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Before Rick spoke, I saw from his expression what was coming.

I said the words first. “The kids are gone again.”

Rick dropped onto the other side of the couch, propping his brow on his hand. I couldn't see his eyes, nor could he see me.

It was just past midnight. All evening, after we'd seen our three kids safely tucked into bed, we'd stayed in separate parts of the house, busily working away at various projects, all of them excuses not to go to bed ourselves—even though it was a work night

Rick looked up, quick and hopeful. “Mary. Did one of the kids say something to you?”

“No. I had a feeling; that was all. They were so sneaky after dinner. Didn't you see Lauren—” I was about to say *raiding the flashlight and the Swiss Army Knife from the earthquake kit* but I changed, with almost no pause, to “—sneaking around like ... like Inspector Gadget?”

He tried to smile. We'd made a deal, last time, to take it easy, to try to keep our senses of humor, since we knew where the kids were.

Sort of knew where the kids were.

How many other parents were going through this nightmare? There had to be others. We couldn't be the only ones. I'd tried hunting for some kind of support group on the Internet—*Seeking other parents whose kids disappear to other worlds*—and not surprisingly the e-mail I got back ranged from offers from psychologists for a free mental exam to “opportunities” to MAKE \$\$\$ IN FIVE DAYS.

So I'd gone digging again, this time at the library, rereading all those childhood favorites: C. S. Lewis; L. Frank Baum; Joy Chant; Ruth Nicholls; and then more recent favorites, like Diana Wynne Jones. All the stories about kids who somehow slipped from this world into another, adventuring widely and wildly, before coming safely home via that magic ring, or gate, or spell, or pair of shoes. Were there hints that adults missed? Clues that separated the real worlds from the made up ones?

“Evidence,” I said, trying to be logical and practical and adult. “They've vanished like this three times that we know about. Doors and windows locked. Morning back in their beds. Sunburned. After the last time, just outside R.J.'s room you saw two feathers and a pebble like nothing on earth. You came to get me, the kids woke up, the things were gone when we got there. When asked, the response was, and I quote, ‘What feathers?’”

But Rick knew he had seen those feathers, and so we'd made our private deal: wait, and take it easy.

Rick rubbed his hands up his face, then looked at me. And broke the deal. “What if this time they don't come back?”

We sat in silence. Then, because there was no answer, we forced ourselves to get up, to do chores, to follow a normal routine in hopes that if we were really, really good, and really, really normal, morning would come the same as ever, with the children in their beds.

I finished the laundry. Rick vacuumed the living room and took the trash cans out. I made three lunches and put them in the fridge.

I put fresh bath towels in the kids' bathroom.

At one o'clock we went to bed, and turned out the light, but neither of us slept; I lay for hours listening to the clock tick, and to Rick's unhappy breathing.

* * * *

Dawn. I made myself get up and take my shower and dress, all the while listening, listening ... and when I finally nerved myself to check, I found a kid-sized lump in each of the three beds, a dark curly head on each pillow. R.J.'s face was pink from the sun—from *what* sun?—and Lauren had a scrape on one arm. Alisha snored softly, her hands clutching something beneath the bedclothes.

I tiptoed over and lifted the covers. Her fingers curled loosely around a long wooden wand with golden carving on its side. If it wasn't a magic wand, I'd eat it for breakfast.

Alisha stirred. I laid her covers down and tiptoed out.

* * * *

“A *magicwand*?” Rick whispered fiercely. “Did you take it?”

“Of course not!” I whispered back. “She'd have woken up, and—”

“And what?” he prompted.

I sighed, too tired to think. “And would have been mad at me.”

“Mad?” Rick repeated, his whisper rising almost to a squeak. “Earth to Mary—we are the parents. *They* are the kids. We're supposed to keep them safe. How can we do it if they are *going off the planet every night*?”

I slipped back into Alisha's room. She had rolled over, and the wand had fallen off the mattress onto her blue fuzzy rug.

I bent, my heart thumping so loud I was afraid she'd hear it, closed my fingers round the wand, and tiptoed out.

* * * *

“Hmm.” Rick waved it back and forth. It whistled—just like any stick you wave in the air—but no magic sparks came out, no lights, no mysterious hums.

“This has got to be how they get away,” Rick murmured, holding the wand up to his nose and sniffing. “Huh. Smells like coriander, if anything.”

“Except how did they get away the first time?”

“Good question.”

I felt my shoulders hunch, a lifetime habit of bracing against worry.

Rick grimaced. “I know what you're thinking, and I'm thinking it too, but maybe it's okay. Maybe the other world isn't a twisted disaster like ours.”

“But—*why* our kids?”

Rick shrugged, waving the wand in a circle. “Found by a kid from another world? Some kid who knows magic, maybe?” His voice suspended, and he gave me a sort of grinning wince. “Kid magician?” He laughed, the weak, unfunny laugh that expresses pain more than joy. “Listen to me! Say those words to any other adult, and he'll dial 1-800-NUTHOUSE.”

I gripped my hands together, thinking of my kids, and safety. I said, “Touch it on me.”

“What?” Rick stared.

“Go ahead. If it sends me where they go—”

Rick rubbed his eyes. “I'm still having trouble with the concept. Right. Of course. But we'll go together.” His clammy left hand closed round my equally damp fingers, and with his right he tapped us both on our heads.

Nothing happened.

Rick looked hopeful. “Maybe it's broken.”

“I don't think we're that lucky,” I muttered, and went down to fix breakfast.

The kids appeared half an hour later, more or less ready for school. The looks they exchanged with each other let me know at once that they were worried—desperately—about something.

Then three pairs of brown eyes turned my way.

“Um, Mom?” R.J. said finally, as he casually buttered some toast. “Did you, uh, do house cleaning this morning? You know, before we woke up?”

“No,” I replied truthfully, watching his toast shred into crumbs. He didn't even notice.

“Did you, like, find any, um, art projects?” Lauren asked.

“Art projects?” I repeated.

R.J. frowned at his toast, then pushed it aside.

Alisha said, “Like a stick. For a play. A play at school. Uhn!” This last was a gasp of pain—someone had obviously kicked her under the table. Her eyes watered, and she muttered to Lauren, “What did you do that for?”

“The play was last month, remember?” Lauren said in a sugary voice, rolling her eyes toward me. “Mom helped paint scenery!”

I fussed with my briefcase, giving them sneakier looks than they were giving me, as I watched them trying to communicate by quick whispers and pointing fingers. Rick came in then, looked at us all, and went out again—and I could hear him turning a laugh into a cough.

* * * *

“You all reminded me of a bunch of spies in a really bad movie,” Rick said later, when I was driving us to our respective workplaces. He grinned. “All squinting at each other like—”

“Rick.” I tried not to be mad. “It is *our kids* we're spying on. Lying to. I feel terrible!”

He said, “I don't. At least they're home—”

“They're not at home. They're at school.”

“They're safe. The wand's in the trunk of the car, by the way. And as soon as I can, I'm going to take the damn thing out and burn it, and make sure the kids *stay* safe.”

I sighed as I drove past palm trees and billboards—the once-reassuring visual boundaries of mundane reality. Mundane made sense. It was safe, because there were no reminders in that everyday blandness that the rules we make to govern our lives are not absolute, and that safety is an illusion.

I dropped Rick off at his printshop. Sighed again when I parked the car.

And I sighed a third time when I sat down at my computer, punched up Autocad, and stared at the equations for the freeway bridge I was supposed to be designing.

* * * *

When we got home, the first sign that Something Was Up was the house—spic and span. Usually housecleaning is something that gets done when Rick and I feel guilty, or when it's gotten so cluttered and dusty I turn into the Wicked Bitch of the West and dragoon everyone into jobs.

I knew, of course, that they'd given the place a thorough search—but at least they hadn't made a mess. I considered this a Responsible Act, and brought it up to Rick later, when we got ready for bed. And didn't a Responsible Act deserve one in return?

“Very responsible,” he agreed. “Won't it be a pleasant, refreshing change to sleep the entire night, knowing they are safely in their beds?”

“Did you destroy the wand?” I asked.

He studied the ceiling as though something of import had been written there. “No. Not yet. But I will.”

* * * *

Home life was normal for about a week.

At least on the surface.

The kids tried another surreptitious search, more oblique questions, and then finally they just gave up. I know the exact hour—the minute—they gave up because they really gave up. Not just their secret world, but everything. Oh, they ate and went to school and did their homework, but the older ones worked with about as much interest and enthusiasm as a pair of robots, and Alisha drifted about, small and silent as a little ghost.

I hated seeing sad eyes at dinner. We cooked their favorite foods. Rick made barbequed ribs and spaghetti on his nights, and I fixed Mexican food and Thai chicken on my nights—loving gestures on our part that failed to kindle the old joy. R.J. and Lauren said, “Please” and “Thank you” in dismal voices, and picked at the food as though it were prune-and-pea casserole.

Alisha didn't talk, just =looked=.

I avoided her gaze.

* * * *

Eight days later I passed by Lauren's room with a stack of clean sheets and towels, and heard soft, muffled sobs. Her unhappiness smote my guilty heart and I was soon in our room snuffling into my pillow, the clean laundry lying on the carpet where I'd dropped it.

We're the parents. They are the kids.

That's what Rick had said.

I got up, wiped my face on one of those clean towels, and went back—not sure what I'd say or do—but I stopped when I heard all three kids in Lauren's room.

“I can't help it.” Lauren's voice was high and teary. “Queen Liete was going to make me a maid of honor to Princess Elte—my very best friend! Now we've missed the ceremony!”

“You can't miss it, not if you're the person being ceremonied.” That was Alisha's brisk, practical voice. Even though she's the youngest, she's always been the practical one.

“Celebrated,” R.J. muttered. “How much time has passed there? What if they think we don't want to come back? That we don't care any more? Brother Owl was going to teach me shape-changing on my own, without his help!”

Lauren sniffed, gulped, and cried, “I wish you hadn't picked up that stupid wand, Alisha. I wish we'd never gone. It's so much worse, being stuck here, and *remembering* .”

“I don't think so.” That was R.J.'s sturdy voice. “Somebody got the wand, but nothing can take away what I remember. Riding on the air currents so high, just floating there...”

“Learning a spell,” Alisha put in. “And seeing it *work* . Knowing that it had to be us, that we made all the difference.”

“You're right,” Lauren said. The tears were gone. “Only for me the best memory was sneaking into the Grundles' dungeon. Oh, I hated it at the time—it was scarier than anything I'd ever done—but I knew I =had= to get Prince Dar out, and, being a girl, and an outworlder, and a very fast runner, I was the *only one* who could get by those magic wards. I liked that. Being the only one who could do it.”

“Because of our talents,” Alisha murmured longingly.

“Because we saw the signs, and we believed what we saw,” R.J. added, even more longingly.

Gloomy silence.

I tiptoed away to pick up the towels and sheets.

* * * *

Rick was in the garage, supposedly working on refinishing one of the patio chairs, but I found him tossing the sander absently from hand to hand while he stared at R.J.'s old bicycle.

“You haven't burned the wand,” I guessed.

He gave his head a shake, avoiding my eyes. “I can't.”

“I think we ought to give it back,” I said.

He looked up. His brown eyes were unhappy, reminding me terribly of R.J.'s sad eyes over his untouched dinner.

“They're our kids,” I said. “Not our possessions.” I told him what I'd overheard.

“Talents,” he repeated when I was done.

I said, “What if Alisha had been born with some incredible music talent? She'd be just as lost to us if she

were at some studio practicing her instrument eight hours a day, or being taken by her music coach to concerts all over the country.”

“She'd be safe,” Rick said.

“Not if some drunk driver hits her bus—or a terrorist blows up her concert hall. We taught them to be fair, and to be sensible. But to be totally safe in this world we'd have to lock them in a room. The world *isn't* totally safe. I wish it were.”

Rick tossed the sander once more from hand to hand, then threw it down onto the workbench. “They lied to us.”

“They didn't lie. Not until the wand disappeared. And we lied right back.”

“That's love,” Rick said. “We did it out of love. Our duty as parents is to keep them safe, and we can't possibly protect them in some world we've never even seen!”

“Think of Lauren, making friends. For five years we've worried about her inability to make friends—she's never fit in with the kids at school.”

“She needs to learn to fit in,” Rick said. “In this world. Where we live.”

I felt myself slipping over to his way of thinking, and groped for words, for one last argument. “What if,” I said. “What if those people from the other world find their way here, but they only have the one chance—and they offer the kids only the one chance to go back? For ever? What if we make them choose between us and that world? They've always come back, Rick. It's love, not duty, that brings them back, but they don't even know it, because they've never been forced to make that choice.”

Rick slammed out of the garage, leaving me staring at R.J.'s little-boy bike.

* * * *

I was in bed alone for hours, not sleeping, when Rick finally came in.

“I waited until Alisha conked off,” he said, and drew in a shaky breath. “Damn! That kid racks up more under-the-covers reading time than I did when I was a kid, and I thought I was the world's champ.”

“You put the wand back?” I asked, sitting up.

“Right under the bed.”

I hugged my knees to my chest, feeling the emotional vertigo I'd felt when Lauren was first born, and I stared down at this child who had been inside me for so long. Now a separate being, whose memories would not be my memories. Whose life would not be my life.

And Rick mused, “How much of my motivation was jealousy, and not just concern for their safety? I get a different answer at midnight than I do at noon.”

“You mean, *why didn't it ever happen to me?*”

His smile was wry.

* * * *

They were gone the next night, of course.

It was raining hard outside, and I walked from room to silent room, touching their empty beds, their neatly lined up books and toys and personal treasures, the pictures on their walls. Lauren had made sketches of a girl's face—Princess Elte? In R.J.'s room, the sketches were all of great birds, raptors with beaks and feathers of color combinations never seen in this world. He'd stored in jewelry boxes the feathers and rocks he'd brought back across that unimaginable divide.

Alisha's tidy powder-blue room gave nothing away.

The next morning I was downstairs early, fixing pancakes, my heart light because I'd passed by the three rooms and heard kid-breathing in each.

I almost dropped the spatula on the floor when I looked up and there was Alisha in her nightgown.

She ran to me, gave me a hug round the waist. “Thanks, Mom,” she said.

“Thanks?” My heart started thumping again. “For pancakes?”

“For putting it back,” she said. “I smelled your shampoo in my room that day, when the wand disappeared. But I didn't tell the others. I didn't want them to be mad.”

I suddenly found the floor under my bottom. “Your dad put it back,” I said. “We were in it together. We didn't mean to make you unhappy.”

“I know.” Alisha sat down neatly on the floor next to me, cross-legged, and leaned against my arm, just as she had when she was a toddler. “We didn't tell you because we knew you'd say no. Not to be mean. But out of grownup worry.”

“We just want to keep you safe,” I said.

She turned her face to look up at me, her eyes the color of Rick's eyes, their shape so like my mother's. “And we wanted to keep you safe.”

“Ignorance is not real safety,” I pointed out. “It's the mere illusion of safety.”

Alisha gave me an unrepentant grin. “How many times have you said about us, *they're safer not knowing*?” she retorted, and then she added, “That's why we always go at midnight, and we're only gone a couple of hours. We can do that because the time there doesn't work like here.”

“But another *world*. How can we set safety rules? We don't know what happens.” I held her tightly against me.

“You send us to school,” Alisha said, pulling away just a little, so she could look at me again. “You don't know what happens there. Not really.”

I thought back to my own school days, and then thought of recent media orgies, and felt my heart squeeze. “True. But we're used to it. And habit and custom are probably the strongest rules we know. Can we go with you to the other world? Just to see it?” I asked.

Alisha shook her head. “There’s a big spell. Prevents grownups, because of this big war in the past. Only kids can cross over—not even teenagers. One day we’ll be too old. I know you’ll be real sorry!”

I tried to laugh. It wasn’t very successful, but we both smiled anyway. “It’s not every set of parents who have kids who cross worlds—you’ll have to give us time to get used to it.”

She hugged me again, and flitted away to get dressed.

* * * *

“R.J. has taken to telling me stories,” Rick said a few days later. “Not—quite—admitting anything, just offering me these stories instead of me reading to him.”

Only Lauren went about as if nothing were different, everything were normal. Keeping the other world secret was important to her, so we had to respect that, and give her the space to keep it.

* * * *

“Alisha told me more about magic,” I said that next week.

The kids were gone again. A spectacular thunderstorm raged like battling dragons outside. We didn’t even try to sleep. We sat in the kitchen across from each other, hands cradling mugs of hot chocolate. Rick had put marshmallows in it, and whipped cream, and just enough cinnamon to give off a delicious scent.

“Magic.” He shook his head.

“The amazing thing is, it sounds a lot like the basic principles of engineering.”

“I think R.J. has learned how to turn himself into a bird,” Rick said, stirring the marshmallows round and round with his finger. “They fly in a flock, and watch for the Grundles, who I guess have a bad case of *Whats-yours-is-mine* as far as other kingdoms are concerned.” His smile faded, and he shook his head. “Nothing will be the same again, Mary—we can’t even pretend to be a normal family.”

“Is anybody?” I asked. “I mean, really?”

What *is* normal?

We live in our houses and follow schedules and pick jobs that are sensible and steady and keep the bills paid, but in my dreams I fly, as I did when I was small.

“The universe is still out there just beyond the palm trees and malls and freeways,” I said. “And the truth is we still don’t really know the rules.”

What we do know is that we love our children, will always love them, until the stars have burned away to ash, and though parents are not issued experience along with our babies’ birth certificates, we learn a little wisdom and a lot of compromise as the children grow.

Rick said slowly, “Well, I hope Lauren and her sword-swinging princess pal are kicking some serious Grundle butt.”

We remember how to laugh.

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