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Awkward Questions



I can clearly remember the first time I really began to wonder about the mystery that surrounded my early life. I was at kindergarten, sitting with my friends under the apple tree in the playground. It was a perfect morning in May and we were drinking mugs of milk at break time.

“Lucy, why do you live with your gran? Why don’t you live with your mum and dad, like everybody else?”

Harvey Chatterley-Foulkes fixed his goggle-eyes on me as he asked his question.

I had to think of an answer quickly, and looked around hopefully for Miss Hunt, my teacher, thinking she would help me, but she had gone to look for someone in the cloakroom. I stared at Harvey, think-

ing he looked like a fat frog, and said, "Because I don't. Wipe your mouth, Harvey. You've got a milk mustache." I thought this would make me sound grown up and confident, but Harvey took no notice.

"But why not?" he insisted. "I mean, where are they? You must have been born from someone."

There was silence. If I said, "I don't know," they would all laugh at me, and I might cry. Now, all eyes were fixed on me, waiting for my answer.

"Perhaps they're dead," said Mary cheerfully.

"Or perhaps they've run away and left you," breathed Janie.

"Or perhaps they're divorced," broke in Billy, who seemed to know all about it.

I looked around desperately and breathed a great sigh of relief, for Miss Hunt was coming across the playground. I went over to her and felt safe, but Harvey was still determined to find out about my private affairs.

"Miss Hunt," he squeaked excitedly, "why does Lucy live with her gran? I mean, why hasn't she got a dad and—"

Miss Hunt's clear voice silenced him.

"If I had a gran like Mrs. Ferguson, I wouldn't mind too much if I had parents or not; she's as good as a mum and dad rolled into one. You're a lucky girl, Lucy. My gran died when I was a baby. Now, wipe your mouth, Harvey; you've got a milk mustache. And now, everybody listen. Since it's the first of May . . ."

Everyone immediately forgot about me being parentless as we fixed our eyes on Miss Hunt, wonder-

ing what delight she was going to surprise us with because it was the first of May.

“Because it’s the first of May,” she repeated, “instead of going back in the classroom for math, we’re all going for a walk up to the wood on the hill to pick kingcups—they’re just out.”

There was a shout of joy as sixteen happy children raced toward the meadow. Miss Hunt walked behind, and I trotted quietly beside her, still feeling rather shaken.

I knew now that Harvey’s question had been there for a long time, buried deep and never asked. Now, all of a sudden, everyone had asked it; and there was no answer.

I knew that I had not always lived at Pheasant Cottage with Gran. A long time before that there had been somewhere else, where a very tall man had carried me in his arms, and I remember very clearly that he had once gone down on all fours and let me ride on his back. As I grew older, I used to wonder if he could have been my father, but, strange to say, I had never asked.

I’ll ask Gran today, I said to myself, and then forgot all about it in the delight of the outing. Miss Hunt was in front now, because the hill was steep for small legs. She looked like the Pied Piper with all her class puffing and hurrying behind her, while she called back exciting instructions.

“See how many different kinds of wildflowers you can find . . . not all dandelions, Sally! Look very quietly in the hedges—you might see a nest. Harvey, stop chattering! We want to listen to the birds, and you

are frightening them all away. Now, stand still, everybody . . . you, too, Lizzie; stop jumping up and down! Now, be very quiet. Can anyone hear that thrush singing?”

Then we plunged into the oak wood, and I was the first to spot a gleam of gold in the shadows and shout, “Kingcups!”

Everyone broke into a charge through the undergrowth, but Miss Hunt shooed us back onto the path so that we didn’t get stuck in the swamp. But there were plenty of flowers to be reached from the path, and we returned home later with muddy feet and pollen-powdered noses.

Parents were waiting by the schoolroom door, and one by one the children went home, clasping their golden bunches. I lived a long way out, and it was four o’clock before Miss Hunt put me on the school bus.

Gran was standing at the bus stop with Shadow, our black Labrador, who was straining at his lead and barking for joy because he knew I was coming. We usually chased each other madly home, but Shadow must have been disappointed that afternoon because I did not feel like playing. I walked quietly beside Gran, hugging my kingcups, and then, suddenly, I asked my question.

“Gran, why do I live with you and Grandpa? Didn’t I ever have a mum and dad? Most of the other children have them.”

It seemed very quiet after I spoke. I could hear a bee buzzing in the lilac tree and a blackbird singing. At last Gran answered.

“Your mummy was our dear daughter Alice, Lucy. She died when you were a tiny baby, and there was no one else to look after you, so Grandpa and I took you as our own little girl.”

“But didn’t I have a daddy?” I persisted. “And why didn’t he look after me? Is he dead too?”

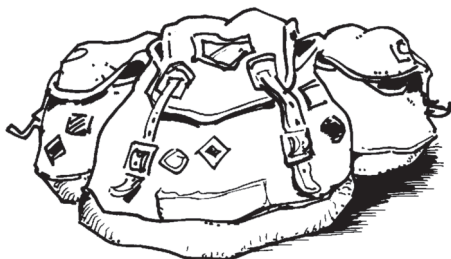
There was a long silence while I waited confidently for the answer, because I knew Gran always spoke the truth.

“He went right away,” said Gran slowly, “and we never saw him again. He would not have looked after you properly, Lucy. You belong to us now, and always will, just as though you were our own little girl. Look, there’s Grandpa! He’s seen us.”

We had reached our garden, and by the way she changed the subject and pressed her lips together, I knew that I was not expected to ask any more questions ever again. I did not mind. A delicious smell of baking came from the cottage, and Grandpa waved from his vegetable patch, his rosy face beaming a welcome. Home was a perfect place. What did I want with a father? I really didn’t need one!

Yet somehow that old faraway memory puzzled me and wouldn’t go away. For if that tall man *had* been my father, then he could not have been completely bad, or he would not have held me in his arms, nor would he have gone down on all fours and let me ride on his back. But it was a puzzle without an answer, and for five whole years I never mentioned it again to anyone.

Guide Camp



Those five years passed very quickly, and life was happy and exciting. I loved living in the countryside, watching the changing of the seasons. I never much minded being an only child, or not doing the things that the other children did.

Sometimes, when the girls at school laughed at me because I'd never seen the sea, I would grow restless and wonder whether I would ever travel or do anything different from going to school, coming home, and going to church on Sundays. I did not see how I could, really, because my grandparents were growing older every year, and Grandpa, who had been head gardener at the castle on the nearby Eastwood Estate for thirty years, only had a small pension. They were perfectly content to remain in their cottage,

and, apart from occasionally visiting relatives in Birmingham, they had no wish to take holidays, and could not, in any case, because of having to look after the chickens. And, except when my friends made fun of me, I was content, too, content to play in the woods and climb the hills, to read, and to scribble stories about children who went on long journeys and travelled to all the countries I learned about in geography lessons. I had my own jobs to do in the cottage and garden, too, and the days never seemed long enough.

Sometimes my best friend, Mary, came to spend the day, and I would take her onto the estate. But Mary was a sturdy, practical child who preferred to arrive somewhere than just to wander. She would often say, "Where are we going, Lucy?" which really annoyed me. My unchanging reply probably annoyed her too. "We're not going anywhere; we're just walking!" And after a time we would turn back and play games in the garden. I really liked Mary, but she belonged to my school world, and my woods and countryside bored her.

But from all my happy childhood memories, one event stands out, clear and unforgettable, and that is the Whitsun Guide Camp in the Cotswolds when I was eleven years old. When Gran told Captain I could go, I was so excited that I hardly slept for two nights. And when we actually set off in the bus with our knapsacks and bedding, I could hardly speak. I sat squeezing my clasped hands between my knees, bottling up my joy, because living with elderly people had made me rather a quiet child. But gradually,

as we traveled for hours through leafy lanes, I relaxed. We sang, we chattered, we giggled, we ate sandwiches and drank lemonade out of bottles; and then we were there, high on a hill at the edge of a great beech wood, overlooking the Gloucester plain, and Captain and Lieutenant were showing us where to put up our tents and how to light a fire.

That holiday was everything I had hoped it would be. I shared a tent with Mary, and every waking hour was thrilling, from the moment we crawled out into the sweet-smelling morning to the moment we snuggled into our sleeping bags in the dark, shrieking in pretend terror when the owls hooted in the woods behind us. But I remember most vividly the early morning when I woke before anyone else and, slipping on my jumper and shoes, crept out into the waking world. The sun had not long risen; a cuckoo called from the beeches. Captain was up and wandering about, and she saw me.

“Lucy,” she said, “would you like to dress and take a message to the farm for me? Straight through the wood and climb over the stile and cross the hay field. You’ll find the farmers milking the cows. Ask them to save us fifteen fresh eggs, and we’ll fetch them later.”

I was slipping on my dress when Mary’s tousled head appeared out of her sleeping bag. She blinked at me.

“Where are you going?” she yawned. “Shall I come too?”

“No, no,” I replied hurriedly. “I won’t be long. I’ve got to go to the farm with a message. I’ve got to go now, at once. You can come and meet me if you

like.” I shot outside, for this was my special expedition and I had to go alone. I ran through the sunlit wood, climbed over the stile, and saw the hay field—a tangled mass of wildflowers, all sparkling with dew.

I went mad! I flung my shoes backward over the stile and leaped and danced barefoot along the path, the flowers tickling my legs. I laughed and clapped my hands, carried away with the joy of being alive on such a morning, loving the feel of the cold grass between my toes. Then, having delivered my message, I turned back and walked more slowly, wanting this hour to last and last. But it was not to be. Mary was trotting toward me, and by the look on her round face, I knew she had a secret to tell me.

“Lucy,” she began mysteriously, “do you know what?”

“What?” I answered.

“Well, I came to meet you through the wood, and Captain and Lieutenant were standing by the stile.”

“So what?”

“Well, they *saw* you!”

“I don’t care.”

“Yes, but Lucy, they talked about you; I heard them. They didn’t see me, ’cause I waited behind a tree, and I *heard* them, Lucy.”

I was silent, desperately curious to know, but I wasn’t going to show it!

“Lucy, shall I tell you what they said about you?”

“What, then?”

“Captain said”—and here Mary’s voice changed to sound like a grown-up’s—“Fancy good little Lucy

going all wild like that! There's more in that child than meets the eye.' And Lieutenant said, 'Oh, Lucy's got plenty in her. Her teacher says her essays are brilliant. She needs to get away from those grandparents of hers occasionally and start living.' That's what they said, Lucy. There was more, but I can't remember it all; and anyhow they turned around and saw me."

"How silly," I replied rather crossly. "I live just as much as they do." But somehow the sparkle had gone out of the day, and all that morning while we ate breakfast and tidied up and swam in the river, I puzzled over their remarks. What was wrong with being good? And what was wrong with my grandparents? And what had I been doing all these eleven years except living? I supposed that they said it because I hadn't done all the things the others had done, and because I'd never been to the sea. But, after all, they knew nothing about my real life, and they'd never even set foot in the Eastwood Estate. I felt rather cross all day, and they must have wondered what was the matter with me, until the delight of cooking sausages on the campfire drove the whole thing out of my mind.

But it had stirred up all the old questions. I was different.

That night I lay awake for a long time, with Mary snoring beside me, and listened to the owls and the rustle of the beech leaves, and tried to remember the face of the tall man who had gone down on all fours. But it was no good. It had gone forever.