

Waiting for Tomorrow

The Way to Oz

By Mihaela Iancu

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Anne wrapped the pink bubble gum around her finger and bumped with her right foot one of the bench legs, when she said to Frank:

“You know mister, my friend Jane hugs trees.”

“Is that so?”

“Every time we go to the park. Maple trees are her favorite.”

“That’s why you’re here all by yourself? And what do you think about that?”

“I find that rude. I mean, she comes to me and says «Let’s go outside!» and then she leaves me here. She goes from one tree to another, not even looking at me.”

“I see.”

“Honestly! Why do you think she does that?”

“I have no idea. Maybe she’s listening for something. Maybe some animal found shelter inside the tree bark. ”

“If she does it one more time, I’m going to tell on her. She doesn’t even let me kiss her.”

“Maple trees are very nice to touch. You should try it too.”

“I don’t want to. People would look funny at me.”

She looked at the sand castles in front of her, still soaked in water, after which she suddenly turned towards Frank and held out her free hand.

“My name is Anne.”

“Pleased to meet you, Anne.”

The little girl peeled the gum off her finger.

“I can make it into a mushroom. Would you like a mushroom, mister?”

Jack nodded.

“Who wouldn’t want a pink mushroom? This means it’ll be magical.”

Jane made a little snake and a small ball.

“Do you have kids?”

“No.”

“That’s too bad. You should.”

“I keep considering it...”

Anne put the hat on the tip of the little snake and handed it to Frank.

“Here’s your mushroom, mister. It still smells like strawberries. Don’t eat it, ‘cause it’ll stick to your stomach and after that, all of your insides will get stuck together. It’s risky. Just leave it like that and be patient till it dries out.”

“It’s very beautiful”, said Frank. “I’m going to put it right here beside me, on the bench.”

Jack stared at a dad on the chute, his son on his shoulders.

“I can’t wait to be all grown-up. I envy you.”

“What’s so great about being a grown-up?”

“Oh, lots of things. You can take a bath on your own, and even wash your hair by yourself, you are allowed to watch whatever you like on TV, for as long as you want, you can have any kind of sweets you like and as many as you like, you are allowed to use the knife, the lighter, and to ride in the front seat of the car, you can sleep with your blanket off...”

“Ok, I get it!”

“Yah, it’s pretty great to be a grown-up. Jane doesn’t want to. I’m not even sure why I hang out with her any more, honestly. Hah, it’s the second time I’ve said «honestly». Did you notice?”

“Not really.”

“What’s it called? Help me, I can’t remember.”

“A tick.”

“That’s right, «tick». What a funny name for a word, don’t you think?”

“You are friends though, right? You and Jane.”

“I don’t know anymore. She won’t let me touch her. Or hold her hand. Or kiss her. She says it’s gross.”

“What do you mean gross?”

“She wasn’t like that before. She sais that when I kiss her, I’d drool all over her face. But she kisses maple trees instead. It’s not normal.”

“How do you figure it’s not normal, Anne?”

“Well, you don’t kiss trees. You kiss toys, and people, and animals.”

“Give her some time. She’ll come around.”

“But I want to hold her. We agreed that she is my daughter. If she’s my daughter, I should get to hold her.”

“Let her come to you. I promise that she will, one day. Look, we will meet again, and you will tell me, ok?”

“I don’t really know. If you do have more experience...”

“Trust me.”

Jack took his hand to his forehead.

“Do you have a headache, mister?” asked Anne while getting closer to him. “Or are you thinking about something? What are you thinking about? That’s how my mom does when she tells me «Hush now, let me think!». And I don’t mind. We’ve made a pact. I let her, if she tells me, afterwards, what she was thinking of. We don’t have secrets. We tell each other everything. And you mister, have a secret, isn’t that right?”

Jack looked straight into her eyes. They were green. And she had tens of freckles and a tiny mouth, burnt by the sun and wind.

“Tell me.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any secrets, Anne.”

“Oh, but I can feel that you do. Mom can’t hide anything from me, either. If you like, I can tell you one of my secrets, too.”

Jack looked away. He turned his head towards the swings from his right, where three boys had started a water fight.

“Mister?”

He wet his lips, bit the lower one and said:

“I had a little girl. She didn’t look like you, but she talked as much. We went to seaside, three years ago. I was talking to some other grown-ups. She went into the sea and drowned.”

Jack lowered his head and clenched his jaw. He turned to the other boys. Somebody yelled “You’re not allowed.”

Anne stood up, and hugged him.

“Promise not to drool on you.” And kissed him on both cheeks.

“Do you want to be my baby? I could take care of you. Do you live close by? I live right in that building.”

And pointed to a twelve-story building, from which you could see a few windows above the trees in the distance.

“And what about Jane?”

“Jane will come to me, one day. Isn’t that what you said? I want to be somebody’s mommy. I can be a very good mommy. And I’ve always wanted a little girl and a little boy.”

On the street that lead up to the Protestant church, ten meters behind them, there was an ambulance with the siren on. Anne covered Jack’s ears with her chubby hands. When the vehicle drove further away, she let go.

“I’ve seen this in the subway, one day. A mommy and a kid got on the train. The kid was this big, from here to here, not quite that big, but not a baby either. When the doors shut and the train began to move, the tracks started to screech very, very loudly. The little one twisted around suddenly, grabbed her hands and put them over his ears, and then squeezed her with his fingers through her coat. She was constantly telling him «There, there! It’s gone now!», but he kept crying and wouldn’t let go. I don’t think that little boy was a wimp for getting scared. Isn’t that so, mister?”

“Why would you think he was a wimp?”

“Not me. Jane. Because he couldn’t stop crying.”

“Don’t be mad at her. Maybe she needs some time to herself. She’ll come around.”

“I don’t think you like ambulances, don’t you?”

“That’s true, I don’t.”

Anne took the mushroom off the bench, touched it with her finger to see if it hardened and then she put it in one of his pants pockets.

“Would you like some ice cream, mister? I promise you’re going to feel much better.”

“How long are you going to keep calling me mister? After all, you are my mother.”

“All right, then. Again: would you like some ice cream?”

“I would.”

They left, holding hands, towards the park exit loaded with honeysuckles.

“I’ll have to give you a name. I can’t keep calling you «mister», either.”

“My name is Jack.”

“Jack is a boring grown-up name. I’m going to call you Peter. You look like a Peter. And you will call me Mommy.”

“Don’t you like Anne?”

“Anne is for when we’re not playing. When it’s play time, I’m Mommy. Let’s not complicate things.”

“That’s what we’ll do, then.”

“Good. Let’s hurry up, then, Peter. Because today’s your birthday, remember, you’re turning four, I’ll get you a raspberry-cream ice cream.”

That evening over dinner, Jack told his wife that he was ready to have another baby. She kept her eyes on her plate, sighed, and then took the fork into her mouth.

“Jack, let’s not start this again. I know that you’ve been to the park again. I’ve realized that when I saw the sand under your finger nails, but it’s not a solution. You know how I feel. I’m sorry, that’s what I really think. Just sleep on it, at least.”

She looked him in the eyes.

“I don’t think that you’ll say the same thing tomorrow morning.”

He stuck the fork into the bits of chicken.

“One night is never enough.”

She smiled affectionately and with tears in her eyes.

“We’ll talk more about this tomorrow, ok? Eat, it’ll get cold.”

Jack took the pink mushroom out of his pocket, and put it upright on the table. They both stared at it for a few moments, and continued to swallow quietly, bit after bit.

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