

THE HEART OF BLUEBERRY WOOD

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Spinky kept his heart in a big wooden box left to him by his father. Originally it had been full of toys, but Spinky had grown out of toys and had replaced them with something far more valuable. The heart had simply become too big as he got older, growing faster and faster until he was sure it could no longer fit him. And so he'd put it in the box. It was a lovely box, and he was proud of it. On special occasions, he would take it out with him to show off to his friends and the people of the surrounding villages. At first, people were flocking from miles around to see it. But, as with all special occasions, they eventually grew bored with it, and his audience dwindled to nothing as they sought their excitement elsewhere.

One afternoon, as he skipped home from a picnic in Blueberry Wood, Spinky slipped and fell flat on his face in the dirt. The box shot from his hands and he watched in terror as it sailed through the air. He was certain that the moment it hit the ground it would shatter, and its precious cargo would be dashed to pieces on the rocky path.

But then, an instant before it landed, it was swept from the air by a mysterious Bedouin. The tall, cloth-wrapped stranger knelt down to the shaken Spinky and lifted him back to his feet.

"You want to be careful with this, little tiger," he told him, handing Spinky the box. "You only get the one, and without it the world is a cold and desolate place."

And with that, the Bedouin rose, patted the tiny Spinky on his shoulder and went on his way.

When Spinky got back to his village – just before sunset, his pace was so slow – he headed straight to the local Mole. Although Spinky was scared to disturb the Mole after office hours, he was even more afraid of dropping the box, so he knocked timidly on the great wooden door. And when he'd stood there an age without a response, he stretched up and rang the bell.

Eventually the peephole slid open. The Mole's beady eye regarded him from within.

"Business hours are forty to a hundred and forty degrees, with a twenty degree break at midday," he grumbled. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to make a deposit," Spinky told him, struggling to keep his confidence.

"Aren't you a little young to be making deposits?" asked the Mole, blinking through his monocle. "What can *you* possibly have that's of value?"

"It's my heart," Spinky told him. "I keep it in this box and I nearly broke it today. I thought it would be safer if I gave it to you."

The Mole smiled with his monocled eye and Spinky heard the sound of many latches and bolts being opened within. The door creaked open, heavy on its reinforced hinges, and a kindly looking Mole ushered him inside.

"I was your age once," the Mole told his visitor as he secured the door behind them. "Used to bury my heart in the dirt where I thought it was safe. Only, one day, Mrs Mole was digging away – searching for what, I don't know – and she stumbled across it. Wrapped in a nice warm blanket, it was, and at first she mistook it for a little mole baby, left somewhere safe while its mother was working. But her curiosity got the better of her, and she took a sneaky peek at it. When she saw what it was, she was fascinated. She gathered it up and hid in a bush, waiting for its owner to come and collect it."

“Sure enough, after only a few hours, I came along to inspect it. Imagine my shock when I found it was gone. I tell you, my boy, I was in a mighty big tiz as I plowed through the earth wondering where it had got to. My eyesight was better then, of course, and I was sure that, if it was there, I’d have been able to see it.”

“And what happened then? Did she give it back?” asked an anxious Spinky, clutching his box tight with fear.

“I’ll tell you what happened next, my boy... She leapt from her hiding place and scared me half to death. And there, in her hands, I saw my little bundle. She’d cleaned off the mud and the dirt, and it was gleaming like it had never gleamed before.”

“And she gave it back, all nice and clean?”

“Patience, please, I’m telling a story,” the Mole growled. “If it’s only the end you want, then take yourself off and come back later and I’ll get on with the middle in peace.”

“Sorry, Mr Mole,” Spinky mumbled quietly.

“No need to apologise, just don’t do it again. Now, where was I? Ah, yes. Mrs Mole was standing there holding my bundle. I tell you, my boy, she had the most beautiful smile I had ever seen - spread wide across her face, it was, under the cutest button-nose in the woods. Anyway, she came closer and boldly introduced herself – of course, her name wasn’t Mrs Mole then...”

“What was it?” Spinky interrupted, slapping his hand over his mouth as he said it.

“Why, Miss Mole, of course,” the Mole only smiled. “And what a beautiful creature she was. So delicate were her paws that I could scarcely believe her capable of carving her way through the earth; so well-groomed was her fur that it seemed it had never been caked thick with mud...”

“Anyway, I soon introduced myself too, though - as I’m sure you can imagine - I was terribly worried what would happen to my precious bundle, now it was in someone else’s clutches. We spent the rest of the day walking through the forest, talking about all manner of wonderful things - but neither of us mentioned the thing that had brought us together. Even so, and even though I was fascinated by everything she had to say, I couldn’t take my mind off my most treasured possession.

“And then, as the sun sank low in the sky, she turned to me and smiled. ‘I really must be going,’ she said. ‘My parents will be worried’.

“‘But what about my heart?’ I asked, as she’d clearly not thought to return it.

“‘I didn’t think you wanted it,’ she told me, ‘Leaving it so carelessly in the woods. Honestly, if you can’t look after it properly, you should give it to someone who can.’

“‘But what will I do?’ I pleaded with her. ‘How will I survive without it?’

“And you know what she did then? She laughed, a funny squeaking little giggle that felt like it tickled my belly. Then she reached into her satchel and pulled out her own little bundle – all wrapped up in silk it was. ‘Here,’ she said. ‘You take this one instead. But be careful with it, no burying it in the dirt for someone else to find: it’s extremely fragile and I want you to keep it with you at all times. I shall be back to check on it tomorrow.’”

“And did she come back?” Spinky asked him, unable to keep quiet a moment longer.

“Yes, my boy; she came back. And she’s come back every day since. Now, I don’t do as good a job of looking after it as she has of mine, but I’ve never let that heart out of sight – not for a moment. It’s the most precious thing in the wood, and I would certainly never give it to someone else to look after.”

The Mole leant forward from his armchair.

“Now, I’m still willing to watch over your box, my boy, if you’re sure that’s what you want. But no one will be coming to find it here - there are never any break-ins at Mole’s bank.”

“All the same, I’d like to keep it safe,” Spinky told him. “Just for now. It’s far too big and heavy to carry around with me at the moment. Maybe, when I’m bigger and stronger, I’ll come back and get it.”

“Don’t you worry, my boy. When the time comes, you’ll be big enough and strong enough to carry it no matter how heavy a box you keep it in. Until then, though, you can be sure it’ll be safe with old Mole.”

The Mole smiled and took the box from Spinky’s eager hands, then carried it carefully into the darkness. And after a series of clicks, clanks and clatters, he returned with two silver keys.

“This one’s for me to keep hold of,” he said, slipping one of them into his pocket. “And this one’s for you. Don’t lose it, now. We need both keys to open the safe, so you’d best keep yours somewhere you’ll quickly be able to find it.”

Spinky took the key from him with a solemn look on his face. He held it gently, as if it were a petal that could so easily be torn, squashed or folded.

“Now, run along,” said the Mole, the wistfulness gone from his eyes. “Mrs Mole’s making dinner and my tummy’s just aching for sprouts and blueberry chutney.”

So Spinky ran along, skipping back to his house now that the weight of the box was gone. But he was careful to hold the great silver key in both hands all the way.

As Spring turned to Summer and Spinky got that little bit bigger and older, he forgot about his trip to the bank and the story the old mole had told him. The key went forgotten too, kept in some ingenious hidey-hole somewhere in Spinky’s small house, and Spinky got on with enjoying the sunshine.

He played with his friends on the lake at the edge of the wood. They made small boats out of lily pads and raced them from one end to the other, or swam to the bottom for stones. He’d never had more fun in his life, and the days of pleasing the crowds with his beautifully-carved wooden box faded to a distant memory. Now that the box was safely locked up in the bank, he could skip, run and play as much as his breath would allow him without fear in the wood of falling and breaking it.

All through the Summer, he laughed and sang with his friends. They were a huge gang, always ready for anything – a race to the top of the tallest tree to spy out the woods around them; building twig cabins or tree houses; an expedition into the parts of the forest where their parents had forbidden them to go. Nothing was ever too much for them.

And then, one day, the day that the first leaf turned brown, there came a new addition to their gang. From one of the other villages came a girl who’d never before been allowed to visit the lake.

With bluebells wrapped in her hair and a chain of daisies around her waist, she was as beautiful as the woods around her. Spinky was transfixed, so much so that he didn’t notice Rinding’s little boat careering toward him. And, as Spinky stood in a daydream in his own lily pad canoe, the other boat smacked straight into it and he splash-popped into the lake.

All his friends laughed as Spinky splashed around in the water, trying to right his canoe and pull himself back into it. Rinding tried to help him, apologising profusely for not looking where he was going. But the new girl wasn’t laughing, and Spinky secretly smiled to himself when he saw the look of concern on her face.

Guiding his boat to the shore, Spinky did his best not to notice her. He hefted the canoe onto land, and lay out on a log to dry off. But Sandy had begun the introductions and soon it was Spinky’s turn to meet her.

Her name was Lily and she was Sandy's distant cousin and neighbour. Spinky shook her hand politely and mumbled a "How d'you do?" as professionally as he could. She smiled and asked how he was feeling after his fall out on the lake. Spinky blushed uncontrollably.

"I was so scared you might have hurt yourself," she told him. "But then I could see that you were such a good swimmer that surely there was nothing to worry about."

The heat in Spinky's cheeks gave way to a warm glow of pride. But he still couldn't think of anything clever to say.

They stood there in silence for a moment. Then Lily glanced suddenly over Sandy's shoulder. "What's Eifer doing in that tree?" she asked him.

Sandy turned and scoured the edge of the lake. "Where?" he asked, holding his hand above his eyes and squinting. "I can't see her."

While her cousin was looking for Eifer, Lily slipped Spinky a petal from one of the daisies at her waist, shushing him with a finger to her lips. Spinky hid it behind him as Sandy turned back to face them.

"Oh, perhaps I just imagined it," Lily shrugged, winking at Spinky. "Anyway, hadn't you better introduce me to some of the others before it gets too late?"

She smiled at Spinky, then she and her cousin skipped off round the lake. As soon as they'd gone, Spinky pulled the petal from behind him and examined it. Sure enough, there on the underside, scribbled in red, was a message.

Meet me behind the orchids in ten degrees, it said. And don't be late.

Spinky's skin went all a-tingle and he glanced about him suspiciously in case anyone had seen. Then he rolled the note into a tube, tied it with a blade of grass and fastened it to his waist like a scabbard.

Ten degrees later, he was standing impatiently by the orchids, his hand never straying from the note at his hip. He'd been there for ages, and he'd eaten two and a half buttercup sandwiches before Lily finally arrived, not a moment earlier or a moment later than planned.

They walked in the wood for the rest of the afternoon. Spinky took her to the secret places he'd discovered during the Summer. It was almost as though they'd been waiting for her, those beautiful places - like they were made for her, and he was just their little messenger, taking her their invitation to come and stay with them a while. But he was proud to do his duty, and every time she gasped at a flower or hidden grotto, he felt a tiny tickle in his tummy.

They walked like this every day, each of them describing their village and hoping someday - when they were old enough - to invite the other to tea. Spinky would wear his scabbard, which with time grew tatty and brown, and they would seek out new secret places, where she would sing and paint pictures and he would tell stories of far away lands and the mystical creatures at the heart of Blueberry Wood.

And then, as the Autumn grew long and the days frustratingly short, they realised their adventures would soon have to end. Once the last leaf had fallen, Winter would be quickly upon them.

One grey afternoon, as they said their daily goodbyes with the last leaf clinging boldly above them, Lily reached into the folds of her warm Autumn clothes and pulled out a small glowing bundle, wrapped up tightly in the velvety petals of tiger lilies.

"I want you to have this," she said, "To look after you through the harshness of Winter. It's not very big, but it's warm and should keep you 'til we meet up in Spring." And she handed him the small glowing bundle, with a smile and a tear in her eye. "Take it now, in case the leaf falls tonight."

They looked at the last leaf in fear, both of them willing it strength as they held each other's trembling hands. And then, with a sniff, they raced off to join their friends for their bracing walks home.

All the way to the village, Spinky thought of the Mole. He recounted that Springtime story to himself several times as he hurried past his dawdling friends on the path. And, as soon as he was back, he made his way straight to the bank, and rang the bell over and over until the old Mole opened the door.

"Business hours are forty to a hundred and ten degrees, with a twenty degree break at midday," he grumbled, pulling the large blanket around him against the bitter cold outside. "What do you want?"

"I need to speak with you Mr Mole. It's terribly important," Spinky panted.

"I should certainly hope so," the old Mole huffed. "Now get yourself inside. Don't you youngsters know it's almost Winter out there?"

"Sorry, Mr Mole," said Spinky humbly, stepping inside and helping his host close the door.

"Now, what's this all about, my boy?" the Mole finally asked once they were sitting in front of the fire. "What can possibly be worth all this kerfuffle, disturbing an old mole when he's about to sit down to tea?"

So Spinky told him the story. He told of his long carefree Summer, and told of his friends and their adventures in Blueberry Wood. And, eventually, when pressed by a tiring and hungry Mole, he told of his meeting with Lily, and the wonderful times they had spent together.

"Ah, so she gave you her heart..." mused the Mole when Spinky at last paused for breath. "But why did you so desperately want to share this with me?"

"Because I wanted you to tell me what to do with it," said Spinky, aghast. "You've looked after one for years; you know how it all works."

"Ah, well that's where you're wrong, my boy," the old Mole smiled, dusting his monocle. "Just because I've been doing it for years, hardly means I know what I'm doing. It's not something you learn, my boy, not something anyone can teach you. It's not even something you know you've got right. It's just a feeling. You make the odd mistake along the way, maybe mislay it a couple of times, but as the seasons wear on, you slowly get a feel for how best to look after it. You get to know what you should feed it - what things are the most nourishing and help it to grow, and what things are bad for its health. It's all instinct, my boy - instinct and true dedication. As time goes by, you'll find it gets a lot simpler, becomes natural even - but never become complacent, never assume that you're doing everything right."

"But how do I start?" Spinky begged him.

"How do you *start*, young Spinky?" the Mole leaned over to him in disbelief. "Why you start by giving her yours, my boy. Don't tell me you'd not thought of that!"

Spinky sat in silence, stunned by his mentor's answer. He pulled Lily's parcel from his warm woollen jacket and held it before him, feeling its heat through the wrapping. He thought of her singing to him as they sat in their hollowed-out tree trunk, staring at him with her glassy brown eyes and clasping a freshly plucked flower in her delicate hands.

"That's it!" he declared. "You have to give it to me now, so I can take it to her immediately!"

"Certainly, my boy," the old Mole smiled, charmed by his youthful enthusiasm. "I have the key right here."

"The key!" Spinky gasped, recalling the terms of their agreement. "I don't have it with me."

“Then you shall have to go and fetch it, my boy,” the Mole chastised him. “Quickly now: the sun is long since down and I’m loathe to eat a cold dinner. You can leave your Lily’s package here, should you wish. I’ll look after it until you return.”

But Spinky took it with him, remembering the Mole’s own warning not to let it out of his sight. He rushed down the tunnel and out of the bank, leaving the Mole to close the front door behind him.

Spinky sped across the village to his home. His dinner was on the table when he arrived, and his mother, brother and sisters were already seated, but Spinky didn’t stop. He stumbled straight into his room and began searching for the key.

He rifled through the drawers and cupboards, tossing old toys on the floor as he scrabbled to find it. And he was so consumed by his search that he failed to notice his mother, watching him curiously from the doorway.

“What’ve you lost, little Spinky?” she asked him. “And can’t it wait until after dinner?”

Spinky shook his head, refusing to be distracted. “It’s far too important to wait,” he told her. “I have to find it now, or Winter will go on forever.”

“Can I help you look for it, then?”

“No,” he sighed. “I have to do this myself. If I’d been big enough and strong enough in the first place, then none of this would’ve happened. I’ve got to find it myself.”

Worried, his mother returned to the kitchen.

As Spinky continued to search he grew ever more desperate and frustrated. All he could think of were the old Mole’s words way back before the start of Summer... “Don’t lose it, now. We need both keys to open the safe, so you’d best keep yours somewhere you’ll quickly be able to find it.”

But, try as he might, he didn’t seem able to find it. He’d been through everything, and all the while he’d kept Lily’s warm little gift held tightly under his arm, afraid to set it down for a moment.

And then, as he reached to the top of the wardrobe, standing on top of a chair and stretching as hard as he could, he dropped it.

It slipped from the crook of his elbow as the chair wobbled wildly beneath him. Then it fell towards the hard stone floor so slowly that he should have had time to catch it. But he couldn’t. He was paralysed on top of his treacherous perch, unable to think of anything but his terrible carelessness and the emptiness of the long cold Winter ahead.

The parcel hit the floor with a terrible crack, breaking the silence and breaking the spell. He leapt from the chair and fell to his knees, then delicately peeled back the wrapping, praying it wasn’t too broken. But what he found was a seemingly impossible puzzle - a million jumbled-up fragments of a thing he had never once looked at. It had seemed so safe, bundled in its velvety petals.

And as he knelt there in a maze of despair, his eyes caught an insistent little glint in the corner, struggling for attention in the darkness under the bed. Careful not to lean on the scattered fragments before him, Spinky slid along the floor on his forearms and pulled himself under the bed, tears streaming from his eyes in frustration.

Just as he knew it would be, it was the key. Its silver was dulled through neglect, and the ribbon he’d tied at one end had faded and frayed beyond recognition. He took the key from its hiding place, then wriggled out from under the bed and propped himself up against it. Then he sat there, his eyes brimming with tears, staring bitterly at the key as he held it in his two, tiny trembling hands.

Meanwhile, as the Mole sat in front of the fire, longing for his blueberry chutney but anxiously awaiting the return of an excited young boy from the village, out in the woods the first of a cavalcade of snowflakes knocked the last Autumn leaf from its bough.