

## **THE ENCHANTED ORCHARD**

It was in the early summer when Fanny and her elder brother Timothy moved into their new house in the Herefordshire countryside and what a beautiful house it was. A fine old farmhouse with beams of oak that sometimes creaked eerily in the middle of the night and a thatched roof where a family of tiny sparrows had made their nest. It was much better living here than in their old council house in Harlesden where their father constantly complained about their West Indian neighbours who played loud reggae music and argued late into the night. Best of all about their new home, however, was the surrounding wild woodland and fields where Fanny and her brother roamed at weekends playing Swallows and Amazons in the shade of tall willow trees.

It was during one of these long hot weekends when they had been adventuring that Fanny and Timothy and their dog, Rasclat, happened to stumble upon a walled plot of land which stood beyond one of the meadows at the back of the house. The gates to the plot had been secured with a thick, rusty chain but, much to their surprise, the padlock has been forced open and with a little effort Timmy managed to prize one of the old oak door open so that they could just squeeze through the gap.

Inside the trio were excited to find an orchard of apple trees dappled with ivy-green leaves and, hanging from the branches like Christmas decorations, were big, juicy cox apples which had ripened to a deep ruby red. Fanny and Timmy picked some of the apples and bit into them. They were sweet and delicious and the children were so overjoyed about their new discovery that Fanny wanted to run back to their house and tell father immediately. When they looked around, however, they discovered Rasclat had scampered off and was barking from somewhere thick in the undergrowth at the far end of the orchard.

“What's the matter with Rasclat?” asked Timmy.

“He's probably just found a nice, juicy bone,” replied Fanny, “Let's go and rescue him so we can go back to the house and tell father.”

At the back of the orchard, they finally found Rasclat's tail poking out from a thicket of stinging nettles. He was growling in the way he sometimes did when he met strangers he didn't like.

“Come on, Rasclat! We want to go back to the house and tell father all about the orchard,” said Fanny, tugging at the mongrel's tail.

But Rasclat kept on barking and growling and so Timmy carefully peeled back the stalks of the nettles with a stick to see what was troubling him.

The two of children could scarcely believe their eyes when peering into the undergrowth they could make out two tiny little figures who were cowering in the shade of a dot leaf. Each of them was about the size of Fanny's middle finger, a tiny little man dressed in a green and white shell suit and a young lady wearing a very short denim skirt and a tight-fitting sleeveless t-shirt who had bright pink lipstick smeared across her cheek.

“Crikey!” said Timmy crouching down to take a closer look, “Look, it's little fairy people. Real fairies in our secret orchard!”

“Oi!” replied the little man angrily, “Who you calling a fucking fairy? We're pixies not fucking fairies. Fairies don't exist. Are you a fucking div or something?”

Timmy was quite startled. He'd never seen real pixies and he'd never heard such bad words except that time when father had spoken to the traffic warden who had given him a parking ticket that time when they went to visit Hamley's.

“Is that your dog?” asked the pixie woman quaking with fear.

“Yes,” replied Fanny, “We call him Rasclat.”

“Well, he's just taken a fucking piss all over our caravan,” said the man pointing to a tiny little gypsy caravan in the shade of some ferns.

“Oh, you naughty dog,” said Fanny, “We're very sorry about that. What are your names? I'm Fanny and this is my brother, Timothy.”

“I'm Darren. And this here is my bird, Melinda,” said the little pixie man pointing at the woman who was hitching her skirt up, “Any chance you can get your mutt out of our faces? Me and Mel aren't too keen on dogs. Mel had a nasty run in once with a Yorkshire Terrier. We were just having a nice time when he came over and started giving us a load of grief.”

Timmy pulled Rasclat by the tail out of the nettles and handed him a thick stick to chew on.

“So do you live in this orchard?” asked Fanny.

“Well, we do now. We used to live in Blair Wood. You know Blair Wood?”

The children shook their heads.

“It's a couple of miles over there,” continued the man pointing westwards, “Or it was until this property developer, Giles, bought the land, cut down all the trees and built luxury flats there.”

“Cunt!” grunted Melinda under her breath.

“What's a cunt?” asked Fanny.

“Oh, it's just another name for a property developer,” replied Darren, “Yeah, we used to do alright over there. It was a nice set-up. I even had a decent job collecting herbs and mushrooms for this homeopath bloke. Bit of an old hippy type, you know. I mean homeopathy – it's all fucking bollocks, isn't it? Still, at least we had a bit of dough coming in. Now we're living on handouts.”

“And they've cut our benefits,” moaned Melinda, “It's outrageous. We're having to fiddle the lecky meter in our caravan just to get by.”

Fanny and Timmy felt very sorry for the little pixie people. They had often heard father talk about about their old neighbours in London who lived on benefits. It seemed a very hard life. And what was strange was that all the people on benefits had this peculiar smell about them, the same smell that father had when he came back from the pub on Saturday evenings.

“Is there anything we can do to help you?” asked Timmy.

The two pixies stared at each other for a moment and then Melinda whispered something to Darren.

“Well, as it goes, we could do with a favour,” said Darren.

“What's that?” asked Fanny eagerly.

“We're both gagging for a fucking drink. Can you get us any?”

Timmy reached into his bag and produced a bottle of fizzy pop.

“Not that kind, you silly cow,” replied Melinda, “Some cider or lager we're talking about. Even a couple of Barcardi Breezers would do the job.”

Timmy looked at Fanny who was shaking her head.

“But, Fanny, we must help them. They've had their homes taken away and had to walk miles to get here. No wonder they're so thirsty!”

“Yeah, that's right,” added Darren, “We're *well* thirsty after all that walking.”

“Father keeps some cans of beer in the fridge, doesn't he?” asked Timmy, looking longingly at Fanny.

“But you know he said we must never touch it. Remember how angry he got when Mummy took them and poured them all down the sink?”

“But it's not for us, Fanny. It's for the pixies. We must help the poor pixies!”

Darren and Melinda were nodding with enthusiasm.

“Well,” said Fanny eventually, “I suppose if they are *really* thirsty then he won't mind.”

“Yeah, fucking nice one,” said Darren, “Come back tomorrow, yeah? We'll be waiting.”

That night they returned to the house. Fanny wanted to tell father about the pixies but Timmy persuaded his sister against it.

“It's a special orchard,” said Timmy as he lay in the top bunk, “An enchanted orchard. Grown-ups never believe in such things.”

Then when they heard their father stumble up the stairs to bed they both got up and crept downstairs to the kitchen as the old wood of the stairs creaked under their

feet.

Peering out of the darkness into the blinding light of the fridge they could see twelve cans of lager in the fridge.

“If we take two then he'll never miss them,” said Timmy.

Fanny nodded and they took the two cans of ice-cold Stella and crept back to bedroom, hiding the cans under their bed.

The next morning they could hardly wait until breakfast was finished.

“I need to go to B&Q,” said father as he finished his coffee at the breakfast table, “I need to get a jigsaw and some rawplugs. I don't want you two messing about whilst I'm away or I'll be very angry.”

“Okay,” said Timmy, “We're just going to go and play in the woods.”

Father nodded and said something about his head hurting as he sometimes did in the mornings now that Mum had left them.

When they heard father's car pull out of the drive, they rushed out of the kitchen and down to the orchard. They found the spot by the nettles and when they peeled back the leaves Darren and Melinda were there outside their pixie caravan, grinning as they stared back at the children.

“You get 'em?” asked Darren.

“Yes,” said Fanny, taking the cans out of her school satchell and opening them for the pixies.

“Fucking blinding,” replied Darren, “We owe you big time, Fanny.”

“And me,” said Timmy.

“Yeah, and you, mate.”

They helped the pixies by pouring out the amber brew into tiny cups that the pixies had made from hollowing out acorns and Darren and Melinda drank thirstily. They stayed for half an hour whilst Darren told them all about his life and unhappy childhood.

“I mean, it's only natural that you're going to have some self-esteem issues,” he

said then paused for a long burp, “Growing up, I always felt like no one ever really believed in me.”

Then Fanny and Timmy heard father's car coming up the road and they had to say goodbye to the pixies but promised to visit them the next day.

“Don't tell anyone about us being here,” shouted Melinda as they turned to go, “There's a lot of prejudice against little people like us. We just want to be left alone really.”

That evening they were watching a DVD of Peter Pan when they had heard father stomping out of the kitchen and towards the lounge.

“Right, you two,” he shouted at them, “Who's been stealing my lager?”

They both shook their heads.

“Well, someone's taken two cans and it's not me. So, unless the lager fairies have been at them then that only leaves you two.”

“Don't be a div, Daddy,” said Timothy, “Fairies don't really exist.”

“You cheeky, little shit,” screamed father, “Get to your bedroom right now, Tim.”

Timothy got up and skulked towards the door.

“But it was the pixies,” said Fanny, tears welling up in her eyes, “We took them to give to the pixies who live in the Enchanted Orchard. They were *very* thirsty.”

“I'm not standing for this,” said father bristling with rage, “You covering up for your brother. You've both been very naughty. You can both go to bed without any supper.”

Fanny started crying and Timmy comforted her as they climbed the steps to their bedroom.

“I told you not to tell, father,” said Timmy as they climbed into their bunks.

“Why not?” replied Fanny, “Why don't adults believe in pixies?”

Timmy shrugged.

“Goodnight,” said Fanny as she tucked herself into bed, “At least, you've seen them too, Timmy. You're the bestest big brother in the whole wide world.”

Then Timmy switched off the light and they both fell asleep.

In the middle of the night they both awoke to a frightening storm. The wind was blowing so hard it was rattling the window frames and even Timmy was scared as fearsome flashes of lightening lit up their darkened room. Thunder claps boomed so loudly that it seemed to shake the old house and they were both very scared and hid under their duvets. Outside they could hear Rasclat barking and yelping as storms and loud noises always made him upset. It must have taken an hour for the storm to blow over and by then they were very tired again and Timmy and Fanny fell back into a deep sleep.

The next morning after breakfast they rushed across the meadow and back to the enchanted orchard. Scrambling through the gap in the gates with Rasclat scampering after them they were horrified to find that inside the ferocity of the storm had felled some of the old apple trees. They ran down to the back of the orchard but when they got there they were dismayed to find a tree had fallen right on the spot where the pixies lived in the shade of the nettles.

“Oh no!” screamed Fanny, “The poor pixies. Timmy, try to move the tree to see if they're okay.”

Timmy tried to pull the tree away from the ground, the nettles stinging his arms as he wrested with its trunk, but it was not good. All they could make out of the pixies and their pixie caravan were the two beer cans crushed under the weight of the tree.

“We must tell, father,” said Fanny, “Maybe he can rescue them. Maybe we can take them to a special hospital for pixies.”

“No,” said Timmy, “They told us not to tell anyone.”

But it was too late. Fanny was running back to the house and by the time Timmy caught up with her she was in the kitchen telling their father all about the

pixies and how they had been crushed by a tree. Father looked very concerned.

“You must stop making these things up, Fanny,” he said sternly.

“But I'm not making it up. Ask Timmy. He's seen them too.”

Father shook his head.

After that Fanny never stopped telling people about the pixies that lived in the enchanted orchard. She told all her school friends, her teachers and every stranger she met. It was several years later – when Fanny was almost eleven – and after her father had consulted a number of psychiatrists and child psychologists that Fanny was prescribed an assortment of pills and capsules for what the doctors referred to as 'schizophrenia'. The pills often made her feel a bit funny but sometimes – not always - when she had taken them she would see the pixies again as she lay alone, strapped to her hospital bed and she would smile to herself and know that they had all lived happily ever after.