

Wisps of Smoke

Mika Higgins-Woo

Wisps of smoke decorated the high-ceilinged hall, spiraling from the crackly, auburn flames. The blaze was contained by an ornate fence-like structure, made of twisted bronze. She sat on the warmed stone hearth, mesmerized. Her eyes are glazed over, looking like those glass eyeballs that taxidermy deer in museums have. She glanced out the windows, packed in with snow and shivered - just the look of it made her feel cold. Her arms warmed against the gentle glow beside her.

Behind her, her brother sighed, snapping her out of a trance and back into the real, tiring world.

“Can we go out yet??” He asked innocently. Her brother wasn’t the most patient person. Yet, he was only five, so she cut him some slack.

“Not yet, buddy, we still have three more days,” she replied, already wary of the next few days. Alone. Alone in the house with herself, her thoughts and her brother. How pleasant.

“Can we have more hot chocolate, then?” Her brother pressed.

“No, as I said five minutes ago, we have run out of hot chocolate.” She said with a stab at her heart. It was hot chocolate that her parents had gone out to get from the store when this disastrous storm hit. Her patience was running out.

“Ok!! Can you read *Goodnight Moon* to me then?” He replied, oblivious to the dire situation that they were both in.

“Fine,” she gave in, “go and get it.” It was only so long before they’d run out of fire, she thought. It was only so long before her patience ran out. She wondered which would run out first.

“I’m baaaaaaaaaaaaack,” her brother shouted, hurtling towards her from a long corridor to her right.

“Wonderful,” she replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm. In a way, she felt jealous of her brother. She wanted to be able to ignore the consequences and danger of the situation enough to enjoy a book about kittens and mittens. But that wasn’t possible. She could just imagine the attic, leaky and wet. What would she do if the roof fell in? Would she survive? Would her brother?

“Start! Start! Start,” her brother chanted, thrusting the book into her arms, “didn’t you hear me?”

“No, I didn’t,” she shot back sarcastically, “did you want me to stop?”

“No silly billy goo goo,” he responded, unable to read sarcasm or leave-me-alone vibes, “START!” He was threatening a tantrum. She knew what she had to do.

“In the great green room...” she began. She knew this story backwards, and forwards and sideways. She could read it with her eyes closed. To test this theory, and to keep from boredom, she closed her eyes and continued, *“there was a telephone, and a red balloon.”*

“And a picture of a cow jumping over the moon!” Her brother interrupted, full of joy at hearing his favorite story. She sighed, she didn’t want to be reading this story, she wanted to be in her room reading her own book. She didn’t want to read it in the first place, but her brother was five, they were in the middle of a public crisis alone together, and even though her eyes were still closed, she knew he was looking up at her with irresistible puppy dog eyes. So, reluctantly, she pushed on with a sigh.

“And there were three little bears...” She was just about to open her eyes from fear of actually falling asleep (and maybe secretly not remembering when the next page turn was), when there was a loud thump at the door.

“What was that?” Her brother yelled eagerly. He seemed to find everything exciting. Even startling, anonymous, ominous thumps that came from outside during a snowstorm that the world deemed a public crisis. She slowly opened her eyes, not really wanting to see what was at the door.

She willed her eyes open and moved her brother off her lap. Cautiously, she glanced out the window, rolling her eyes. Of course she couldn’t see who was outside, they were in the middle of a public crisis blizzard. Why on earth would there be someone thumping at the door, then?? Calm down, she told herself.

“There’s nothing there,” she reassured her brother, “no person in their right mind would be outside right now, it was probably just a stick or a tree branch or something.”

“Then who is that?” Her brother’s were wide, staring up at the giant figure looming above them. She didn’t want to look. She wanted to be asleep. And most of all, she wanted her parents to be back to protect her from whatever “that” was. But her parents weren’t there, and she wasn’t asleep, so she had to look. She moved her head up very slowly.

She gasped, staggering back. Above her loomed a large gray bunny wearing blue and white striped pajamas, covered in snow. He looked down at them, seemingly intimidating. As intimidating as a bunny covered in snow could be.

“Are you possibly reading my book?” The bunny happened to be a mega baritone of a bunny, voice thundering through the house, contrasting greatly with his fuzzy and adorable appearance.

“Uuhhhhhh yeah,” she replied, feeling threatened.

“Yeah, but she didn’t want to! She had her eyes closed!” Her brother shrieked. That boy had no self control. She shot devil eyes at her brother. She didn’t want to upset the seven foot mammal standing in their living room.

“Yes, that’s why I was summoned,” he replied matter-of-factly, “I wasn’t happy with the way that you were delivering my story.” She rubbed eyes, surely she was seeing things.

“Summoned?” Accepting what was really happening, her only goal was to get this rabbit out of her house.

“Yes, summoned, by the spirits of childhood, you *must* read my book correctly” he said, “and with joy, it’s a classic. A milestone of childhood that must happen,” the rabbit added with pride. She just stared upwards.

“What do we have to do in order to get your snow off my floor and back into the forest or wherever you came from?” She was impatient.

“There’s no *we*. It’s only you. Your brother was doing everything right. Read it with conviction and passion! You loved this story!” He pleaded.

“Yeah, when I was five!” She protested.

“You’re still five. Inside,” he explained with faith.

“Thank you?” She was now fully done with this conversion.

“So read the book and once you do *correctly*, I’ll leave in my mysterious large bunny way.” He explained.

“OK,” she summoned her brother into her lap and started, “*In the great green room...*”

“No no no, that’s all wrong,” the bunny interjected, “who read this book to you when you were five?” He was trying to help. He didn’t know that it was her mother who had. Her mother who was lost in a snowstorm. “Read it like they read it to you. Your brother deserves that, don’t you think?” She sighed and got into her best mother-persona. Concentrating, she started again.

“*In the great green room...*” she began, trying her best to put on a soothing voice, and erase all the stress around her. “*There was a telephone, and a red balloon...*” Her brother squirmed and curled up in her lap. And so they lay there, curled up, the fire warming their backs, reciting the words of beloved childhood memories. Her brother interjecting, and she chuckling and fondly squishing his cheeks. They never even noticed when the bunny left.