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Winner



Pooh Sticks & Rainbows

By Kevin Brooke

‘I thought I'd lost these,’ I said, lifting the photos from the envelope. ‘How old are we, seven?’

‘If so, Spike must be eight,’ Angie replied, sitting beside me on the edge of the bed.

‘Look at those glasses. What did your Mum call them, bottle bottoms? And those little blonde tresses.’

Angie stood up. ‘I'd better get going. Don't spend too much time reminiscing, will you?’

‘No,’ I replied, but it was too late – I was already lost in the

memory of my first visit to the sea and the smell of salt on the wind.

Angie's mum, Penny, let me run around at first as I chased the receding waves, only to turn and run up the beach as the water chased me across the sand. She knew I'd come back once the food was laid out on the blanket. It was the same blanket that the three of us were sitting on when the photo (our first one together) was taken.

'I'm going to build a sandcastle,' I said, soon after.

'I'm going to make a big hole,' said Spike. He had a knack of digging holes for himself, particularly as he got older.

I don't remember the exact moment the mood changed. I do remember the taste of sand in my ice-cream, the crunching bitterness and, of course, the sound of Penny's voice.

'Where's Angie?' she said, high pitched and shrill. 'Sam, have you seen Angie?'

She stood up, her feet kicking my sandcastle into nothing. Just as it seemed the world was about to end, Angie re-appeared - her hand being held by a lady from nearby.

'Is this one yours?' she asked.

'Thank you,' Penny replied, and dragged Angie back towards the picnic blanket. Then it started to rain as a black cloud turned out the light and we were all soaked within moments. I didn't care about getting wet – all I could think about was my sandcastle but soon after, the clouds retreated and Angie tapped me on the shoulder. As I turned, I witnessed the most amazing rainbow I've ever seen.

I placed the photo at the back of the envelope. Ignoring the

earlier warning about spending too much time reminiscing, I lifted the second one from the envelope and kicked the bedroom door closed.

I was all grown- up by then, or at least as grown- up as I allowed myself to believe at fourteen. Spike was there too, along with a girl he'd met at the campsite. I don't remember who took the photo but there we were, standing on the bridge and each of us was holding a stick as we waited for Angie. Unfortunately, this time, a kind lady didn't bring her back.

'I'm not standing around in this,' Spike said, as it started to rain.

'She'll be back soon,' I said, unconvinced. It had become a trait of hers, the way she kept going missing, particularly after her dad left.

'She's mental that bird of yours,' said Spike.

'She isn't my bird,' I replied.

Spike and the girl threw their sticks on the ground and started to walk away. 'Let's go lover boy,' he said.

'She isn't my girlfriend and never will be,' I said. 'Have you seen those glasses?'

'Ugly glasses, ugly girl,' the girl with Spike said and they both started laughing. I joined in at first, but then something made me turn. Behind us, Angie was standing on the bridge. She was only a few feet from us and close enough to have heard everything we'd said.

'I'll be back in a minute,' I said to the others and ran back through the rain, handing Angie my stick.

'Are you okay?' I asked. She took the stick but didn't look back. I should have stayed. I should have apologised for being such a coward and told her I didn't mean it but I just was too worried at what Spike might say.

So I walked away, the sight of the clouds lifting for a few moments persuading me to turn and see Angie continuing to lean against the side of the bridge as she stared towards the river. In the background was a glimpse of sun and the faint colours of a rainbow.

When we came back from the holiday everything changed so quickly. Angie barely spoke to me and Spike grew angrier by the day. It was almost as though he knew what was coming. I think that's why Penny told him first - she knew he'd struggle with the news more than anyone.

'That bitch is kickin' us out,' he said, pushing by me on the landing.

'What d'you mean?' I asked but instead of answering, he locked our bedroom door and proceeded to explode into rage. Tables smashed into walls, a chair was thrown through the opened window and then the mirrors followed with the crash of glass on the outside patio, barely audible above the sound of his screams.

'Spike, open up now,' Penny cried, banging on the bedroom door as a further thud followed. Together with Angie, I looked through the window to see the drainpipe Spike had attempted to climb down was strewn across the patio. Spike meanwhile lay amongst the blood stained fragments of glass. He pushed himself up to kneeling and held one of the shards to his wrist.

'No!' I shouted as, accompanied by one last scream, he sliced through the skin on his forearm, in a vertical line from his wrist to inner elbow. The ambulance arrived just in time. Ten minutes later and Spike would've been dead.

I was still shaking as I turned over the third and final photo to see Angie looking back at me. I wasn't in it and neither was Spike. After the incident at Penny's house, he was taken in, briefly, by his 'proper' family. We kept in touch for a while and he seemed happy, much happier than I was and so after a while, I stopped replying to his letters.

Angie and I went down different paths too. At least I'd stayed local, which meant we went to the same school and then met up at a friend's eighteenth birthday party one balmy, August evening. She was wearing contact lenses by that time.

'You look great!' I said.

'Don't you think I look like a boffin anymore then?' she said, using the word I'd called her at school when she was doing well and I was doing badly. She said she was going to university to study illustration – something she'd always dreamed of doing.

'I've just signed up at the boatyard as an apprentice,' I lied.

'Well that's worth celebrating,' she said, the chink of her bottle against mine followed by a kiss on the cheek. I couldn't believe my luck and soon after, we let one thing lead to another.

The third photo was taken about two months after the party. Angie looked amazing and that's why I took the photo. It didn't even occur to me that by this time she should have started her course.

There were a couple of people I didn't know either side of

her as she relaxed in the middle of the boat, her reflection in the water a picture of serenity. Okay, so working on the lake in the park wasn't quite the job I'd boasted, but even so her reaction surprised me. She was being helped out of the boat by one of her friends and so I went over to assist.

'Thanks for calling me like you promised,' she said, her expression hardening to anger.

'I meant to, but I was busy,' I replied.

She stopped, barely turned, but said one more thing. 'You've ruined my life Sam Wordsley and I will never forgive you.'

As she walked away, it started to rain. This time the sun didn't come to the rescue and most definitely, this time, there were no rainbows. It must have been seeing her that triggered the rest. Penny turning up where I lived, spitting words like responsibility and telling me I had to find myself a proper job.

'Until you've sorted yourself out, don't even think of coming near my daughter again,' she said and walked back along the path to where Angie was standing by the gate. A few months later, things got even worse. In some ways I've been lucky never to have known my 'proper' family. I thought Angie had it all and so did Spike - the foster boys who'd invaded her life.

'It was difficult for me too,' she told me recently. 'It was great at first, but after a few months I wished you'd both just go away and leave me alone.'

It must have been similar feeling for Spike's parents when they took him back. Unfortunately, unlike a resentful seven year- old girl, they had the power to do something about it. I remember Penny turning up at the door of my foster parents. I

was sure she'd come to give me another lecture but as I walked down the stairs I realised she'd come for a different reason.

'Hello,' I said, getting in the car, but Angie barely looked at me for the entire two hour journey. I couldn't help but think it had something to do with the pregnancy and that it had gone wrong in some way. I couldn't help but wish it was true and that I'd be able to give up my job, while Angie could to go to university after all but it wasn't that simple.

'I'll let you go on your own,' Penny said, as she parked outside the care home.

When I got inside the hospital, Spike didn't look any different to begin with. The closer I went towards him, however, the more obvious the drool became that dripped from his chin.

'Spike,' I said. 'Is that you?'

He looked back, barely focussing. A woman in her fifties walked past. She stopped and slapped Spike on the back of his hand.

'What's wrong with him?' I asked.

'Brain damage,' the woman replied. 'Some bright spark thought it would be funny to add a cocktail of drugs to his drink.'

'Spiked?' I asked, immediately regretting the word.

After his parents let him go for a second time, Spike went from one foster home to another until finally, the system gave up on him and let him take his chances on the street. This is what Penny told us on the way home - me and the girl with the bump that protruded through her dress that only an hour before I'd wished would go away.

'Have you finished looking through those photos yet?' Angie said, her voice from downstairs dragging me back to the present.

'Nearly,' I said.

It was seeing Spike that forced me to sort myself out. Then, amazingly, Angie agreed to marry me. When I ask her why, she tells me it has something to do with what happened at the bridge. How she'd watched our pooh sticks hit the rocks and stones in the river. How they'd separated briefly but somehow come back together.

'Dad, are you coming downstairs or what?' the impatient voice of a girl, sweet sixteen today.

'In a minute,' I said, placing the photos together on my bed and retrieving a fourth from my wallet. There was me, Angie, Penny and a different little girl with blonde tresses and glasses with lenses as thick as the bottom of glass bottles.

Spike was there too, in the background. We'd tried to get him to take the photo, but he was still struggling with his coordination. There are a few clouds and a hint of rain, along with a few rays of sunshine. Most importantly, however, in the background is the most glorious, life affirming rainbow.

ENDS
