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Youth Short Story Category – 3rd Prize 2020

TO LOVE A FAERY

By Layla O’Callaghan

The giggling chatter of birds drifted to Jade’s ears where she sat on the veranda of her Grandmother’s old house. Delicious scents from the garden tickled her nose when she inhaled and she sighed happily. Every summer she came to her Grandmother’s house to keep her company. Each year her Grandmother, Natalie, entertained her with delightful stories of the faeries and her childhood amongst them. There were very few people in Jade’s small town who remembered the faeries, even less who were friends with one. Her grandmother was one of the few. A small creak in the floorboards made Jade jump and she turned to see her Grandmother slowly shuffling out of her room, walking stick in hand. Leaping up to help her, Jade guided her into the seat beside her own. “My dear granddaughter, today I will tell you a story that sits deep in my heart.” The old lady declared. “It is about the faery that holds my deepest love.”

“Go on Grandmother.” Jade prodded eagerly. Clearing her throat with a hackle, her grandmother continued slowly.

“Her name was Mae and her beauty was unrivalled. She had hair the colour of fire and wings that shimmered like the stars. She was always laughing. It didn’t matter the situation, she could always make me smile and I told her my deepest secrets.” The old lady chuckled, her

eyes glittering with nostalgia. “When we were both around fifteen, our governments were at odds with each other. It didn’t worry us of course, when you’re only young, politics seems a trivial matter. However, there were threats of a war between the faeries and the humans. Our governments fought constantly over everything under the sun, from land and resources, to religion and values. Regardless of this, our world was the same and so we continued to meet under that magnificent tree standing tall over there.” Jade followed her Grandmother’s gaze to a towering tree with large boughs. “Then, one day, I was waiting for her and instead I found a note. The faeries, her community, had disappeared. Written in Mae’s scribbly handwriting was only a few words. She didn’t explain why they had left, only that they had to. She told me that she loved me and that she was sorry. Months later, I learnt that our government had declared war on the faeries and so, instead of fighting and hurting the people they loved, they left.” Jade fumbled for a tissue on the table beside her and handed it to her grandmother, who wiped trembling tears from her wrinkly cheeks.

“Gran,” Jade asked softly. “Where did they go?”

“The faeries went to what we called the ‘trepid lands’ they are heavy woods just south of human civilisation. Until a few years ago, it was all the land that they owned. We have improved our ways since then,” her Grandmother reassured her. “The government signed all this land.” She gestured to the woods that surrounded her house. “to the faeries. I live right on the border.” She looked up at Jade’s curious eyes. “The faeries will come back Jade.” She smiled through her tears. “I only hope I live long enough to see it.”

Jade smiled, content with her Gran’s story for the night. She gave her a soft pat on the shoulder before retiring into the house. Walking past a darkened window, Jade caught a flicker of movement in the corner of her eye. “There’s nothing there” she quietly grumbled to herself. Fighting the uneasy feeling in her stomach she continued down the corridor, when, again she caught movement outside the window. This time, Jade turned her head speedily to look into a pair of sparkling emerald eyes. Her scream evaporated into the silent house as she processed the man outside the window with his hands pressed against the glass. He did not stand at his full height, hunched over so that his face could be seen in the window. Taut muscles corded around his neck and his biceps bulged. He wore a shirt with no sleeves that proudly displayed his broad shoulders and a leather strap attached to a bag hung around his neck. His eyes were strong and yet pleading. At what she saw next, Jade’s jaw dropped like lead. Erupting from this man’s back was a pair of silk-like wings, they glittered in the

moonlight and rippled with the breeze. Cautiously, Jade approached the face in the window. “You’re a faery!” She gasped. He nodded, reading her lips. Cautiously Jade reached over and pushed open the window, leaving only a thin piece of mesh between her and the faery. “My name is Wayd and I know I’m not supposed to be here, on this land.” The faery began, swallowing with a gulp. “But I need your help.” Crouched outside the window in her Grandmother’s corridor, the faery told Jade of his job to find an elder of his community, Mae. Mae had left many weeks ago, to search for her old friend who lived at the border between humans and faeries. Unfortunately, the elderly woman suffered from a faery version of a condition like dementia. This was why she had been unable to make the trip earlier and also why her disappearance stirred worry. It was Wayd’s job to find the old faery and bring her to safety. He needed Jade’s help in talking to Natalie, so that they could search the places Mae had met her that she might have remembered. Maybe paths they had taken and hiding spots they had used. Mae, in her confusion, would be headed toward anything familiar. He hoped they could backtrack and find her. Listening to his story, Jade couldn’t help but stare at his beautiful wings, his emerald green eyes and his pearly lips; his face framed by waves of chestnut hair. When he finished, she smiled gratefully at him and promised she would talk to her Grandmother.

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A young woman sat expectantly at the bottom of a towering tree in the woods. She didn’t look around for her companion to arrive, just sat, patiently waiting. Sure enough, after only minutes, without a rustle or murmur, another young woman dropped down from the high branches of the tree to plonk herself cross legged opposite from the waiting woman. “Mae!” The waiting woman greeted the new company. “Your hair looks so lovely today.” Mae’s auburn hair looked as beautiful as it always did, it cascaded from its roots down her shoulders and spilled across her back in a crimson wave. She wore a yellow singlet dress that proudly displayed the long glittering wings that sprouted from her shoulder blades. Her eyes danced with joy.

“Natalie, how I missed you!” Mae replied, embracing her. Obviously excited to see one another, the women chatted delightedly all afternoon, rising to their feet at one point to dance beneath the broad shade of the tree. They skipped and laughed, Mae’s amber hair mixing with Natalie’s blonde until the sun had almost disappeared below the horizon and

tearfully Mae left, bounding upwards, leaping from branch to branch until she could no longer be seen.

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Trudging through the house to Natalie’s room only a few hours after the sun had woken up, Jade knew what she must tell her. She was not sure how her Grandmother would react or what she would say. “Gran,” she called into the room. She walked in, her eyes adjusting to the darkness, the only light in the room was coming from the open window and Natalie sat, as any other day, facing the woods. Nervously, Jade came and sat in the chair beside her. Jade described to her Grandmother, the faery that had come to visit her the previous night and everything he had told her. Much to Jade’s relief, Natalie only smiled sadly. She looked up at Jade with resolve settled in her eyes. “We will find her.” She told Jade. “We have to.”

Each morning, Jade waited at Natalie’s front doorstep to help Wayd with the day’s search. Every morning, without fail he dropped from a nearby tree and came to greet her with a careful, thought out plan. Jade also brought with her, lists of places from her Gran. The first few days she was shy, eyeing Wayd cautiously and following him with a distance as they searched for Mae. Soon though, she relished their days together and sometimes she even forgot about the serious, desperate task they had to accomplish. Wayd relaxed in her presence as she did in his, she loved to listen to him describe his home and the jokes he told her made her giggle rather embarrassingly. When they walked together, he would swing his hand to brush hers and while she pretended not to notice, her heart sang. He smelt of pine and honey and home. She loved the way that he smiled when he saw her, his face lit up with unbridled happiness. Beside him, she was someone better than herself. Together they covered more and more land, scouring countless nooks and paths. Wayd’s jokes grew less frequent and he constantly howled guttural faery calls that echoed throughout the woods. No matter the defeat that Jade saw growing in Wayd’s eyes, she remained positive, certain that sooner or later they would find Mae.

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Natalie approached a towering tree in the woods, her insides humming with the anticipation of seeing her friend. However, when she reached the tree, a fluttering piece of parchment caught her eye. It was wedged strategically into a knot in the tree so that it was visible to a

keen eye but still secure. Curiously, Natalie pried the parchment from its place and opened the crinkly material to find a scrawled message on the back. It read;

Natalie, oh how I will miss your patient smile and caring companionship, the joy of our many evenings together will forever be in my heart. We are leaving, we have to. I know that you don't understand right now but I hope if we meet again in the future, that you can find it in your heart to forgive me. Know that it is only because I love you that I am leaving you like I am. I couldn't bear to say goodbye. ~ Mae

Natalie stared at the note in blatant disbelief. The sweet humming inside of her took a violent turn, instead now roaring with pain. A single tear slid from her eye, dampening her skin on its way down her cheek.

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Sitting on her Gran's front doorstep, Jade felt a bubbly excitement creep up on her for the day ahead. She couldn't wait to see Wayd and hear his soft yet strong voice. Her face lit up when she heard the rustle of leaves and saw the glitter of his wings appear beneath a fir tree. What she didn't expect was Wayd's soft yet strong voice to be sad and weak. He told her with reluctance that they weren't to search today, because he was to go home. As Jade took in this news, her heart sunk to her feet. Wayd had received word from his village through a small messenger bird and although they were reluctant to say good bye to an elder, it was time the search be over and Wayd head home. "This is farewell." He told her and stooped down to let his lips brush her cheek. She gave him a small smile and inwardly scolded the butterflies that squirmed at his touch. Wayd then entered her Grandmother's house and kissed Natalie's soft, feathery hand. Tears filled her eyes when she realised he was to go and Mae could not be found. Soberly, Jade and Natalie watched as Wayd disappeared into the woods, his gear strapped tightly to his muscled back.

Meanwhile, an elderly faery made her way through the woods.

Her head pounded dreadfully and her brittle bones ached as Mae stumbled through the woods, desperately hoping to find a landmark. A clue. Another living being or just anything that would encourage her to continue. She felt as though she had been walking for weeks and weeks on end. She had used all of her packed food and her water supply was running low. She couldn't remember how long she had been walking for. Now, with heat bearing down

upon her stooped back, she prayed to each of the faery gods that she would find her friend. Desperation clogged her throat, sadness weighed down her knees as they sunk into the ground and hot tears evaded her eyes. A picture surfaced in her mind, it was a picture of Natalie, sweet Natalie, waiting patiently for her beneath the towering tree with the large boughs. The memory stung her heart as she remembered how it felt to leave her best friend. Now, as her body grew more and more fatigued, she knew that it didn't matter, she had to find Natalie. It was the guilt that inspired strength back into her legs and love that spurred her determination. The guilt at leaving her beautiful friend, no matter how noble the cause. She lurched up onto her feet and continued to trudge forwards. Though she was not sure which way she was going, she did know that she would get there.

A thud echoed in the bushland to Wayd's right and he pricked his ears to a strangled cry. As he ran towards the saddening sound, he realised with a heart wrenching surprise that it was a faery. He leapt over logs and branches, his legs straining with the effort as he willed himself to find the one who was hurt. Gradually the sobs sounded closer, though they began to quieten now, Wayd could hear them clearly. He skidded abruptly to a stop as he reached a parting in the trees and his heart filled with relief at the hunched, withered shape shuffling along slowly, yet with purpose. It was Mae! Solace poured through him and he ran forward and scooped up the tired old lady. She hollered loudly in surprise but Wayd just spun her in the air, crowing with delight. "Put me down at once young man!" Mae scolded, though her eyes twinkled with amusement and soul lifting relief. She looked at Wayd, questions in her eyes. "How far am I from Natalie?" She asked him, assuming that the young man must've known who she was and what she was doing.

"So close!" He enthused with jubilation. Together Mae and Wayd trekked back where Wayd had come from, to Natalie's house and to Jade. Wayd chattered excitedly to old lady, inquiring on her health and the bruises on her legs while thoughts of Jade danced, rejoicing in his head. How grateful he was to find Mae and that she may give him another reason to see Jade. How grateful he was that he heard the old faery with all the noises of the forest. Mae clung feebly yet determined to Wayd's sturdy shoulder, excitement dancing in her veins, hopeful but in fear of a fifty-year-old void that might keep her from her dearest friend.

Natalie sat as she usually did, in dim lighting, snuggled up in her reading chair with a knitted blanket draped over her knobby knees, gazing out into the woods. Much to her astonishment, mere hours after Wayd had left, something caught her eye at the entrance to the

woods. It was something that made her call out to her granddaughter in the other room to “Come, come quickly my dear.” Jade bounded into her Grandmother’s room, her heart racing in anticipation for what her Grandmother had seen. She stared at the woods incredulously, for what she thought she saw was two figures. One hunched and one tall, striding out of the woods and towards the house. It was Wayd and Mae. Quickly handing her Grandmother her walking stick, she leapt out of Natalie’s bedroom, leaving her to hobble slowly after her towards her friend on the path. Jade burst out the back door and barrelled into Wayd. Her heart flew at the presence of his wavy chestnut hair against her cheek and his face pressed into her own hair. Slowly she pulled from him and wrapped her arms, more gently, around Mae. Together, the three of them ran up to the house and Natalie’s room. Natalie was standing, despite her crippled legs, in the doorway. Upon seeing one another, both women burst into boundless tears, wrapped their long bony arms around each other and clung tightly. A few metres away, Jade stared up into Wayd’s emerald eyes and he swooped down, without hesitation and pressed his lips firmly onto Jade’s. Her heart sang and her head swam. This time, she didn’t scold the butterflies. She stroked his soft hair in awe.

In Jade’s small town, there were only a select few who had had the privilege of loving a faery. Jade sat with Wayd’s strong arms swung around her shoulders, his wings tickling her back, and watched her Grandmother tucked in her reading chair, laying under the wing of her old friend who was squashed in beside her. Together, they laughed as though they were young again, her Grandmother scolding Mae for her guilt. Still, after so many years, Mae’s eyes danced with joy. At that moment, Jade knew that her and Natalie were two of the very few lucky ones. The ones who loved a faery.