My Life
by Mustafa

Once upon a time there was a little girl whose mum moved house. Her dad moved house too, but to somewhere else, and sometimes she went to stay with him but it always felt cold in his new house, even when it was warm. There was an echo to the smooth shiny surfaces of everything that made you think of knives, and sharp edges. Mum’s house was in the country and it was the opposite, it was so warm and full of people and noise and busyness that you couldn’t even breathe, the air was always full of steam and talk and there was no peace.

It helps; it does help, if I think of it as a story. It helps if I tell the story of what happened as if it was a fairy-tale.

I begin “Once upon a time” but I can’t put another little girl in this story. Though I wish it wasn’t, this is my story. This is a story about me.

So the I-child started to play outside in the garden, to get away from the noise. She had never had a garden before, but even if she had it wouldn’t have compared to this one. This one was smooth lawn uphill and stretched out for running, and pretty shrubs cut into shape up near the house, but down along the back of it there was an orchard of bitter apples (for cooking, not for eating) and behind that a hedge, high as the sky and thorny and tangled and thicker than walls. If you were small enough, you could slip through a gap between two apple trees and wriggle your way into a space under the hedge, thorns and leaves all around, invisible from grownups and cousins and the whole world.

When I found it first, I was only looking for a hiding-place. But I found I could wriggle along on my belly for a while and come out the other side and into the woods.

The woods were where every fairy tale I’d ever heard must have happened. I’d never seen such woods; I hadn’t thought they came like this. The trees were wide-apart and very old and thick and the first time I found it there was bluebells covering all
the ground like carpet. I stepped so carefully, I didn’t want to break them. They made a little ringing noise, so high and faint I was sure I was imagining it, but not sure at the same time. I saw a squirrel that sat and looked at me for a long moment and then moved away like liquid poured into a squirrel-shape. I’d never seen a squirrel before that, ever. Birds with big black eyes and orange faces watched me from the trees. They looked like they might speak at any moment.

After I found the way into the woods I went back every day. I couldn’t hear any sounds from other houses or from the road or from mum’s house when I was in the woods. Mum thought I was playing in the garden, and I didn’t tell her different.

I didn’t want to ask her about the woods and have her show me them on a map or say what they were called and of course she knew about them. I secretly suspected that the woods might be real, and that would mean they weren’t fairy tale at all, just normal and not secret or special or only mine.

I was sure there were talking animals and elves and things in the woods and they’d always just left when I got there, were just out of sight. There were faces that smiled from the barks of the big gnarled old trees, and the trees were perfect for climbing on. One had a branch shaped like a hammock that was just a bit too high to be comfortable lying on in case I rolled over, but I did anyway, for the butterflies in my stomach.

And there were the birds. I don’t know what kind, I still don’t know, but they had those orange faces and they’d look at me with black beady eyes and I never saw them sing, though the woods were always noisy with insects and birdsong and if you stayed still long enough the noises got louder and louder, the small furtive rustlings of things that lived in hiding.

I always found something new there. Red berries bright as poison. Mushrooms, dark and spongy and smelling of damp.

How long did I go on visiting there? I don’t know if it was a season or a year or two or three. I don’t remember the seasons changing, I don’t remember if the leaves ever
fell and I don’t remember snow or rain, but I think I was there for ages. Time doesn’t pass the same way for children, it pools around you, slow and thick as treacle.

It’s not important, I suppose. I loved the woods and they were my safe place, my favorite place that I went back to and back. And one day, when I went back (I’d made the gap wider, but still had to wriggle through the thorn-tunnel) the woods were different.

I noticed straight away that it was darker, but I saw some small red flowers like sparks in the gloom and wandered heedlessly away and some unknowable time later I heard the silence that was suddenly all around.

My heart sped up without my knowing why. The smiling faces in the tree bark were all turned away. The birds with orange faces were all gone. Every sound I made was as loud as a gunshot against the absence of noise – no rustling or squeaking or insect-hum or birdsong.

And then a sound. Only one. A movement, a shift of weight.

Some animal lives inside all of us still, and pricks its ears at danger and knows to be afraid of the dark. I think children are closer to it. In any case I knew, utterly and completely, that something was there, that it was watching me, and that it was bigger than me.

I was young enough that I didn’t try to talk myself out of being afraid.

I froze, for hours it felt like, and then another sound, a whiff of breath from off to the side, and I ran.

I ran blind, on instinct, and something followed me. I did not look behind. I was the monster under the bed, and the big bad wolf and the bogey man and I didn’t need to look at it to know that I should run.

No part of me thought it might be only my imagination, it might be a fox or a dog or
even an animal escaped from the zoo.

It was real and it was playing with me.

I heard it ahead of me and veered away, and I heard the whuff-whuffwhuff of its breath again, but now it sounded like laughter.

It played with me like a cat playing with a mouse, but it wasn’t a cat. (I saw it, not clearly, but as a dark shape in the shadows, and sometimes it seemed to lope on all fours, but sometimes I thought it stood upright and went on two feet).

I swerved to get away, and swerved again, but it was always faster than me, always in the way.

And just like a cat playing with a mouse, once in a very great while the mouse gets away.

I saw my tunnel through the hedge – almost invisible from this side- and dived in, head first without thinking. The thing made a noise, a shrieking growl of frustration, and it grabbed at my legs, reached in to pull me out.

Have you ever tried to flee for your life by crawling on your belly through a low dark hole while something pulls and scratches at your feet, the backs of your legs, your backside?

I’d say it’s not something you forget, but I did forget. Or decided to forget. I know that must have happened, but the next thing I can recall is standing at the far side of the sour-apple orchard trying to catch my breath and convince myself to turn around and make sure it wasn’t following.

I could see my mum through the window, yellow light spilling out, and two of my aunts in there with her, and a cousin I didn’t like (I didn’t like any of them), and it looked so normal and boring and I forced myself to look at that claustrophobic comfort and breathe in great gulps of air and I told myself that no monsters could
exist in the same world as mothers who made the same chicken casserole again and again even though she knows I don’t like it and cousins who leave sticky fingerprints on all your things but you have to play with anyway even if you don’t want to.

And after a while I turned back and the orchard was empty behind me. I even dared myself to walk all the way to my secret entrance and I stood by it – but not close enough to grab, just in case – and I listened for the sound of something big and cruel trying to dig through.

I heard nothing, but had a sudden image of the beast standing just on the other side of the hedge, watching the same hole on its side as I was watching on my side, and (what if it heard me breathing?) only a screen of leaves and branches away. I bolted back to the house all in a panic all over again.

Mum gave out to me for ruining my trousers (they were torn and my legs started to hurt as soon as I saw the long red scratches) but she didn’t scold long or loud and she hugged me and drew me a bath and didn’t make me play with my cousins after dinner (chicken casserole).

You would think I’d never have gone back. Why would I go back?

But children think differently. For a week, maybe two, I didn’t go back. The thought was terrifying. And then I went to stay with dad and he took me to the funfair and it was the first good visit ever (mum made a face when I told her about how good it was and then pretended that was her normal smile and said “Go on”).

So it all faded back behind lights and candy floss and you don’t really hold onto memories at that age, and the house was still stuffy and the garden wasn’t nearly as good, so I found myself back at the end of the orchard again and again.

And in the end I went through.

The tunnel was bigger on the woods side now. It must have tried to get through after all. That made me feel worse and better all at the same time. Worse because it was
such tangible evidence that it was really real, and had really happened and it had
really chased me and really dug up real soil, and better because it definitely couldn’t
get through even though it had tried to.

I was cautious. I lay in the tunnel, ready to wriggle back at the first sight or sound.
But I could hear the birds singing and the insects humming and I thought I saw a frog
hop and I’d never seen one up close before. A bird with an orange face landed close
enough to make me jump and put its head on one side and said “Chirp,” exactly like
it was saying the word “chirp”, as if it was asking me where I’d been all this time. I
was absolutely sure then that the birds would talk to me one day, and say more than
just “chirp”. The faces in the trees were all smiling again and I’d forgotten all about
the monster by the time I found the little dark pond with all the little frogs.

But I always checked after that. Once or twice it was quiet in the woods, and I didn’t
hear the birds, and I backed out. Once it felt dark, but I heard birds singing and I
almost wriggled through when I heard a whuff-whuff and went backwards as fast as I
could, but still I felt the air move on my face from where it reached for me.

It must have waited hours for the woods to forget about it and start being noisy
again.

I only went through after that if I saw an orange-face bird. They were my allies, my
best friends and I trusted them. One would always land if it was safe. One day
walking and swishing a big straight stick and being a pirate, an orange-face bird flew
at my head in a whirr of wings and I bolted for home. I don’t know for sure if the
beast was there that day, but I trusted the birds.

The poor birds.

I didn’t know then. It was so clever.

It almost got me, one time more.

I wriggled through, and waited under the hedge, and saw an orange-face bird on the
ground. I pushed myself up on my forearms and waited to hear it say “Chirp” or something else but it didn’t move. I saw it was dead the exact same second that the beast leaped at me, roaring now, enraged. Not treating this as a game anymore. I propelled myself backwards by my wrists and my elbows and I don’t know how it didn’t get me. It swiped at me with its huge dark claws. I shot out of my tunnel at the orchard end like a champagne cork going out of the bottle.

I have a small white scar on the end of my nose. I tell people I got it falling out of a tree.

It wasn’t safe after that. It just wasn’t. I knew it was waiting for me, and the birds would be no help to me or if they helped it would kill them for helping me.

I never would have gone back, ever.

Mum got a dog for herself for Christmas to take it for walks. Going for a walk became mum’s new favorite thing and every time I go down to see her, we go for a walk somewhere. Going for a walk means finding a place with paths all marked out and marching down them as fast as you can without looking around at anything much, with the dog yapping its head off at everything that moves or makes small noises.

Last week I went to visit and she brought me to a place called Tolston Wood. We drove for an hour to a gravel parking lot and there were hardly any paths, but for once mum didn’t mind, it was so “lovely” and as we were strolling (on long enough walks she slows to a stroll. “I liked long walks the best, she told me “You wouldn’t think it from how far we had to drive, but these woods are huge, they back up practically right onto our garden, your Aunt told me.”

And I went cold from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

I froze solid in the space between one heartbeat and the next, and mum went on and on about “how lovely” and mused about whether she could get the hedge knocked down and make a path.
“I don’t think you’re allowed,” I said, because mum cares about being allowed to do things and what was I supposed to say? I wanted that thick thorny hedge (and now that I think about it, who planted that hedge anyway?) firmly in place between mum and these deep dark woods.

It can’t be that dangerous, I told myself, even though my heart was speeding up. I was less clever now that I wasn’t a child any more. There are people here, I told myself, and paths and hiking trails marked out with splashes of colour on the tree-bark.

I could still see the faces in the trees. They stared at me, aghast, as if I’d violated some awful taboo in coming back.

I saw a bird with an orange face. It regarded me solemnly and said “Chirp” in a flat, sad voice. Rolo the dog barked at it, but it didn’t fly away. It stared sadly at me with its black bottomless eyes.

I faked a sudden stomach-cramp, to get mum to get me out of here. She didn’t argue “You’ve gone white,” she said.

Back at the car, there was a dead bird with an orange face left delicately on the passenger side windshield. It’s so hideously clever.

“You know,” mum said as we drove away (not fast enough! I wanted to scream but I didn’t) “I don’t think I’ll go back there. It looks nice enough, but there’s a kind of an atmosphere. And that poor dead bird. A cat got at it,” and she asked about irresponsible pet owners.

I’m glad she won’t go back. I don’t know if it would come after her, I don’t see why it would, but then I don’t know. It’s not like I can go back there and check on her.

I ran back to the city as fast as I could and told work I was taking all my saved up holiday days and I came here, as far away as I can think of.
I don’t know what to do. Now that I see it all written down, it isn’t like a fairy-tale at all. If it was the birds would have told me where to find the silver bullet or the magic sword and I’d kill the monster or turn it human with a kiss and I’d be the chosen one and live happily ever after in the fairytale woods.

I think I might be far enough away. Maybe if I just wait, just hide for a while. It forgot about me before, maybe it will again.