**The Teddy Bear**

Mother was tired. She always tired these days. It was summer, and every afternoon it seemed she needed to sleep with the windows closed against noise, and the curtains closed to keep out the sun which flooded into the south-facing bedroom windows. Her bedroom was her safe place, a place where she had completely to herself; a place where she could wrap herself in the blankets like a cocoon, and hide from the world.

The girl, now aged three and a half, was as energetic as any normal child of her age. She loved playing in the garden, helping Daddy as he worked in the garden; picking peas, and of course eating a few, from among the twisting plants supported by the twiggy pea sticks she had helped Daddy to poke into the ground alongside the rows of pea seeds back in the spring, and picking any of the fruit and vegetables he grew in the large garden, or helping to plant little plants that would grow into proper vegetables for them to eat. Daddy was always needing her help, but most of all she loved to collect the smooth, burnished brown eggs, still warm from the sweet-smelling fresh straw in the nesting boxes in the hen house at the bottom of the garden beyond the fruit trees. She loved to be out in the open air in the garden with the flowers and trees.

That afternoon Mother was looking after the girl on her own. It was a warm, sunny day and she had spent quite a lot of time in the kitchen, baking a seed cake for tea, and putting together things for supper that evening. She had made sandwiches for lunch; cheese and tomato sandwiches with ripe tomatoes fresh from the plants which grew alongside the kitchen wall, so fresh they still had a minty tang when you smelled the stalk. Now she was feeling hot and weary. The promise of a rest after lunch was all that kept the smile on her face when the girl came in from the garden clutching two eggs in her chubby hands. The girl wanted to have them, fresh as they were, for their lunch, and her face shone with excitement to think that she had provided them, but Mother gave a sigh and told her to go and wash her hands, extremely well after being in the hen run, as lunch was ready and waiting on the table in the breakfast room. The eggs, she said, would do for tomorrow.

The girl knew not to try to persuade Mother to have the eggs now, and sadly made her way to the downstairs cloakroom where, standing on a little wooden stool that her father had made especially for her so she could reach the taps, she studiously scrubbed at her hands and fingers with the nail brush which lived at the side of the basin. She knew that Mother would inspect them, so they had to be very clean. She wanted to please Mother as she was hoping to go into the village and play with her friend who lived in a pretty thatched cottage next door to the church. Her friend’s mother made delicious ginger beer and served it in tall glasses with cubes of ice and sometimes with a slice of lemon, which made the two girls feel very grown up. Hands now spotless, she went into the breakfast room with its pale green walls and pretty flowery curtains to present her hands for inspection. Having surmounted that hurdle, she clambered up onto her chair beside Mother’s and looked at the plate of sandwiches in front of her. She always had to eat the ones made with the crust from the end of the loaf, even though it was difficult for her to chew the tough crust with her little milk teeth. Mother said crusts would make her hair curl, but it didn’t seem to be working, as every night she had to have her hair rolled up with pipe-cleaners, which were horribly uncomfortable and knobbly to lie on, and were always pulling her hair, it was a ritual in pursuit of childhood beauty, but she would have much rather have had her hair cut short and left straight like her friend’s. Mother thought that wouldn’t do for her, she believed that little girls should have curly hair, preferably with ringlets.

Slowly the girl began to chew on the first sandwich. She was quite hungry, but the bread felt dry and the tomato kept slipping around over the cheese, making it feel horrid. Eventually the first sandwich was finished, and she turned to Mother and asked if she could play with her friend that afternoon. Mother sighed and said that no, today she was tired and had a head ache; the girls could play tomorrow. This afternoon she had to have a rest. The girl’s face crumpled as she pointed out that was what Mother had said yesterday. She hadn’t seen her friend for ages. Mother said to eat up, and she could have some pudding afterwards, so the girl ploughed slowly through the unappealing crust sandwiches. Mother had finished her plateful first, and went into the kitchen to collect the girl’s pudding. Perhaps it was jelly, or even trifle mused the girl. The prospect spurred the girl on until the last morsel was gone; but no, not trifle, not even jelly! Mother put a dish of cold stewed apples and custard in front of her. If you refused to eat something last evening, you had eat it now, at lunch, or have it tonight; that was the rule. The girl really hated stewed apples. There were always hard, sharp slivers from the core lurking, waiting to scratch your throat and make you gag, and the custard had been sitting on top of the apples for so long now that there was a livid edge all round it where it met the apples. Fighting back her tears, the girl picked up her spoon and began to eat the horrid stuff. At least Mother had put enough sugar in this time. It made a change. She usually put very little in when stewing fruit, saying that if more was needed, it could be added at the table, but that didn’t really sweeten the fruit. Apples weren’t too bad, but plums were so sharp, they made your teeth feel gritty, like the feeling you get when eating cheap, bought cake that had too much baking soda in.

Finally the stewed apples were eaten, well, enough to satisfy Mother, who took away the dish and went into the kitchen to wash up. The girl asked permission to leave the table, and went into the sitting room where her doll’s house sat on a little table, but after a few moments she heard Mother calling for her to come upstairs. The girl protested that she wasn’t at all tired, and really didn’t want to go to bed, but to no avail. Slowly she made her way up the broad staircase. The Grandfather clock in the hall made a whirring noise and then gave a little “ting”: One o’clock. In her bedroom she stripped off her frock and put it neatly over the chair in the corner of her bedroom. It was a pretty bedroom, carefully decorated in pink and white, with rosebud-sprigged curtains; Mother’s idea of what a little girl’s bedroom should be like. It had to be kept tidy, and after playing with any of her toys, the girl had to pack them away in their boxes and put them into the cupboard. She picked up her beloved Teddy bear, given to her for her first Christmas present by her lovely grandfather, and climbed into bed. Mother’s voice called to her, saying that she wanted the girl to come through into her bed so she knew where she was. Very reluctantly the girl got back out of bed and, carrying Teddy, went across the hallway to Mother’s room. It was dim with the curtains drawn, and felt stuffy, with a faint scent of Mother’s make up. The huge overblown pink roses of the wallpaper seemed to push out from the walls, and the enormous dark mahogany wardrobe loomed menacingly over everything in the room. Slowly, holding Teddy, she climbed in beside Mother who promptly cuddled her up in a tight grasp. The girl protested that she was too hot being cuddled up so close, but Mother was determined. She was not going to let the girl out of reach; who knew what mischief she might get up to if out of sight while Mother slept unknowing. The girl felt very hot and uncomfortable. She wasn’t tired, and didn’t want to sleep the afternoon away, she wanted to play.

Softly she began to talk to her Teddy bear. She began to make up a story to tell him, he always listened and loved to hear her stories. Teddy was her best ever friend and confidant. After a while she couldn’t lie still any longer and wriggled to try to get more comfortable. Mother’s arm was still round her, and it was hot and heavy. She wriggled a little bit more, but only found Mother’s arm holding her more tightly and was told to lie still and let Mother sleep. Quietly she continued her story, with Teddy her rapt audience.

It may not have been very long, but it felt as though she had been lying in that hot embrace for ever. Mother was very still and making little puttering noises as she breathed. Ever so gently and slowly the girl wriggled down the bed, out of Mother’s slightly looser grip. She dared not get out of bed; that would never be allowed, so she lay next to Mother who, now that she was no longer holding the girl, had rolled onto her back, and was snoring loudly. The girl eased herself up until she was sitting on the pillow with her back against the headboard. She sat Teddy on her lap and carried on with her story; he was such a good listener. Mother gave a sort of grunt, and turned over. Now she was snoring really loudly, and the girl had to speak up so that Teddy could hear her. In the story the people were going to dance, so the girl stood Teddy up on her knees and began to make him dance as she described the scene. It was fun and exciting; now Teddy was dancing quite wildly. Suddenly Mother sat up, took hold of Teddy, and threw him with all her might into the corner beyond the massive wardrobe. The girl got out of bed and walked slowly over to where Teddy lay in a heap, his arms and legs all awry. Slowly she bent down and gently picked him up, she kissed him, smoothed his furry head, and cuddled him. “Mother didn’t mean it,” she said quietly. “She’s just very tired of me.”

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