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The Girl with Glass Feet

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1

That winter there were reports in the newspaper of an iceberg the shape of a galleon floating in creaking majesty past St Hauda's Land's cliffs, of a snuffling hog leading lost hill-walkers out of the crags beneath Lomdendol Tor, of a dumbfounded ornithologist counting five albino crows in a flock of two hundred. But Midas Crook did not read the newspaper, he only looked at the photographs.

That winter Midas had seen photos everywhere. They haunted the woods and lurked at the ends of deserted streets. They were of such multitude that while lining up a shot at one, a second would cross his aim and, tracking that, he'd catch a third in his sights.

One day in mid-December he chased the photos to a part of the woods near Ettinsford. It was a darkening afternoon whose final shafts of light passed between trees, swung across the earth like searchlights. He left the path to follow such a beam. Twigs crunched beneath his shoes. A bleating bird skipped away over leaves. Branches swayed and clacked against each other overhead, snipping through the roving beam. He kept up his close pursuit, treading through its trail of shadows.

His father had once told him a legend: lone travellers on overgrown paths would glimpse a humanoid glow that ghosted between trees or swam in a still lake. And something, some impulse from the guts, would make the traveller lurch off the path in pursuit, into the mazy trees or deep water. When they pinned it down it would take shape. Sometimes it would form a flower of phosphorescent petals. Sometimes it drew a bird of

sparks whose tail feathers fizzed embers. Sometimes it became like a person and they'd think they saw, under a nimbus like a veil, the features of a loved one long lost. Always the light grew steadily brighter until – in a flash – they'd be blinded. Midas's father hadn't needed to elaborate on what happened to them after that. Lost and alone in the cold of the woods.

It was nonsense, of course, like everything his father had said. But light *was* magic, making the dull earth vivid. A shaft of it hung against a tree trunk, bleaching the cracked bark yellow. Enticed, Midas crept towards it and captured it on camera before it sank back into the loam. A quick glance at his display screen promised a fine picture, but he was greedy for more. Another shaft lit briars and holly ahead. It made the berries sharply red, the leaves poisonously green. He shot it, and harried another that drifted ahead through the undergrowth. It gathered pace while Midas tripped on roots and snagged his ankles on strands of thorns. He chased it all the way to the fringe of the wood, and followed it into the open, where the scrubland sloped down and away from him towards a river. Crows wheeled in a sky of oily rags. Hidden water gurgled nearby, welling into a dark pool at the bottom of the slope. Above the pool, the ray of light dangled like a golden ribbon. He charged down the slope to catch it, feet skidding on mushy soil and sharp air driving into his lungs as he stumbled the last distance down to the banks. A sheet of lacy ice covered the water and prevented reflections, so all he could see in the pool was darkness. The ray had vanished. The clouds had coalesced too fast. He was panting, hanging his head and resting with hands on knees. His breath hung in the air.

'Are you okay?'

He spun around and felt his foot skid on a clot of soil. He fell forward and stumbled up again with filthy hands and cold muddy patches on his knees. A girl sat neatly on a flat rock. Somehow he'd not seen her. She looked like she'd stepped through the

screen of a 1950s movie. Her skin and blonde hair were such pale shades they looked monochrome. Her long coat was tied at the waist by a fabric belt. She was probably a few years younger than him, in her early twenties, wearing a white hat with matching gloves.

'Sorry,' she said, 'if I surprised you.'

Her irises were titanium grey, her most striking feature. Her lips were an afterthought and her cheekbones flat. But her *eyes* . . . He realized he was staring into them and quickly looked away.

He turned to the pond in hope of the light. On the other side of the water was a field marked out by a stringy barbed-wire fence. A shaggy grey ram stood there, horns like ammonites, staring into space. Past that the woods began again, with no sign of a farmhouse attached to the ram's field. Nor was there any sign of the light.

'Are you *sure* you're okay? Have you lost something?'

'Light.'

He turned back to her, wondering if she might have seen it. It was on the rock beside her, beamed through a hole in the clouds.

'*Shh*!' He spent half a second aiming, then took the shot.

'What are you doing?'

He scrutinized the image on the camera's screen. A fine photo, all told. The girl's half of the stone steeped in a tree's forked shadow, the other half turned to a hunk of glowing amber. But wait . . . On closer examination he had made a mess of the composition, cropping the ends of her boots. He bent closer to the screen. No wonder he had made the mistake, for the girl's feet sat neatly together in a pair of boots many sizes too big for her. They were covered in laces and buckles like straitjackets. A walking stick lay across her lap.

'I'm still here, you know.'

He looked up, startled.

'And I asked you what you were doing.'

'What?'

'Are you a photographer?'

'Yes.'

'You're a professional?'

'No.'

'Amateur?'

He frowned.

'You're an unemployed photographer?'

He waved his hands in vague directions. This complicated question often worried him. What other people could not realize was that photography wasn't a job, a hobby or an obsession; it was simply as fundamental to his interpretation of the world as the effect of light diving in his retinas.

'I cope,' he mumbled, 'with photography.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'It's rude to photograph people without their consent. Not everyone enjoys the experience.'

The ram grunted in its field.

She carried on. 'Anyway, may I see it? The photograph you took of me.'

Midas timidly held out the camera, tilting it slightly towards her.

'Actually,' he explained, 'um, it's not a photo of you. If it were I'd have framed it differently. I wouldn't have cropped the tip of your, erm, boots. And I'd have asked permission.'

'Then what's it a photograph of?'

He shrugged. 'You could say it was the light.'

'Can I take a closer look?'

Before he'd had a chance to figure out how to word a sentence to say no, not really, not quite, he wasn't that comfortable with other people handling his camera, she reached up and took it. The carry strap, still slung around his neck, forced him to step unbearably close to her. He winced and waited, leaning backwards to keep as much of himself as far as he could from her.

His eyes drifted back to her boots. They weren't just big. They were enormous on a girl so thin. They reached almost up to her knees.

'God, I look awful. So shadowy.' She sighed and let the camera go. Midas straightened up and took a relieved step backwards, still staring at her boots.

'They were my dad's. He was a policeman. They're made for plodding.'

'Oh. Ah . . .'

'Here,' she opened her handbag and took out her wallet, finding inside a dog-eared piece of photograph showing her in denim shorts, yellow T-shirt and sunglasses. She stood on a beach Midas recognized.

'That's Shalhem Bay,' he said, 'near Gurmton.'

'Last summer. The last time I came to St Hauda's Land.'

She offered him the photo to take a closer look. In it, her skin was tanned and her hair a roasted blonde. She wore a pair of flip-flops on small, untoward feet.

A snort behind him made Midas jump. The ram had made a steamy halo for its horned head.

'You're quite a jumpy guy. Are you sure you're all right? What's your name?'

'Midas.'

'That's unusual.'

He shrugged.

'Not so unusual if it's your own name, I suppose. Mine's Ida.'

'Hello, Ida.'

She smiled, showing slightly yellowed teeth. He didn't know why that should surprise him. Perhaps because the rest of her was so grey.

'Ida,' he said.

'Yes.' She gestured to the speckled surface of the rock. 'Do you want to sit down?'

He sat a few feet away from her.

'Is it just me,' she asked, 'or is this an ugly winter?'

The clouds were now as thick and drab as concrete. The ram rubbed a hind leg against the fence, tearing its grey wool on the barbed wire.

'I don't know,' Midas said.

'There've been so few of those crisp days when the sky's that brilliant blue. Outdoor days I like. And the dead leaves aren't coppery, they're grey.'

He examined the mush of leaves at their feet. She was right. 'Pleasing,' he said.

She laughed. She had a watery cackle he wasn't sure he enjoyed.

'But you,' he said, 'are wearing grey.' And she looked good. He'd like to photograph her among monochrome pines. She'd wear a black dress and white make-up. He'd use colour film and capture the muted flush in her cheeks.

'I used to dress in bright colours,' she said, 'saffrons and scarlets. Jesus, I used to have a tan.'

He screwed up his face.

'Well, *you* were always bound to enjoy black-and-white winters. You're a photographer.' She reached over and shoved him playfully in a way that stunned him and would have made him shriek if he weren't so surprised. 'Like the wolf man.'

'Um . . .'

'Seeing in black and white like a dog. As for me, I like colourful winters. I really want them to return. They were never this dreary before.'

She kept her feet still as she sat, not shuffling them about and poking at the ground as he had a habit of doing.

'So what do you do? If you're not a professional photographer?'

He remembered from nowhere what his father had said about never talking to strangers. He cleared his throat. 'I work for my

friend. At a florist's. It's called Catherine's.'

'Sounds fun.'

'I get paper cuts. From the bouquet paper.'

'A florist must be a nightmare for a black-and-white photographer.'

The ram hoofed at slushy dirt.

Midas gulped. These had been more words than he had spoken in some weeks. His tongue was getting dry. 'What about you?'

'Me? I suppose you could say I'm unemployable.'

'Um . . . Are you ill?'

She shrugged. A fleck of rain hit the rock. She smoothed her hat further on to her head. Another raindrop fell on the leather of one boot, making a reflective spot above the toes.

She sighed. 'I don't know.'

More rain fell icy on their cheeks and foreheads.

Ida looked up at the sky. 'I'd best head back.' She picked up her walking stick and carefully pushed herself to her feet.

Midas looked back up the slope he'd charged down. 'Where's . . . back?'

She gestured with her stick. Away down a winding river-bank path. 'A little cottage that belongs to a friend.'

'Ah. I suppose I'd best be going, too.'

'Nice to meet you.'

'And you. Get . . . Get well soon.'

She waved gingerly, then turned around and moved away along the path. She walked at snail's pace, cautiously placing her stick before each step, like she was rediscovering walking after a bedridden spell. Midas felt a tug inside him as she left. He wanted to take a picture, photograph *her* this time, not light. He hesitated, then shot her from behind, her shuffling figure backdropped by the water and the ram's grey field.

2

She'd developed a particular way of walking to accommodate her condition. Step, pause, step, instead of step, step, step. You needed that moment's pause to make sure you'd set your foot straight. Like the opening gambits of a dance. Her boots were thick and padded, but one accidental fall or careless stumble could do irreparable damage that would finish her off for good, she supposed. That would be that.

And what was it like, walking on bone and muscle, on heels and soles? She couldn't remember. Now walking felt like levitation, always an inch off the ground.

The river stayed quiet, here pattering down a short cascade, there brushing over a weed-covered rock that looked like a head of green hair. Ida kept hobbling, occasional raindrops dissolving into her coat and making the wool of her hat wet. That was another problem with this bloody stupid way of getting about: you couldn't move fast enough to keep warm. She pulled her scarf over her chin and ice-cold nose.

Thickets of holly dipped branches in the river. A moth landed on a cluster of bright berries. She stopped walking as it fanned its wings. They were furred brown and speckled with lush greens.

'Hi,' she said to the moth.

It flew away.

She walked on.

She wanted the moth back. Sometimes when she closed her eyes she saw more colour than she could in a whole day on St Hauda's Land with them open.

She had always liked to be in places where tightly packed hips,

shoulders and backsides danced against yours, a dazzle of colours whirling on dresses and shirts. She'd held off sleep using the sheer pleasure of company, be it huddled in a freezing tent wearing a thick jumper or trading stories over card games in friends' flats until morning came. There was none of that to be had on these islands.

She had with her the tatty St Hauda's Land guidebook she had bought on her trip to the archipelago in the summer. When she had opened it that winter, for the first time since the trip, grains of white sand fell from its spine.

She'd had more enthusiasm for the place in summertime. She had read, with pity for the islanders, about the lurching industrial fishing boats that trawled from the mainland to intrude in the archipelago's waters, scooping whole pods of speared whales from the water and turning them to blubber and red slop on their slaughterhouse decks. She had read of local whalers who sailed farther and farther out to sea in little boats their fathers and grandfathers had fished in. Some had not returned, either when storms blew up or generations-old vessels failed them. She had read of how, when they returned with dismal catches, the market was already saturated by the meat from the mainland. Whaling families began to move away, taking their youngsters with them. Ida's guidebook tried to draw a line under this, but sounded delirious instead. Tourists would never be attracted, as the authors hoped, by the drab architecture of Glamsgallow's seafront. Nor by the plain rock walls of Ettinsford's church. Nor by the fishery guildhall at Gurmton, whose painted ceiling of seamen and sea creatures, all depicted with underwhelming skill in the muted colours of the ocean, was optimistically compared to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

It was wrong to count on the landscape, although it could be impressive at times. Other island destinations had more dramatic coastlines than St Hauda's Land, which showcased more than

anything the insidious sea. Ida had wondered when the guidebook's map was sketched, for entire beaches shown on it were these days buried under the weight of water. An impressive natural rock tower called Grem Forst (known locally as the Giant's Lamphouse) was described in flowery prose as a star attraction. The lumberjack sea had been at work, cutting away at the rock with its adze of waves. Unwitnessed one evening, the Lamphouse toppled. It broke into a string of boulders peeking meek faces out of the tide.

Inland, the archipelago had only foul-smelling bogs and haggard woodland to attract holidaymakers. Ida doubted the islands could survive the peddling of this kind of tourism. If anything, the guidebook should trumpet the one thing it was careful to avoid.

Loneliness. You couldn't buy company on St Hauda's Land.

He'd been an odd one, that boy with the camera. Such a distinctive physique: pale skin so taut on his skeleton, holding himself with a shy hunch, not ugly as such but certainly not handsome, with a demeanour eager to cause no trouble, to attract no attention.

Made sense. She reckoned photographers wanted you to behave as normal, as if they and their cameras weren't there.

She liked him.

She hesitated, taking her next careful step along the river path. There were more pressing things than one skewed island man. Like finding Henry Fuwa, her *first* skewed island man.

Henry Fuwa. The kind of man who was either pitied or scoffed at. The kind of person who might be seen on a bus paired with the only empty seat, while passengers chose to stand in the aisle. A man she had come back all this way – braved the heaving sigh of the ferry deck and the retreat of colour – to pin down. Out of everyone she'd met since what was happening started happening to her, only Henry had offered any clue about the strange

transformation beneath her boots and many-layered socks. She had not even known it was a clue when he offered it, because back on that summer trip she had still been able to wriggle her toes and pick the sand out from between them.

Wind stirred the branches of the firs overhead. The memory of the clue he had given her was like a dripping tap in the dead of night. The moment you blocked out the dripping, you realized you'd done so, and that made you listen again.

He had said it in the Barnacle, that ugly little pub in Gurmton, six months ago when the earth was baked yellow and the sea aquamarine.

'Would you believe,' he had said (and back then she had not), 'there are glass bodies here, hidden in the bog water?'

Night mustered in the woods. Shadows lengthened across the path and Ida could barely see where track ended and root began. The half-moon looked like it was dissolving in the clouds. A bird called out. Leaves rustled among worm-shapes of trunks. Something shook the branches.

She hobbled onward in the dark, eager to be inside, to root out colours in the safety of the cottage. Tomorrow she would look again for Henry Fuwa. But how did you find a recluse in a wilderness of recluses?