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## The Forbidden Forest

Although they were twins, Patrick and Mary didn't always like the same things. When it came to school, Patrick was more interested in stories, especially the adventure type; whereas Mary preferred painting and drawing and making things. There was one bit of the school day, however, that they both felt the same about because neither was too keen on it. Each morning, once all of the children were in class, the teacher would announce that it was time for 'show-and-tell'. Most children would bring something interesting that they could tell the rest of the class about. Patrick and Mary, however, could never think of anything that wouldn't seem boring to the other children; so, they were both glad when this part of the day was over. "You know," said Mary on their way home, "The thing with show-and-tell is that we only ever do stuff that's ordinary."

"What we need is to find something really neat that we can tell about," suggested Patrick.

"Like what?" asked his sister.

"Oh, I don't know," mumbled Patrick glumly. "Let's get home and try to think of something."

They spent the next hour searching their bedrooms for anything that they might be able to tell about at school; but the best Patrick could come up with was a small plastic compass he had got out of a Christmas cracker. Mary didn't think much of it. "I bet every kid in the class has one of them," she said, "And what kind of a story would we have to tell?"

"Well," said Patrick as a gleam came into his eye, "We could use it to go exploring and we could tell about that."

"The only problem is," argued his sister, "Where or what are we going to explore? There isn't anything around here."

"How about the woods?" suggested Patrick. "We've never been there."

"That's because we aren't allowed," Mary reminded him. "Mum and Dad said the forest is forbidden, which means we shouldn't go there. And," she added, "It could be dangerous."

"Yes, it could," said Patrick almost breathlessly, his eyes widened with excitement. "And if we did it and it was dangerous, then we really would have something to tell about."

It was still only early afternoon when the twins climbed over their back fence, beyond which lay the forest. As they stood gazing at towering trees growing out of a tangle of ferns with not a pathway in sight, the hearts of both were beating fast. "I wonder what's so terrible and why it's forbidden?" puzzled Patrick casually.

"Perhaps there are wild animals," said Mary with a shiver.

"Like what?" sneered her brother, "Giant kid-eating caterpillars? Not likely. Mind you," he whispered secretively, "It could be magic: you know like in the Hansel and Gretel story. Maybe there's a witch."

"Shut up!" snapped his sister. "You're frightening me."

"Only joking," Patrick reassured her with a laugh. "Mum and Dad probably don't want us to go in there because they figure we'll get lost." Fishing in a pocket, he brought out the plastic compass. "But that won't happen, not with this. It shows the way, see," and he pointed to the

little needle under the glass which swung as he turned around on the spot. "We just have to keep an eye on which way the needle points as we walk; then to get home all we have to do is use it to walk in the opposite direction - simple. Come on. Let's give it a go."

As they took the first few steps into the trees, Mary clutched at her brother's arm. "This is scary," she said. "I don't think we should go any further."

"We'll be fine," said Patrick. "And stop jogging my arm - it's making the compass pointer skip around."

Although she truly didn't want to continue on, Mary stayed with her brother; and after a while she was beginning to think that she had probably been worrying over nothing. It seemed like every other wood they had been in, and there were so many things like strange flowers that she had never seen before. "Look at this one," she said, crouching down to touch the bright purple and yellow petals. "It's really different and it would be good for show and tell. Can we take it and go home, please?"

She was reaching out with her fingers for the stem of the plant when Patrick snapped: "No, Mare! Mum said we shouldn't pick wildflowers - it's not allowed. They're protected, or something." He started walking again. "Come on. I reckon we can find something different and better." Reluctantly, Mary followed her brother as he pushed through the undergrowth between the trees. Slowing to a halt, he stared at the dense thicket in front of him. "Hey, this is great - it's like a jungle; but we don't have a machete to cut through."

"Does that mean we can go home now?" asked his sister eagerly.

"Nup," commented Patrick. "We'll just go round." Turning to the left he said: "This way."

Once the thicket became less dense they were eventually able to push through to the far side. Patrick had then intended to go right so that they could return to their original route, the one they were following before they had to make the detour; but he shrugged off the idea, figuring it didn't really matter because they weren't going anywhere in particular. A number of times the two children were forced to change direction when the undergrowth became too thick; and even Patrick was becoming concerned that this would make it hard to find their way home. Finally, he called a halt. "This is far enough," he declared. "Time to head back. Keep an eye out for a show-and-tell thing, Mare."

Looking down at the compass, he turned on the spot to face in the opposite direction to the pointer, expecting it would show where they had come from; but the little needle hardly moved and just stayed pointing in the same direction it had been all along. This confused the boy and he frowned. "It's still pointing ahead to where we were going, useless piece of junk."

"Well, what do you expect from a Christmas cracker?" groaned Mary. "I suppose this means we're lost."

"No we're not!" snapped Patrick. "I remember exactly which way we came, and I don't need a stupid plastic compass to tell me." With that, he stuffed it into a pocket and strode off. After a few twists and turns and quite a lot of back-tracking the boy eventually had to admit: "I guess we *might* be kind-of lost."

The thought brought tears to Mary's eyes and she sobbed: "If we can't find our way back, what are we going to do?"

Patrick gave a huge sigh and shrugged. "Keep going forward, I guess. There's bound to be a road or a house up ahead," he suggested uncertainly as he withdrew the compass from his pocket. "Our only choice is to carry on following this."

"You said it was useless," his sister reminded him.

"Maybe I was wrong," mumbled Patrick.

"Maybe you're not as smart as you think," Mary chided. "You did manage to get us lost."

So they continued on through the forbidden forest, heading in the direction that the compass pointed. Mary was becoming quite nervous by then, and she was jumping at every strange sound. Her brother's claim that they were made by harmless little creatures just scurrying about

in the undergrowth didn't help. "Where's this house you promised?" she demanded to know irritably. "I bet there isn't one, and you said there would be. You're just a fibber."

"Am not," countered her brother.

"Are so," insisted Mary.

Usually it was the kind of argument that carried on for a while, but not this time. Patrick had his head cocked to one side. "Shhh! Listen! I can hear something. It sounds like music."

"Don't be silly," said his sister. "Who would be playing music in a forest?"

"A person," said Patrick hopefully, "People. If we can find them, we can ask how to get out of here."

The idea seemed a good one and they began walking, more confident at the thought of finding people. Pushing through some low bushes they suddenly found themselves in a small clearing; and there, sitting on a tree stump was a little man; a *very* little man. He was the one making the music which stopped as he lowered the pipe he had been blowing. Noticing the children, he said cheerfully: "Well, hello there. 'Tis a fine day, to be sure. And what might you be doing out here on your own?"

He seemed friendly enough, so Patrick stepped closer. "We were looking for something we could take for show-and-tell and we got lost. Do you know how we can get home?"

"Easy - you just turn around and go back the way you came," answered the little man in his squeaky voice.

"We tried," put in Mary, "But it didn't work, thanks to Patrick's stupid compass." She was peering at the little man, a frown on her face. "You look like a grown-up; I mean, you've got a beard, but you're so small."

"That's because I'm one of the little people, a leprechaun. Mick's the name. What might yours be?"

"I'm Mary," replied the girl, "And he's Patrick."

A broad smile crept across the little man's face. "Lovely Irish names, and I should know. Ireland's where I come from, all leprechauns do."

"But this is Australia, and I've heard of Ireland - it's a long way away." said Patrick. "How did you get here?"

Mick held out the pipe he had been playing. "I just followed the tune wherever it led me, and here's where I ended up."

"Could that tune lead us home?" asked Mary.

"Well, now," said Mick, "I suppose so, but I wouldn't wish to be without my pipe." He noticed the looks of disappointment on the children's faces and added: "But it can help to find something that *will* show you the way home. All we need is a patch of shamrocks." He was turning, squinting at the ground; then he stopped and pointed. "There's a fine bunch."

"They're just weeds, aren't they?" said Patrick as he walked towards the mass of green plants not much taller than the grass in which they grew. "They look like clover, that's what Mum told us."

"Yes, indeed," confirmed Mick, "But they are known to us Irish as shamrocks; and if we can find a special one with four leaves instead of three, that will be the lucky one."

Mary was crouching for a closer inspection. "They all seem the same with three leaves. We'll never find a four-leaf one."

"Just you wait a second," advised Mick. A gay tune filled the air as he began playing his pipe.

"Hey, Pat," said Mary to her brother. "One of the shamrocks is twitching around like it's dancing."

The music stopped and the shamrock became still. "Look closely," said Mick, "And I'm sure you'll find it has four leaves. If it has, pick it."

The little girl sat back on her haunches. "We aren't allowed to pick wildflowers," she declared.

“Ah, but it’s not wild,” stated the leprechaun wisely. “It’s very gentle and friendly; and a shamrock isn’t a flower: it’s just a stalk with leaves. Pick it, Mary. I give you my permission.”

The girl was hesitant until Patrick encouraged her: “Go ahead, Mare. You want us to get home, don’t you?” Mary reached out, caught hold of the green stalk near the bottom; then after a short pause, she held her breath as she plucked the four-leaf shamrock out of the ground. She was expecting something terrible might happen, and she breathed a sigh of relief when it didn’t. Patrick put out his hand. “Better let me have it, Mare; seeing as I’ll be leading the way.”

“No, no lad,” said Mick. “The one who picks it is the only one it will answer to. What you must do now, Mary, is ask it, nicely of course, to show you the way home. The stalk will bend and the leaves will point the way.” Mick glanced up at the sky. “Better get a move on, you two, before the rain comes.”

Patrick groaned. “If we arrive home soaked, Mum will be mad at us.”

“Don’t you worry yourself,” said Mick cheerfully, “Not at all, at all. The shamrock will get you back long before that happens.”

Although they wanted to go home, the children were sad to leave their new friend. Mick could see this from the sorrowful looks on their faces. “No need to be glum. You are more than welcome to visit anytime, wherever I may be. The lucky shamrock will know where I am and will lead the way.” With that, the little leprechaun returned to sit on the tree stump and began playing his pipe, watching as Mary led Patrick across the clearing and into the forest.

It was as Mick said: the shamrock bent towards the direction the children had to walk; except when they took a wrong turn: then it would start shaking its leaves as if to say ‘not that way’. “She’s quite amazing,” said Mary. “We should give her a name.”

“How do you know it’s a she?” muttered Patrick, clearly annoyed that his sister was the one leading them home.

“I just know, that’s all,” said Mary; then she began speaking to the shamrock: “I think you need a pretty name, something Irish. How does Kathleen sound to you?” When the little shamrock began dancing around in her hand, Mary declared: “That’s it, then: from now on your name is Kathleen.”

“I reckon giving it a name is stupid,” sneered Patrick. “After all, it’s just a dumb weed.”

Kathleen must have heard and wasn’t too happy. She turned in the boy’s direction and rustled her leaves at him. “Now you’ve upset her,” chided Mary. “You say sorry, and be nice, otherwise she won’t take us home.” The shamrock stayed limp until Patrick apologised; then, as soon as she had perked up, Mary said: “Show us the way please, Kathleen.”

And Kathleen did. Luckily, their mother didn’t see them coming out of the forbidden forest and climbing over their garden fence; and they were able to go to their rooms without being noticed. Mary put the little shamrock’s stalk in a small jar of water to keep her fresh. “Thank you for bringing us home safely, Kathleen,” she said quietly, “And we need to talk to you about taking you to school for show-and-tell.”

“No way!” said Patrick sternly. “We can’t tell anyone!”

“Well, what about show-and-tell?” asked Mary.

The boy dug a hand into his pocket and brought out the plastic compass. “This is good enough. Kathleen and Mick are our own special secret, and only we know about them. When the other kids are showing their boring stuff, we can remember that we’ve got something at home that they can never have. So, no show-and-tell for our little Kathleen.” He went close to the little shamrock and said: “Is that okay by you, Kathleen?”

From the way her four leaves curled it was obvious Kathleen was smiling. Of course, only Mary and Patrick could see this, and Kathleen was glad of it; because as far as she was concerned, as she was special to Mary and Patrick; they were also very, very special to her.