

## Little Squirrel

“That’s you and me one day, Peg, standing outside our own home...”

Jim’s words entered Peggy’s mind as she pulled the ornament from the box. She could remember as if it were yesterday the cold wind on Brighton Pier as he brought her the little gift. Gazing affectionately at the two tiny figures outside the little cottage she shook the dome and engulfed them in snow.

Closing her watery eyes she tried to bite back the tears and picture her Jim.

“Come on Mum, we haven’t got all day,” said Marie impatiently as she entered the room. “The taxi won’t wait forever.”

Clutching the ornament tightly, Peggy focused on her daughter. “I was just going over the last few things.”

“You can’t take anything else. I’ve already explained to you. Two boxes, that’s all you’re allowed.”

As much as Peggy loved her daughter, she couldn’t hide the resentment from her words. “I don’t want to go.”

“Oh not again. We’ve been over this a thousand times. It’s too dangerous living on your own, you almost burnt the house down yesterday.”

“I did no such thing. Anyway, your father would never let anything happen to me. “Do you think he’d stand by and watch me suffer?”

Marie sighed. “You’ll be perfectly safe with me and Clive,” she said, ignoring her mother’s superstitious rantings. “You’ll be able to see little Joe growing up, you’ll love it.”

Peggy stiffened and looked hard into Marie’s eyes. “And who will be here to talk to your father?”

Marie lost her patience. “Dad is dead, why do you keep talking about him as if he were still here? Don’t you understand that he’s gone forever?”

The words were out before she could control them. Close to tears she ran to her mother and threw her arms around the sagging shoulders.

“Please don’t make it harder than it already is,” she pleaded. Peggy remained silent, nuzzling her face into her daughter’s neck she wept.

“Mum! Mum!” Shouted a little boy as he came scampering into the room. “The man in the car so that if you’re not out in one minute he’s going!”

Marie pulled Peggy away and held at arm's length, mopping up the tears with a tissue.

"Why is grandma crying?" asked little Joe innocently.

Ignoring her son, Marie stood up and went to collect her mother's belongings.

"No, please!" Exclaimed Peggy. "Give me one more night."

"But you said that yesterday."

"I know, but I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to your father properly." The sound of a car horn sounded from the street.

"Please?" Peggy pleaded, trying to press her daughter's hesitation.

"He's going," said Joe from the doorway as he watched the black car trundle off down the road.

"Alright, you win. One more night. We'll stay here with you, that way we can get off first thing in the morning."

A huge grin spread across Peggy's face. The youthful glint that suddenly returned to her tired eyes brought a lump to Marie's throat.

Marie scoured the kitchen for food. Luckily there was just enough tinned produce to scrape together a passable meal.

Despite all the pleas her mother ate little. Marie could see that she was growing weaker by the day. Even now she found it hard to believe the rapid decline in her health.

Initially things had seemed trivial and Marie had not taken much notice. Her mother complained that she got out of breath when she climbed the stairs or felt dizzy when washing the dishes.

But what had really shaken her was all this talk about her father. It didn't say much for her mother's health when she spoke as if they really had been speaking together that day.

Things finally became impossible to ignore the previous day when she had set light to the net curtains that hung in the kitchen.

Luckily it hadn't spread and the man next door had said it was a miracle it didn't take hold.

Peggy had simply shrugged it off. She insisted there was nothing to get excited about and that Jim had put it out in seconds.

Marie and her husband Clive agreed that she should come and live with them immediately.

Peggy sat in silence, gazing affectionately around the room. In every corner, every alcove a memory.

A smile came to her lips as she looked at the fireplace. It had looked like something out of one of those silent movies, Jim's face blackened with soot and the long stiff brush hanging idly in his hand.

And the door, he'd always fancied himself as a handyman but the look on his face as he tried to get it to hang properly had been a picture.

So many memories.

She knew she shouldn't blame Marie for what she was doing, she think's she's doing what's best. But why wouldn't people listen to what she had to say?

"He's asleep at last," said Marie as she entered the room and seated herself next to her mother. "It's not easy for him, sleeping under a different roof."

"He'll be all right, sleep like a log he will. Jim will see to that."

"Why do you say things like that?" asked Marie softly.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, things about Dad. It scares me."

"There's nothing to be scared off, he looks after us," replied Peggy. "Did I ever tell you about the day you were born?"

Marie nodded.

"It was a devil of a day, you've never seen snow like it. Two days non-stop it had fallen, huge great flakes the size of shillings."

Peggy curled her forefinger to her thumb and spied her daughter through the exaggerated outline of the coin.

"We were completely cut off from the town. Luckily I was well stocked up and we had plenty of food."

Marie couldn't help widening her eyes as her mother spoke. She must have heard the story a dozen times but she never tired of it.

"Everything would have been fine," continued Peggy. "That's if you hadn't decided to show your face. I had an inkling you were on your way because you'd been kicking a merry dance for days. Your father tried to fetch help, he got as far as the front gate, and that took him an hour!"

"There was nothing else for it. We had to do it all ourselves. I was scared stiff I don't mind telling you. Your father was as cool as the snow outside."

"How did he know what to do?" asked Marie.

“He didn’t. Just let nature take its course. After you were born he took you in his arms and held you tight. I’ll never forget his words...”

‘Little squirrel, if you’re a good girl then I’ll always look after you, always.’

Marie felt a feeling of warmth flowing through her at the mention of her pet name

“Little squirrel,” she repeated softly.

Peggy smiled. “He always called you that, right from day one.”

“I remember he said those same words the last time I saw him in the hospital,” said Marie sadly. “He knew he didn’t have long, it was his way of saying goodbye.”

“You never told me that.”

“I completely forgot until just now. I must have blotted the whole incident out of my mind. I’ve always blamed myself for not being there at the end.”

“I was there with him, he wasn’t alone,” comforted Peggy.

For a few minutes the two of them sat in silence, each lost in their own private thoughts.

“It’ll be like losing him all over again when I leave here,” said Peggy finally.

“I’m sorry Mum, I really am. It’s just not safe for you anymore. I couldn’t live with myself if anything ever happened to you while you were here.”

“Nothing will happen all the...”

“... All the time Dad’s here?” Marie interrupted. “I know all that.” She sighed. “I know it’s hard for you, but there’s no other way, believe me.”

Marie changed the subject quickly. “It’s time you got some sleep, we’ve a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Here, I’ll help you to bed.”

“No, I want to stay up for a while. Say my goodbyes, remember?” Marie managed a smile.

As she left the room she glanced back over her shoulder, unable to hold back the tears as she watched her mother’s lips begin to move in speech.

She felt sure she could have coped with the physical decline, she had been prepared for that. But the sound of her mother speaking to an empty room was breaking her heart.

Marie was surprised to find herself awake before Joe. Mornings normally began at six o’clock sharp, her beauty sleep shattered when her bed became a trampoline.

Treading quietly out of his room to avoid waking him she slipped downstairs.

Peggy was still in the chair where Marie had left her.

“Did you go to bed?” she asked.

“Of course, but I didn’t get much sleep.”

An awkward silence hung in the room.

“I don’t suppose you’ve had a change of heart?” said Peggy hopefully. “You don’t think that all this is a little premature? After all, it’s not as if I’m here all alone.”

“But you are Mum. You must come to terms with it. Dad isn’t here to protect you.”

“I know you think I’m mad,” said Peggy. “But I don’t care. I know my Jim is here with me, if you don’t believe me then why should I care.”

“I’m sorry,” was all Marie could find to say.

Joe came wandering into the room, rubbing the sleep from his eye.

“Mum, what’s a squirrel?” he asked.

A cold shiver ran down Marie’s spine.

“How can I be a good little squirrel if I don’t know what it is?”

“Where did you hear that?” barked Marie. The harshness of her words scared the boy, and his lower lip began to tremble.

Peggy held out an arm and drew him to her, throwing a sharp look at her daughter.

“It’s all right,” she said softly. “Your mother didn’t mean to be cross with you.”

Carefully she drew his long fringe from his eyes before speaking.

“Where did you hear about the squirrel?”

“From Grandad,” he replied.

Marie held her breath.

“When was that?” Asked Peggy.

The boy hesitated, looking to his mother for reassurance. “Last night, while you were asleep,” he said eventually. “He told me that if I was a good little squirrel like my mummy, then he would look after me always.”

Peggy smiled and looked to her daughter.

“See?” She said happily. “I told you I wasn’t alone. Now will you let me stay?”

Hot tears flowed down Marie’s cheek as she rushed and took Joe in her arms. Glancing up at her mother she managed a smile and nod.



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