratitude, which I promise… we will repay.”

“Ah… Ah...Tha...thank you”, he stammered, uncertainly.

Was it a good thing? Or might it be bad for the family? For the boys? Or for Lucy?

Worse than those even, he realised, was that he had no way of knowing what might happen, other than it would and horribly so. With no move to settle his fears, the Queen turned away to watch Lucy playing. The child’s bright giggles as they arose rapidly melted her scorn. Look at how she plays and harmonises so well with my happy kin, her rising smile suggested.

Freed from the Queen’s intense stare Papa was not off her hook yet. He received another vision. A gentle but more telling one - a rare glimpse into fairy culture.

Look at the fairies Her-Bert. See how happy and free they are. They are not my subjects as you humans would arrogantly declare. Our belief is the same as those poor beleaguered Scots living to the north of this country who were still in touch with their mystical past once so richly and happily followed. Until the culture-less hollow spirited English intent on enrichment and subjugation invaded to either beat or trick a love of kin out of them. Just as their kind went on to encourage a psychopathic want for position and power to kill off fellowships and cultures, based on respect for each other and the Earth's bounties, all across the world. They spread the idea of raw power by any means for the few, regardless of what they have to destroy, or of the cost to others… Callous destruction is the only culture your kind follows Her-Bert. Now they must learn the right way.

Papa freely swallowed several times before sighing silently. Whatever bad things might befall Mama and me and the boys, at least our Lucy will be spared the Queen's wrath.

Then all thoughts of revenge and the earth's destruction shot straight up the fire's hungry flue when Lucy shrilly shrieked.

"Papa! Mama! Look!"

Section Eighteen

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"Look!" Lucy pointed excitedly. "Look the plant is forming a bud. See Papa! See Mama!"

And so the fantastic plant was, and quickly too.

The fairies and humans huddled around the table to witness the plant's new flower bud swelling ready to open.

Overjoyed, the cloud of fluttering fairies suddenly burst into song and began to flit, skip, fly and dance around the kitchen. Like the Queen's gown, they reflected the colours of wherever they were passing by. Some glowed with the bright orange, yellow, and blues and greens of the drinking cups hanging on the wall and the matching plates and bowls stacked on the side. Others reflected the flamboyantly feathered tropical birds in the family's treasured and framed rainforest scene. Or they took on the blue and silver hues of the floor tiles. Even the many coloured flowers in the single wallpapered wall - Mama's attempt to brighten the kitchen-cave - flashed into life as they danced around until the kitchen quickly resembled a chaotic knees-up in a glitzy ballroom.

The fairy's freely expressive wild dancing was accompanied by their beautiful melodious and spontaneous singing. As their voices filled the kitchen tambourines gaily bashed, fiddles happily bowed and pipes enchantedly flowed. Then amid their crescendos of pure joy and rivers of sound, the flower burst open. It was a beauty too. If anything, to Lucy's excited eyes, it was even more stunning than before.
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To the family’s amazement, the Queen in a flash of sparkling shimmers jumped on the table and immediately shrunk to the size of one of Lucy’s tiny dolls. Two of the unicorn stamens leapt from the flower to join her, expanding until they matched the Queen’s height and all their wonderful features, their long manes and tails were fully revealed. As Lucy sighed at the adorable unicorns the Queen with a glorious “Yip” leapt onto their backs, but not to sit conventionally. Placing a foot on each back the Queen stood tall as she rode them in happy gallop around the kitchen while the fairies streamed after her in merry pursuit.

It was a fabulous sight, one that would thrill many a Celtic heart, Mama thought. And so the night continued until the sun began to show where one by one in the day’s new light the fairies flickered and blinked out.

“We’re not gone,” a sweet voice said, which Lucy suggested was the Queen.

“But when the sun comes up and it’s bright like now, you will not see a fairy as the light passes right through us. But if you look in the shadows you will see our likes again.”

Sure enough, as they eagerly peered into the dark corners and beneath the cabinets they spotted the fairy’s shimmers.

“It’s difficult to see you properly in the shadows,” Lucy explained.

It’s because deep shadows have no colour of their own or depth. You will always see us best in fire, candle or moonlight," the Queen explained. Although which one of the fairies was the Queen Lucy had no idea.

That set her thoughts rolling. I know there are fairies here, but I cannot see them…

From that hesitant start her reasoning led her on to decide…

My dark dusty old school is full of scary shadows so the fairies could easily hide there if I need them to.

And I think I do, she decided a few moments later as she thought of a way to deal with the bullies and hopefully for good…

A plan was born. One that the Queen was more than happy to embellish. Over the coming weeks, Lucy spent many a long instructive hour down in the woods. Whenever she returned to the house her cheeks were sweetly flushed while her eyes sparkled with otherworldly light.

To Papa's mind, Lucy seemed to be growing taller as well.

"At this rate, she'll not fit in the house anymore, dear," Papa fretted. "We'll have to keep her out in the hay barn."

"Don't be silly," Mama laughed. "It's her new self-assurance showing, that's all. Our Lucy is finding out who she and it's making her stand taller."

"Ah! That'll be it," Papa agreed with relief. "When you see Lucy in the morning dear, tell her I'm very pleased and to keep it up."

"I think she knows that already, dear," Mama declared while quietly thinking. And she's getting to know a lot more than that too, I suspect.

Section Nineteen

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As the days passed they came to love their new Lucy as much as they did the once meeker child, but they were afeared too.

What might she grow to be?

Their worries sprang from how she could suddenly speak lovingly and knowledgeably about nature using ideas and attitudes that were way above her years and experience. She was also developing a gracefulness and a love for dance and music. Although that's no bad thing, Mama thought.

Papa merely sat in his favourite armchair with his face wrapped in a smile whenever Lucy danced to fairy music. It played often in their house now that the fairies and humans had got over their shyness of each other.

But topping those changes, was the strong sense of deep other-worldly knowledge which sparkled so brightly in her eyes. Mama could not help wondering, is she becoming more fey? Are the fairies about to claim our child as their own? Will we lose her to never see her again…?

For such are the old stories of fairy, Mama knew.

It was Lucy one evening during tea, after having startled them with more of her new attitudes and knowledge, who was to put their worries to right.

"I know what you are thinking Mama and Papa. You are scared the fairies are taking me for their own, aren't you? But they are not. I promise."
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They were both about to plea, but you're only a young girl how can you possibly know, when Lucy silenced them with a hard look which gave them both the shivers. This is not our Lucy staring at us, they both felt, although they had no idea who it might be. But before their wits could rally, Lucy in a frighteningly adult way declared.

"What use do the fairies have for a human like me, except for this? They want me to spread good word about them. They are dismayed that many human stories make them into evil creatures when they are not."

While Mama and Papa swallowed hard and wondered, do we still want our tea, Lucy broke her stare with a lightly chuckled.

"But I do agree, they can be a little spiteful at times. But with good reason!"

The air for a few seconds thrummed with expectant silence as they waited for Lucy to explain what she meant. But the child merely smiled in her knowing way. Mama raised her eyebrows while Papa frowned but both assumed it was to be another of her secrets. One that may or may not be revealed in due course.

"So you see," Lucy sent lightly into the twisting faces of their concerned bemusement, "there's nothing to worry about. Is there?"

'Oh isn't there, darling child?' Their worries flashed.

But before such thoughts could turn into harsh words Lucy's head dipped down to her bowl. Picking up her fork she teased out a long strand of spaghetti from the mass in front of her. Relieved they watched the old Lucy return to them. Noisily and messily and very happily so, she sucked several strands up. In a fit of giggles, she splattered tomato sauce all over her face, her dress and the tablecloth.

In their relief, Mama and Papa did not fuss or mind. Instead, they laughed and joined in. Soon they were all competing to see who could make the most noise and mess. But after Lucy was abed and as they cleared the table - assigning the cloth to soak in the laundry room and the dishes in the sink - they each silently wondered about the fairies and Lucy's need to take revenge on the bullies. By the time they reached the dish stacking and drying stage, they were wittering and worrying like a pair of protective hens leading overbold and lively new broods through a dangerous wood.

"What if the children turn on her." Mama wondered. "They might in fear of the fairies. Or to ridicule her if they don't believe in them. What if? And let's be honest dear, fairies have never been loved in this area, not since all the cattle fell sick that time and died. They blamed the fairies, didn't they."

"Aye, they did that," he agreed. "But we now know T.B. was to blame and it had nowt to do with fairies. But I agree they are not liked. And we don't know what terrible things they might be capable of stirring up when riled."

Only to suggest moments later with a fearful heart, but quietly, lest his voice travelled upstairs into Lucy's room. If still awake, he felt sure she would be listening.

"Or what the fairies might do if they see a need to protect our child."

"And what about those boys", Mama whispered as she caught on to his mood. "I cannot help thinking about them. What if the fairies turn them into something horrible?"

"Would they do that?" Papa asked suddenly scared.

"Would they?"

Only to reflect that the Queen might well do so. After all didn’t she turn me into a seed or summit just to say hello and by the way, here’s what else I can do if I choose.

Then they both wondered, almost together. If they do something horrible to the boys, how will the town react? Only to worry and there will be us, right smack bang in the middle of it all!

Section Twenty

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Stacking the plates away in the pantry Mama said with a shrug which Papa could not see. "I don't know. They may or may not do something dear..."

Right at that moment she was more concerned for Papa. The last thing she wanted was for him to lose his temper and go off on one, as he so often does when worried. Who knows what trouble he might stir up in the woods or the village accidentally? She fretted.

“But I agree, those old stories do suggest fairies are capable of doing some terrible things when stirred up.” She said warningly, hoping he might get her point.

From inside the larder, clattering crockery about, she missed the return of Papa’s annoying habit of gnawing on his top lip during moments of stress.

“...but they do want Lucy to put the telling of their history right,” she chirped positively. “So who knows what they have in mind?”

“Yeah. Who knows…” Papa sighed, throwing down the tea towel and reaching for the kettle to fill it. Watching it come to the boil he mumbled into the flames, “I really hope they don’t get nasty, cos it will come back on us.”

“What was that dear? I was moving the plates about, I didn’t hear you…”

He started to explain “I said…”
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But then he blurted out his true fears. “If the locals find out about the fairies they might burn down the wood and run us out of town for protecting them.”

“Oh, I don’t think so dear. Remember…” Mama said as she joined his side to set two mugs down on the counter. Yellow for her and blue for him. With an indulgent grin, she stepped back to make room to allow him to splosh boiling water into them. On this night his aim was good and he got most of it into the mugs. Smiling approvingly behind his back, she suggested.

“Lucy is not our Lucy anymore. You could say she is now part fairy and I agree that new side of her needs to see the boys punished. But I also believe our daughter’s kindly human nature does not want it to be in the terrible way the fairies might have in mind. I think their punishment will be more discreet” she suggested which had more hope behind it than was comfortable.

“So Papa, I guess we’ll just have to leave it to her to sort out. And hope for the best, as people like to say.”

The next morning during a hearty breakfast of thick porridge, made from the cereal crops grown in their fields to the south of the farm and topped with delicious thick cream from their jersey cow - along with an added splash of home-made blackberry jam, Lucy, after they relayed their fears, explained.

“But Mama and Papa the fairies will have their revenge, whether we like it or not. My way will be better and the boys will not forget it, not ever,” she declared with fire in her eyes.

Which scared them both a little. But they were proud as well to know that Lucy was standing up for herself in a world where people bully those who they consider to be different. It was just like Lucy had said a few before when they discussed that very issue.

“Out of fear, black rooks will gang up together to peck at a white rook because they are different. And stupid people act the same when they meet someone they don’t understand or they believe they don’t fit in with their ways. Some of the boys in school say I’m strange because of what I say about nature and how it all works together and they pick on me for it. But you know I’m not strange, right Mama and Papa.”

With her new awareness, it was not just the boys in school who thought her strange. Some of the locals were saying it too. Even the postman had wondered suspiciously. “Haven’t seen your Lucy about so much these days. Is she alright?”

So that morning pride for Lucy beat their concerns.

“Yes,” Mama said, as they discussed Lucy over a spot of lunch while the child was out of the way at school. “She is getting clever and strong-willed and I agree with you. Of late she has been too serious…”

“I would suggest, stern even,” Papa interjected while toying with his cheese on toast.

Normally it was his favourite snack, but not today. The stress was making the toast stick in his throat. He had to clear it with loud hurrr-mmphs which he settled with long slugs of tea. After the last hurrr-mmph, he placed the mug slowly but firmly down before doing a rare thing. He clasped his wife’s hand tenderly. Then, to her very pleasant surprise, which duly went on to make her blush, he said.

“I’ve not always listened to you, especially when I should have done. And you were right about the variety of potatoes to sow this year dear and I never thanked you for that advice. Until now,” he said with a soft squeeze of her hand.

“So, I will do whatever you think is right for Lucy and the fairies. Because not only do I love you, I trust you too.”

“Well… my…,” she said slowly and somewhat flustered. A heat not borne of embarrassment but love for her husband and the closeness of the moment travelled up her neck, colouring her cheeks and painting sparkles in her eyes. And bless me she thought, it’s not even February and our anniversary!

“...Well,” she murmured again, as she collected her thoughts while tenderly placing her free hand on top of his. Which he then lightly smothered with his other hand.

“She has been stern of late, I agree. But she’s also caring which I believe will win through.”

“Yes dear,” he replied, thoughtfully. "But we must not forget what else Lucy said before leaving the table this morning. Remember?

“And neither will anyone else there truly forget it. Not unless the fairies want them to.”

“And what she meant by that is the real worry…, isn’t it.”

“I haven’t forgotten, dear,” Mama said. “And it’s like us. We have to trust each other. Don’t we? And that includes our Lucy. And I know her heart, as I know you do. So I say for the moment we leave her be and trust she’ll take the right course.”

“So we let the matter be for now then” Papa agreed grandly. Before adding a little scribbled sentence of his own into what was proving to be a hastily written saga. One with an ending which neither of them could see with any certainty.

“That is my love… I agree, we trust her. Until we can’t anymore.”

“Agreed,” Mama said with a smidgeon of regret.

It showed in the slight twitch of her little finger when it rose and waved like a submitting wrestler calling to the referee. Worse still, her other fingers were trapped beneath Papa’s so she could not cross them for luck, as she wanted. I wonder, do we do that to fend off the power of binding agreements? Oh, well, she then thought. I’m certain my crossed toes and ankles will work just as well. But don’t you dare let my trust in you down, Lucy… Don’t you dare!

Section Twenty One

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A few weeks later, just like previous years when summer turns to autumn, they accompanied Lucy to Saturday school for a special show and tell assembly, held for the children. It also allowed gifts of vegetables to be presented to the town's poorer inhabitants. But this time, instead of parental excitement lifting Mama and Papa's steps, trepidation weighed them down.

For once it was not their worry that there might be a representative from the council's revenue department out spying, looking for a child's slip-up. Yeah, me dad bought me this from what he earns from his second job - you know cash-in-hand like. Or, I keep me rabbit in our spanking new extension me parents build for it.

Just as the council official was strongly encouraged to leave the assembly last year, they worried. What if it all turns bad and we are chased out of town? What if…? They each pondered in silence.

Lucy happily walked beside them carefully clutching her treasured Unicorn flower which for this assembly had been put in a beautiful ceramic pot. Neither of her parents had seen it before. It simply appeared one evening and they accepted it must have been a gift from the fairies.

And what if the flower gets broken again? Mama worried. Will it heal this time and how will the fairies react…?

During breakfast, her parents had almost pleaded.
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“Please don’t take the plant in with you Lucy. In fact, we’re not even sure you should go today.”

But Lucy insisted on attending the school assembly and taking her beloved plant along as her show and tell. Mama had quietly hoped that the fairies who had taken to visiting regularly might back her up. But to her dismay, they were all for Lucy taking in the plant.

Lucy wanting to show the plant was not their main worry. It was the telling part that concerned them more. Who knows what our Lucy might say? Or worse still, how people might react if she mentions the fairies? Once again Papa worried, will we be chased off our farm if they believe her?

He had good reason to worry for he had no idea what Lucy’s plan was. While Lucy stubbornly refused to say other than to suggest. I’m saving the surprise for the assembly.

Lucy was not totally worry-free either.

As they walked to school Lucy mulled over the past few confrontations with her teacher. Trying to work out how best to present her knowledge of the fairies, which in the past the teacher has attempted to ridicule or stifle. A number of her classmates had joined the teacher with loud howls and put-downs, but not all. That had pleased Lucy and given her hope. But she was certainly not happy with her teacher. Neither were the fairies when she told them about the teacher.

“I only tried telling her what you lot told me,” Lucy explained to the Queen one evening down in the woods as they watched the other fairies making merry up in the tree branches.

“So, what did you say exactly?” The Queen wondered, just to make sure

Lucy had it all right. She was young after all and there had been a lot for her to absorb in such short a time. Not that time meant much to the fairy, but humans she fancied, had so little of it, where in their heedless haste to pass through it, they wasted lots and ruined much. But that thought she kept to herself, although she knew clever little Lucy had already grasped the idea.

“I got angry,” Lucy said, “when the teacher started reading out folk stories about fairies doing nasty things to humans.”

The Queen had bit her tongue at that. The truth is, some humans have been treated rather nastily from time to time, but it was their own fault.

Which Lucy seemed to understand.

“I told the teacher about how the fairy’s lands were stolen by those humans who had left the Indus Valley to find new places to settle.”

Then Lucy explained with a grin. “The teacher looked confused by that. So I had to explain that the Indus valley was in what we now call the Indian continent and that angered her even more because I knew where it was and she didn’t.”

Section Twenty Two

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"I think I can see why your teacher reacted," the Queen offered kindly.

“Most human adults do not like to be told by their children that they are wrong, or to be caught out by them in a fib. And they have yet to learn Lucy, that children at times see things far clearer and with more wonder than the adults care to do. Children so often see the bad things adults are doing to the land. And it is the children who will urge an adult to tend a bird’s broken wing, or to a hedgehog’s winter cold. It is sad, isn’t it that your adults so often lose their capacity to see life’s beauty and to care for the things that matter.”

“You mean, the environment, don’t you?” Lucy had asked shrewdly.

“I do indeed,” the Queen agreed with a light chuckle, that seemed to delight a fluttering of moths play tag close by. Immediately, they diverted and encircled her head a few times creating a living crown before fluttering away.

“But now we seem to have moved away from your story…” The Queen said as she watched the moth’s antics with a fond smile.

“… A story I do want to hear. So, please if you will, continue with it, Lucy.”

“I told her, humans spread out of the Indus Valley and came up here like you explained to me. And I said the humans did not like having to ask the fairy for permission to cross their lands. Then again, just like you taught me, I said,
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that some wicked humans befriended fairies and once they learnt where they lived they turned on the fairy and slaughtered them, and then stole their lands. To cover their guilt they made up bad stories about the fairy just like the one teacher was reading out which made me leap out of me seat to go and tell her off. It was about a type of fairy humans called red caps. She said they stole human babies and killed them to use the blood to colour their hats with."

"The humans did those evil things to our young and then spread those horrid stories about us, Lucy. It is like how the new settlers in America accused the Native Americans of scalping when it was the settlers who started that vile practice. Maybe they tell these lies to cover their guilt," the Queen suggested with such sadness that Lucy felt compelled to hug her. Which earned her a hug back and a smile that lifted her own sadness and pleased her heart. So, more lightly, she explained.

"I also told her about the wicked way the Indigenous peoples around the world were slaughtered in their tens of thousands and their lands stolen. Just like yours were. And about the way they are still being treated by the rest of us today, especially by politicians and businesses and how it upsets the fairy because they are your cousins."

"Well done you," the Queen clapped joyously when Lucy finished. "You have the tale down perfectly. But you left this part out of your telling. In the far distant past the Indigenous peoples were of fairy too, but for reasons we will not explore now, they lost most of their magic. But not their love and enjoyment of the forests and nature which they lovingly tend. Or for their more simple way of life that is still so like ours. And let me add this Lucy. If it were not for their selfless efforts those forests might not be here today, yet shamefully, you humans call them savages while trying to steal all that away from them."

"I told her a bit of that too. I said about how we're still killing the tribes and

stealing their lands. And she didn't like that and she shouted at me to be quiet, she did."

"I think I know why," the Queen ventured.

She had listened to Lucy talking about the teacher where her suspicions about the woman's motives had grown. Enough for her to send a few fairies to spy on the teacher. What they discovered had upset the Queen for Lucy.

The spies reported. "The teacher hates Lucy's niceness and natural cleverness. She also detests the child's enthusiasm for nature and her need to care for it, as we do. And she hates Lucy's inquiring mind as well. And, yes, why not add to the list so it's out there," they said…

"She's jealous of her prettiness as well. It would seem that our little human Lucy is simply everything the teacher is not. And on top of all that, Lucy is, as we all know only too well," they laughed. "Very forthright. And the teacher is still stinging from her last clash with Lucy, so much so that she hates the child."

With those thoughts in mind, the Queen carefully suggested to Lucy.

"I believe your teacher's attitude is far too woven in human history and their needs and wants for us to unravel here tonight, Lucy. But briefly, I believe you will find that her ancestors had a lot to do with how the world was plundered and polluted and how it's ended up now. She comes from a long line of adventurers, as those early explorers were called by your lot. We prefer to call them, murderers and thieves. And her family is linked with the greedy industrialists who followed on. Her whole life and beliefs are tied up in a history that you, my girl, have cleverly but innocently pulled apart in her classroom. I do think Lucy you might well have made an enemy out of her. But never mind that for now, we will do our best to help you. Together, when

the time is right, we’ll deal with her properly.”

Section Twenty Three

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The first part of the assembly where the parent's gifts are presented for distribution amongst the old and the poorer of the town's inhabitants went off well enough. Afterwards, as a number of the parents do, they slipped out to return to their businesses or homes.

Mama and Papa remained in their seats. They always stayed for the children's show and tell. But this year, well, they fretted - "Even if we want to go," they whispered, "how can we leave Lucy on her own?"

"We can't. And this will not be like last year's show" Mama whispered behind her hand with a trace of a smile as she recalled. "Lucy's late-arriving lamb certainly stole the show dear, didn't it."

"Aye, it did," he laughed. "But show me a child who isn't happy to see a lamb gambolling about out of control on the stage and bleating loudly while poohing everywhere."

"Yes, that was something," she whispered back. "But whether we like it or not, I think this year is going to top that. Although I fear my love, it will not do so for the right reason."

"Yeah, you're right," he replied, with a firm tense nod and a deep calming breath before crossing his fingers for luck. Well, he thought, as he watched the children one by one take to the stage to reveal their show and deliver their tell. The future comes marching in, for good or bad.
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They were to have a long nervous wait for Lucy's turn.

"Lucy is to be last on," her teacher had smiled earlier when she led Mama and Papa to their allotted seats that were well out of everybody's way - as the teacher well knew. They were set right at the back to the left in the corner and hidden deep in the shadows of the hall.

"But she usually comes somewhere in the middle of the assembly", Mama protested somewhat surprised as she took her seat. "Why has it changed this year?"

"We thought it best!" The teacher snapped haughtily. While thinking, it's best for me. She had a lot at stake. Her candidature for the headship of the school for one.

With the possibility of the school governors attending, her promotion may well hang on the need to keep Lucy from speaking out against her, as she felt sure the child will. They have disagreed a lot of late about fairies and nature. But what truly galled the teacher was whenever she checked her facts at home, she found to her dismay that Lucy was right every time. Some of the children were realising that as well. Lucy had become too dangerous. She either had to be expelled, although there were no grounds to do so, yet, as she was such a good pupil. Or chased out of the school for good.

Thanks to a bit of accidental eavesdropping on a particular gang of children gathered one lunchtime in the corner of the playground, she discovered a way to make it happen so that none of the blame could ever come back to her. The gang were just as keen to see Lucy chased out of the school and they were making plans to do just that. So, the teacher decided that putting Lucy on last will help the gang. She knew that parents almost always leave once their children have made their presentation, so with Lucy appearing last, there will be fewer witnesses to what might happen, or willing hands to help the child.

In the face of all that scheming, Mama asked sternly. “But why do you think it best?”

Yes, Papa thought, it is very mysterious. He was just about to say that very thing when the teacher snapped. “She’s last… because she is… And who are you to question my decision? Now if you don’t mind, I have other parents to greet!”

With no idea what to make of it, Mama and Papa watched her strut away, stroppily with her nose in the air and an important swagger. Fleetingly, an image of bags of animal feed with the teacher’s face stamped on the front flashed through Papa’s mind. Only for him to decide, Nah, that would be too good for the likes of her. And anyway, she’ll probably give the pigs indigestion and they’re too valuable to have to suffer that.

What Mama and Papa could not know, mainly because Lucy had not said anything, is, she was having problems with that teacher. Equally, being good-natured and not wanting to deprive the other children of their chance to show their tell, Lucy had not argued when the teacher told her.

“I’ve decided you will go on last, Lucy.”

Instead, a little smile curled the edges of her mouth as she thought, that’s perfect. That is just what I need.

The remaining teaching staff on the other hand had not been as accommodating as Lucy.

“But that isn’t the usual way of the assembly.” They protested when the teacher told them what she expected them to agree to.

“The girls always go on first and alphabetically. It’s a school tradition.”

“Baloney to tradition,” Lucy’s teacher retorted. “And I suggest you lot learn where your loyalties lie. Remember, I’m on a shortlist of two to take over the headship of this school. And the other candidate, as you well know, does not stand a chance.”

They did know and only too well. They had heard the nasty rumours circulating about the other candidate. Indeed for the past few months, they had discussed very little else in the staff room. They also knew who started the rumours. So, duly cowered, they agreed to break with tradition where the new show and tell presentation order was dutifully pinned to the school announcement board. Where it was eagerly read by a certain gang of boys.

Section Twenty Four

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As the teacher sat down smugly, Mama and Papa on their side of the hall were not laughing or sighing. Or even smiling along with the children's tales like in previous years. They sat there, glum-faced and worried.

Things are about to get very interesting the teacher smirked a little later when Mr and Mrs Briggs helped their son and his pet guinea pig off the stage, before heading out of the hall and home, just like the other parents had done. That just leaves Lucy, the teacher smiled as the hall doors clattered to a close.

As expected, Lucy clutching her flower entered the stage. With a dramatic sweep of hand, she brushed away the sawdust left by the guinea pig's cage, before carefully placing the ceramic pot down the top of the little table, set there for the children's use.

For once, Mama and Papa were relieved to be the only parents remaining. The fewer people the better they both thought as they clasped hands, where with a little returning squeeze they looked into each other's eyes as they swapped silent prayers.

"This plant…" Lucy opened, as she indicated the ceramic pot, before giving her teacher a sharp look. "...Is my Unicorn flower which I have tried often to speak about in class, but was stopped from doing so by my teacher. Well now, like it or not you'll have to listen to me, won't you" she said true and clear.
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“It is a special plant” she declared, while her eyes searched around the hall for the gang of bullies. The very same ones responsible for nearly killing her treasured plant. Staring defiantly at them she informed the assembly.

“It was crushed and trampled by vandals. Them boys, those sat there,” she said fiercely while pointing the gang out.

“But I took it indoors and tended it. To my father’s surprise…” she said with a smile and nod toward him, “...it healed. So now it is whole again and I brought it in today because I wanted those boys responsible…” Where once again she pointed them out. “...To see it. And to know that they failed. And here is why they did. This plant is special…” she started to explain “because it is the fairies plant and…”

But then the bullies having heard enough began grumbling and rumbling indignantly. How dare she point us out? Who is she to do that to us?

Their dislike of Lucy and what she had to say ignited into anger which, while some of the teachers glared sternly at the boys as if to say quiet, it nether-the-less flared and rose menacingly like a basket of cobras intent on making a strike.

“Lucy’s gone off with the fairies, Lucy’s gone off with the fairies” they started heckling. Where in the way of bullies hidden snugly away amongst a crowd they encouraged others around them to take up the chant. Their task was not a difficult one, for many of the children were prepared for the moment.

Bored by the long assembly, children sensing fun was about to break out adopted an attitude of who cares what Lucy has to say. Or anybody else come to that! To Mama and Papa’s deep dismay, but to her teacher’s delight, many children happily bundled in and began heckling.

Section Twenty Five

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"Oh shut up, you looney" one of the bullies shouted. "What do we care about that plant or bloody fairies."

“You’re a smelly witch”, another with a fine set of lungs loudly shouted.

While another, equally puffed-up idiot skulking at the back yelled. "You’re funny in the ead' you are. An we’ll shut you up…, an for good, we will."

Noticeably, the owner of that shrill voice did not step forward to make good the claim. But his idea and urgings stirred the other children into the beginnings of a frenzy.

While a few were still rather boringly and unimaginatively chanting, “Lucy’s off with the fairies”, the atmosphere swelled with an urgent sense of the frantic. Although few truthfully could explain why or what it was. They merely puffed up and followed the flow.

The louder the bullies yelled, the more worked up the other children became. Within moments, most had forgotten the why or the who of the matter. Adrenalin simply surged to come out as unchecked hatred. Or through a need for fun, whatever it was, chaos duly erupted. The older children, mainly boys, were the drivers, but there were a few girls amongst them too who wanted to look brave. Whatever their reasons, some began slowly to advance on the stage.

Fearing for their child, Mama and Papa leapt out of their seats and quickly
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headed for the stage as well. But their way was blocked by a barrage of children who had jumped up from their seats and were busily waving their arms and dashing about excitedly. Or they simply stood across the hall in a raggedy line of impenetrable groups, while pointing and shouting at Lucy.

On later reflection, the teachers decided it was all rather silly, but at the time the children's boredom caught like dry grass fanned by the bullies urging, where those flames of unrest slowly but surely advanced on the stage.

To the leader's disappointment, Lucy was not crying, or fleeing as hoped. He had been so looking forward to the moment where as planned, the mob chases her out with stinging insults. He had also imagined that once she was nicely cornered he, as the big man, would swagger up to the front and throw her along with the blimming plant into the school pond. Except, to his annoyance, it was not working out that way.

Unfeared by the mob, Lucy remained firmly in command of the stage.

The ringleader's hatred of the farm girl and the joyful prospect of humiliating her had flared up on the bully's face when Lucy took to the stage. She spotted it, as did the fairies who were hiding in various shadows around the hall. With a knowing smirk, Lucy's teacher had also noted it.

What the fairies also spotted as did some of the staff, is that Lucy's teacher who ought to have been the first to rise and protect her had been surprisingly slow to react. Indeed, as chaos broke out around her she failed to rise at all. Her reluctance was not lost on Mama and Papa either. With shouts of "Why aren't you stopping this," they changed direction and headed angrily towards her.

Where she braced for the onslaught.

She had her reasons for not helping, but she was not about to reveal them. But if ever she does it will most certainly not be to the child's parents. But she was fully prepared to say to the school governors.

"See, this is how disruptive the child is!"

While omitting to say, privately she believed Lucy was too revolutionary in her ways and that for the good of all she must be silenced.

Section Twenty Six

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Secretly, or so the teacher believed smugly, when the boys began taunting Lucy she urged silently. "That's right boys, you put her in her place." Only to almost instantly regret ever joining this school which only moments ago she had high hopes of running.

Suddenly, while Mama and Papa were storming towards her, the teacher screamed and clutched her face. Masses of horrible boils filled with who-knows-what-disgusting-stuff suddenly bloomed, rapidly swelled and burst all over her face. And neck and arms and legs too. Worse still they were bursting to make way for even more. Hastily, Mama and Papa backed away - although notably not fearfully, as some of the teachers were doing.

As sickening as the sight was, Mama and Papa had no fears of catching something nasty from the teacher. They realised it was the fairies at work, so why waste time with her when they had a daughter to save?

Lucy, still firmly in command of the stage was not worried by the gangs either. If anything, she was rather enjoying it all and she continued giving her speech in a strong sure voice that carried over the rising hubbub.

“This plant belongs to the fairy, as does the town and all the lands around it. And you need to learn to respect them and that’s a fact.” She yelled defiantly into the chaos.

“Respect the fairies” she yelled again to more derisive howls. But to the mob’s anger, Lucy remained on the stage and gave out more and far better
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than she received.

But that did not stop the children from banding into little gangs and surging towards her - driven determinedly on by the bullies at the back of the hall, like slavers might their victims.

Just like slavers of old and of modern, they had mitigating pleas at the ready…, just in case.

“It’s nothing to do with us sir or miss, we just shouted out a few names for fun. It’s all those others to blame not us. We’re innocent we are and you’re victimising us and our folks ain’t gonna stand for that, they ain’t.”

Except they were to be denied their sanctimonious, indigent fist-rattling moment. Some were nearly denied their sanity as well.

So unlike Lucy’s teacher!

She was losing hers rapidly, along with her job and in time, her family too.

Section Twenty Seven

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"Laugh at me all you want," Lucy yelled as teachers began pulling children away from the stage.

“I speak the truth,” she shouted.

“I will not let the truth hurt me, ever. And fairies are good creatures until you decide to destroy their home or their flowers,” she added sharply.

The teachers as they ran about in bewildered frenzy were beginning to worry. Nothing like this has ever been known to happen in this school or any of the others in the area. But how on earth do we stop a mob that cannot be touched or shouted at - or punished in any telling way?

Not so long ago they were quite happy for the parents to leave once their children had finished their show and tell, but now and fervently they were wishing the parents were still there. And Lucy was not for shutting up either. And would it even matter now if she did? A mob has been created and it needs an outlet, Lucy or someone else.

More worryingly, it did not need the maths teacher to point out to other staff members as he joined the struggle to break the mob up. There are at least thirty times more children here than staff. The science teacher as he grabbed a flaying arm instinctively accepted that all energy is action and reaction and when tightly packed, like explosives in a bomb, the right trigger will set them off. While the history teacher as he pulled a child away from the stage, who was also a war games buff thought, the bullies have primed their weapons
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well.

The science teacher was just considering what exactly is the trigger. What will set it off and how devastating might the reaction be when suddenly the air crackled and fizzled loudly with the intensity of a rainless thunderstorm about to erupt in a tumultuous frenzy?

Some of the children literally and silently immediately froze in place. A few others managed to scream first, but then they too became the epitome of fish held in a tight net - all they could do was move their eyes, heads and necks a little while breathing and wondering… what the!

The only signs of movement around the hall came from Mama and Papa as they climbed onto the stage and Lucy stepping forward to say.

“I’m alright. It’s OK. I expected all this,” she revealed calmly and again very adult-like.

Too adult for her parent’s comfort, who would dearly like to have their sweet seven-year-old daughter back again - this is if you fairies don’t mind. But they both knew that era had passed, especially when Lucy explained.

“It is what ignorant people do when faced with things they either don’t like or care not to understand. But now they will have to,” She said, while hundreds of fairies emerged from the shadows to surround her protectively.

Mama and Papa had known they were there in the school, but the children and teachers had no idea. The light around the stage was strong and the shadows were deep so the fairies had nicely blended in. But that all changed when Lucy began to rise above the stage and up into the softer shadows around the rafters. Those lofty pieces of wood spoke to the same part of Lucy that the crushed Unicorn flower had all that time ago. She felt the wood’s

dismay for their end and caught a trace of the vast forests they were hewed from and their sense of loss. That added more fuel to her flaming anger. What a waste to end up here with these mindless idiots, she thought, as the fairies conveyed her around the hall.

Although the fairies were not truly visible, it was obvious that Lucy was being lifted by something awesome. To various gasps and shades of fear, aghast or horror and many, “Oh my,” along with a few, “You go for it girl,” Lucy flew down at the bullies. Hovering angrily above them she pointed accusingly, while crying out in a cutting voice.

“I place this curse, a fairy curse upon you boys.”

Section Twenty Eight

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"From now on," Lucy cried out angrily. Her voice as it rang clear and strong throughout the silent hall was also heard by her teacher. In a flood of tears, she had fled to the first-floor staff toilet to fall headlong into a nervous breakdown. Sadly, it was to be many years before she could truthfully answer the question which screamed from her lips as she listened to Lucy's curse. "What have I done!"

“Each time you boys abuse nature, or us girls”, Lucy added for devilment, which set the fairy’s tambourines gleefully a-rattling, as well as some of the young girls sniggering.

“You will age. You’ll get dry skin and wrinkles and lose your hair and teeth and hearing. And whenever you lie, no matter how small it is, you will mess your pants and everyone will know it. And each time you cheat or steal you will lose a finger and then your toes. That is my promise to you all. And if you tease or bully me ever again, or come onto our farm, like you did before, then those things I just promised will happen all at once. And after that, I’ll leave you to the fairies to deal with. And I can promise you this. Now that you’ve been warned they will not be as kind as me.”

Curse duly delivered she returned to her parents, where standing beside them she took their hands and with a smile gently urged.

“Come along parents of mine, it’s time to go home and plant the flower back where it belongs. I believe it will be safe there now - as will we,” she whispered with a grin while the gleeful fairies fell in around them.
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As for the teachers and the other children, none were truly ever to remember exactly what occurred, except that somehow Lucy had seen the bullies off. But the bullies were to remember that moment and more, especially Lucy's curse. It haunted the rest of their miserable lives. It was markedly obvious when several of the boys began to age quickly and another suddenly lost two fingers. From then on, bullying petty theft and vandalism disappeared completely from that little town.

Lucy's farm, happily renamed, "Fairies Farm" (with an added little sign beneath which read, *no loose dogs allowed and entrance is by invite only*, flourished with the fairy's help.

Their crops were always healthy and plentiful. As were the livestock that were no longer sent away to be slaughtered. The animals lived long lives while freely sharing their milk, eggs and wool with humans and fairies alike. A new clean brook full of water creatures, some fairy-like, sprang into being to flow around the farm's perimeter, where once an old footpath ran. But unlike the footpath, it never dried up or cracked. Though where the water went after it left the farm, only Lucy, her parents and the fairies ever knew.

The woodland was encouraged to spread outwards a little too, where it soon filled with wildlife. Some were rare and grateful for somewhere safe to live. Many different types of wildflowers arrived to settle the edges as well. Soon, happy fat bees were filling the air along with butterflies, often with fairy passengers aback, as they daintily flittered about from early spring through to late autumn. Through all the seasons glorious birdsong, encouraged by fairy voices and tambourines and pipes and strings, happily filled and thrilled the air.

The farm did indeed become a magical place to be.

Section Twenty Nine

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To their joy, Lucy's special unicorn flower after thousands of years of being the only one left in the country began to spread. To Lucy's delight, she was the unicorn's honoured guest whenever they set to racing through the woods. Sometimes they happily expanded to a large enough size so Lucy could ride out beside the Queen.

Lucy, of course, grew in height and build, but never seemingly any older in look. Happily, in due course, she took over managing the farm. She could often be heard explaining when locals popped in to buy produce and to remark on how well the farm was doing and how beautiful the woodland was.

“Farms can do that you know. Especially with lots of willing helpers who believe in the power and wonder of the old ways of living, who are willing to care for their environment and not try to beat or ruin nature.”

Then she might say with a giggle.

“A few magical gifts and tricks help out a lot too.” Then with a knowing smile, she might add.

“And a belief in fairies is always good.”

Those who heard her were not so sure about the magical part or the fairies, but otherwise, how could they dispute her claim? Many when they could, began planting little woodlands of their own and were happily surprised by how quickly they grew and flourished - while also taking care to leave places
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for wildflowers and the many wonderful critters that come to live alongside, often to care for them.

A few farming families even came to understand what Lucy meant by magic. They let the fairies be and settle and spread wherever they cared. Over the following years, corridors of woodland sprang up alongside those wild areas which in time knitted the county together. Then, once established they spread further into the wider country. As a result, the people's general wellness blossomed. The country became happier and more united and was filled with new purpose. Most of which was of good, once the government discovered it was far better for all if they listened to their hearts and common sense, instead of spending time filling business owner's wallets.

As brilliant as those changes were, all who visited 'Fairies Farm' agreed it was the best and happiest place to be. Some were even heard to remark.

"And don't Lucy and her folks, who must be at least a hundred and twenty now, hold their age well."

For many more years, they continued to say such lovely things until they simply forgot just how old Lucy and her parents were.

And indeed, still are…

The End.