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THE FAIRY TALE

"It'll be fun," said their father cheerfully, and the two boys agreed. Not so the girls.

"How can camping be fun?" sneered Cindy, "All those creepy-crawlies and snakes and stuff. Why can't we holiday in a cabin or something like normal people?"

"And what if it rains? We'll all drown," put in her sister Jill with a scowl.

"It won't rain," brother Tom assured her.

"When did it ever rain in the middle of summer?" the other brother Jack reminded them.

A moody silence fell over the kitchen. The children's mother had an idea and suggested: "Before we make the final decision on the holiday you could give camping a trial run by pitching the tent in the back garden and sleep in it overnight."

"Sounds boring," said Jill.

"Doesn't have to be," suggested Tom. "We could read a ghost story by candlelight."

"No candle, I'm afraid," said their father. "Too dangerous; but there is the battery lantern."

"And I'll pick the story," Cindy said hurriedly, "Something nice that we'll all enjoy."

"I can imagine," groaned Jack under his breath.

It was still daylight when they pitched the tent – a four-berth dome type that went up quite easily. Despite the mini-site being surrounded by grass right in the middle of the back lawn, the girls continued to have their doubts and regarded the trees and shrubs that bordered the garden with suspicion, checking for any movement which might indicate undesirable crawly things. Once the sleeping bags were put in the tent they all returned to the house for an early tea. "Don't forget to zip the door," said Cindy casting a final wary glance at the bushes.

The boys raced through their meal, eager to begin the camping experience, whereas the girls weren't looking forward to it and took their time. Eventually the four were on their way to the tent each armed with drinks and some packets of snacks. Tom also had the battery lantern and frowned at the bag Cindy had slung over her shoulder. "I suppose you've got a book or two in there. I hope you've brought a good one and not some girlie rubbish," he sneered. "What is it, anyway?"

"Wait and see," was all Cindy would say. By then night was closing in and Tom switched on the lantern. "What did you do that for?" Cindy demanded to know. "There's a full moon out so we can see well enough. You'll waste the battery."

"No need to get snaky. I was only testing it," he grumbled, switching the lantern off.

Once in the tent it was too dark to really see anything. "Better switch it on now, Tom," said Jack, "Before we trip over something and break our necks."

It was certainly much easier with the light from the lantern and after some complaints from the girls about the floor being hard the four had settled down. Cindy dipped into her bag and brought out a book. "What did you decide on?" asked Jill.

"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," replied her sister.

"Oh *great!*" moaned Tom. "How pathetic is a kid's fairy tale going to be?"

"Well, we are kids," Jill reminded him. "Just let Cindy start reading. As I recall it was an entertaining story."

Cindy moved close to the light and began. "Once upon a time..."

"Here we go," muttered Jack in a loud aside to his brother. "Prepare for a serve of mush."

"Do you mind if I carry on?" asked Cindy irritably. When there were no more interruptions she continued to read about how the Princess Snow White's mother died and her father the King married again. Hearing one of the boys uttered a soft groan she paused momentarily to send a frown of disapproval in his direction; then she went on to tell of the new Queen who was selfish and cared nothing for her step-daughter. She was also very vain and each day she would stand before a magic mirror and ask it: 'who is the fairest one of all?' to which the mirror would reply that she, the Queen, was the fairest. That was how it was for some years. During this time, however, Snow White grew into a beautiful young woman; and one day the magic mirror declared that she, the young Princess, was the fairest of all. The Queen was so mortified that she ordered a huntsman to take Snow White deep into the forest and kill her..."

"Now, that's more like it!" chimed in Tom, "A bit of action at last. What's he going to use – a sword, an axe; maybe he's got a long pointy spear?"

"You boys really are gross," sneered Jill, "Only interested in death and destruction." She noticed her sister chuckling. "What's so funny?"

"Well," said Cindy as she started to read again, "Sorry to disappoint, but it seems the huntsman took pity on Snow White, and instead of killing her he told her to run away never to return..."

Jack let out a heavy sigh. "Back to airy-fairy girlie stuff again I suppose?"

Cindy chuckled again. "Not quite, because the next time the Queen asked her mirror to declare the fairest of all, there was Snow White reflected in the mirror. Learning that the beautiful Princess was still alive the Queen was so enraged she decided to take matters into her own hands and devised a wicked plan to..."

That was when the light went out. "Must be the battery," said Cindy, standing up. "I'll go to the house to get a replacement."

"I'll come with you," said Tom. "I want to grab another soda."

The two children were gone for less than a minute, not enough time to walk to the house and back, when a light suddenly shone from outside and could be seen through the canvas of the tent. "The lantern must be working again," commented Jill. "Now we can get back to the story."

"And find out what the evil Queen's going to do to Snow White," chirped Jack. "I hope it's something really gruesome." So they waited for the other two to return. Another minute passed and there was no sign of them. Jack was puzzled. "I've been thinking – that light outside is a lot brighter than the lantern. It's got to be coming from something else." Moving to the door he unzipped it and stuck his head out. "Woah!" he retorted. "Take a look at this." He shuffled aside so that Jill could see past him.

She gasped. "What's happened to our garden; and where did all those trees come from?"

"Who knows?" answered Jack, "But there's something else that's weird – they look like they're made of glass and they're glowing!"

"You don't suppose we've jumped into fairy-story land," suggested Jill nervously.

"Don't be stupid," chided her brother, peering into the distance through the forest. "Mind you, I can't see the house because of all the trees; and there's no sign of Tom and Cindy... Oh, wait a bit; I can see someone walking. Maybe... No it's not them. It's a man, and he's dressed in old-fashioned clothes. I'm going to ask him if he's seen Tom and Cindy." Climbing out of the tent he ignored Jill's warning to be careful and headed straight for the man. "Er-m, excuse me, Sir" he called out and waved.

The man stopped in his tracks and waited. Jack continued to approach. As he came closer he noticed the man's hand stray to grip the hilt of a sword in a scabbard hanging from a belt

around his waist. There was something else – a bow over his shoulder and a quiver of arrows strapped to his back. Impossible though it seemed he was suddenly wondering if Jill might have been right about fairy-story land. If so, this could be the huntsman from the Snow-White tale; he certainly looked like it. There was one way to find out: “Are you by any chance a huntsman?”

“What if I am?” grated the man in a very unfriendly tone.

“Well,” Jack started, and paused to think about what he was going to say next: “Er... while you’ve been out hunting I don’t suppose you’ve seen two children – a boy and a girl?”

“I might have,” said the man. “What’s it to you?”

“They’re my brother and sister,” replied Jack, “And I think they could be lost. Do you know which way they went?”

The huntsman pointed. “Into the forest.”

Jack frowned. “Why would they go that way?”

“Because it is where Snow White ran and they were trying to catch up to her.”

The mention of Snow White dropped another piece of the puzzle into place. Jack thought to further test the theory: “Are you the huntsman the Queen sent to kill Snow White?”

The man sighed and nodded. “That’s what I was ordered to do, but I couldn’t go through with it. I released the Princess and told her to run to somewhere safe and stay there. Hopefully the Queen will never know she lives.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong there,” the boy said. “The Queen already knows Snow White is still alive; and seeing as you didn’t do the dastardly deed I reckon you’re in big trouble.”

“How could you possibly know all of this?” asked the huntsman.

“From the fairy story we were reading,” said Jack. Turning to walk away he hesitated. “And there’s more – the Queen’s hatching some evil plan to kill Snow White herself.” Leaving the confused man staring wide-eyed into the forest, Jack rushed to the tent. “Come on Jill, quickly!” When the girl’s head poked out of the tent he added: “The huntsman said Tom and Cindy went looking for Snow White. They must also have realised that somehow we’ve all ended up in the fairy tale...”

“Which could be continuing to play out as we speak,” suggested Jill ominously. “We’ve got to find them, Jack, before the evil Queen does.”

“And don’t forget Snow White,” said Jack. “We didn’t hear the end of the story, so we don’t know if she’s aware that she’s in danger. Come on – we’d better hurry. Let’s find the other two; and if we’re lucky Snow White as well, before...” He let the ominous thought hang as they ran off in the direction the huntsman had indicated.

By this time, Tom and Cindy were deep into the forest and hadn’t yet come across Snow White. “We’ll never find her just wandering around aimlessly,” remarked Cindy. “If only there was someone we could ask...”

“There might be,” said Tom, “I think someone’s coming.” They both watched as a person appeared through the trees and came trudging towards them. “It’s an old lady,” whispered the boy. “Should we ask her?” Receiving no reply he glanced at his sister who seemed uncertain. “What’s the matter Cindy?”

“I’m not sure,” she said quietly so that the approaching stranger didn’t hear. “There’s little doubt that we’ve somehow stepped into the Snow White fairy tale. I’ve read it before, a long time ago admittedly, but I recall that the huntsman let the Princess go unharmed and when the wicked Queen discovered this she set out to kill Snow White herself.”

“How was she going to do that?” asked Tom. “If we knew, maybe we could stop her.”

“Sorry, I can’t remember,” replied Cindy with a shake of the head. “Our best bet is to find Snow White and go from there.” She let out a concerned sigh and added: “I guess our only option is to ask the old lady.”

“I’ll do it,” offered Tom and he waited for the old woman to come closer. “Excuse me, Ma’am. Might we have a word with you?”

The old lady produced a peculiar smile that appeared both friendly yet sinister. "As many as you like, my dear," she replied in a croaky voice.

"Well," the boy began, "We're looking for someone, a beautiful young lady with white skin and black hair who might have come this way. I don't suppose you've seen her?"

Staying in the background watching, Cindy had noticed a change in the old lady's manner the moment Tom described Snow White. This set her searching her memory for that part of the story they hadn't got to when the lantern went out. There was something... but no matter how hard she concentrated she couldn't recall it.

Unaware of his sister's concerns, Tom waited for a response and was surprised when the old lady said: "You must mean the Princess Snow White." She saw the boy's smile broaden and he was nodding. "And yes, I have seen her. She is staying with the seven dwarfs at their house. Actually, I have just come from there. I gave her one of these," and she lay a withered hand on some apples in a basket hanging from her arm. "Would you and your friend like one?"

A warning twinged in Cindy's memory and she rushed forward to pull Tom away. "No thank you," she said, and feeling something sinister might already have happened she asked: "How was she, Snow White I mean. Was she alright?"

"Yes indeed," replied the old woman. "A little tired, though, from all of that housework she does. When I left her she was resting." Her head turned to face an approaching sound of someone singing. "You are in luck. That will be the seven dwarfs returning from work. I feel sure they will take you to their house. Oh," she added as a line of little people came out of the forest, "It seems they have someone with them – two children much like yourselves." With that she started shuffling off. "Have a nice day, and say hello to Snow White from me."

Tom and Cindy took no notice of the old woman's departure, being attracted to the two children with the dwarfs. "It's Jack and Jill," declared Tom unnecessarily as he waved. "They're coming over."

The four children began to relate their individual adventures and all were talking at once. What did become clear was that they were definitely working bit by bit through the fairy tale. Hearing about the old lady and the apples jogged Cindy's memory and she blurted out: "This is the part of the story we didn't get to. That wasn't just an old lady: it was the wicked Queen in disguise and the apple she gave to Snow White was poisoned. We have to hurry. Maybe we can get to the house before the Princess eats the apple...!"

Hurry they did, accompanied by the seven dwarfs who were singing all the way: "Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's back to home we go..."

On their arrival at the house they noticed that the front door was open. Cindy ran to it, looked in and let out a gasp. "We're too late!" Her cause for concern was obvious. There, lying on the floor was Snow White and she looked to be unconscious. The dwarfs ran over and crouched down beside the Princess. One of them, Happy, had an uncharacteristically grim look on his face and shook his head sorrowfully. Snow White, it seemed, was dead!

Before anyone could speak something strange occurred. It grew dark as the light from the glass trees began to dim and eventually went out altogether. At the same time the house started to fade as if bathed in mist. In moments it was pitch black. Cindy still had the lantern with her and had the presence of mind to switch it on. Surprisingly it worked and was enough to illuminate their surroundings. There was no house, no dwarfs and no sign of Snow White. Turning on the spot Cindy looked around. "We're back in our garden," she declared. "Did all that really happen?"

"Something did," muttered Tom, "Something weird. More to the point, we failed miserably and didn't stop the evil Queen from poisoning Snow White."

Cindy had a thought: "No, but I recall that in the original story it all came good. Let's get back to the tent and finish reading it."

Funnily enough both boys were eager to listen as Cindy read the closing stages of Snow white and the Seven Dwarfs... "Rather than burying the Princess they put her in a glass coffin

which they took up into the mountains. While on a journey a handsome Prince noticed the coffin and was so captivated by the beauty of the Princess that he immediately fell in love with her and asked the dwarfs if he could take her to keep her with him always..." Cindy paused.

"Is that it?" asked a disappointed Jack. "I thought fairy tales were supposed to finish happy ever after. That doesn't sound like much of a happy ending to me."

Cindy grinned. "I thought you didn't like mushy girlie stories."

"That was before we got sucked into one," said Tom. "Now I feel cheated."

Letting out a soft chuckle, Cindy said: "Alright, I'll put you boys out of your misery. There's a bit more I haven't read yet – apparently the dwarfs agreed to let the Prince take the coffin and while his servants were carrying it down the mountain one of them stumbled jerking the coffin. The sudden jolt caused the piece of apple in Snow White's throat to dislodge and she awoke. The Prince was delighted, asked Snow White to marry him and..." she paused for effect, "...they did indeed live happily ever after. Does that satisfy you Jack?"

The boy grunted. "Suppose so. Tell you one thing – after what we've just been through I'm glad we didn't read a ghost story. Imagine how that would have been."

Needless to say, not one of the four children was even prepared to think about it.