

Always By Your Side

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THIS SUMMER

Going on holiday was always one of my favourite times of the year but now that has all changed.

I am staring at the artificial stars glowing on the ceiling. I can't sleep. My stomach is churning. This is of course not the first time that I have lain awake the night before a vacation. But all the other times, it was happy excitement that kept me awake. The prospects of setting off in the middle of the night; of sitting in the car, watching the sun come up; of seeing the white-topped mountains rising out of the horizon; of the small balls of Scotch eggs that mother carefully unpacks and passes to the back...

To the back, where I will be sitting alone now, during the entire journey to the South of France. I feel another warm tear gliding down my cheek. With a sigh, I turn to my other side. I know that I shouldn't be looking at the alarm clock, but I do it anyway. The green numbers are glowing in the dark, like cat's eyes.

01.34.

Mum and Dad thought long and hard about whether we should go on holiday this year. And they deliberated even harder about whether we should return to the same campsite again. All the memories... But now that nearly a year has passed since that fateful day, they decided that life must go on. That it was time to carry on from where we had left off last autumn. They asked my opinion, and I said that I would love to go back to the riverside campsite, where we had spent such a lovely time last summer.

I am trying to think happy thoughts, but the churning in my stomach will not subside. I am thinking about all the things I used to do with my little sister. And all the things that we were still going to do, but now will never get the chance to.

We are leaving around 5 a.m., Mum had said. I could still grab a couple of hours' sleep. I shift into a new position to see if lying on my tummy helps.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO

Mum was holding the door open. Anna entered, wearing her blue summer dress, waddling in like a little robot. As she was approaching the bed, taking one tiny step at a time, the nauseating smell grew thicker around her. A mixture of medicine, mashed potato, detergent, urine and death... A smell that got intensified in the warm air.

'Granny wants to say something to you Anna.' Dad was sitting on a stool on the other side of the bed. He sounded hoarse. Granny was his mother.

Anna stood still at the foot end of the bed. She let her eyes glide up the soft pink bedspread until they met Granny's. Granny's eyes seemed sunk deep into her skull, pulling the skin tight over her cheekbones. Even though Granny had been in a gradual decline for the past couple of weeks, Anna was visibly shocked by how she looked today.

Granny tried to lift her head off the pillow. She beckoned her youngest granddaughter with a fragile hand. Her lips parted slightly and she groaned.

'Anna...' she said softly but audibly. Anna stood still, staring at the infusion needle in Granny's hand.

'Soon, Granny is going to fall asleep and will not wake up again,' said Dad.

I knew that they were gradually going to increase the dose of the sedative, until her body gave up the fight.

I shut my eyes for a moment and tried to resist crying. It had all happened so quickly. 'Anna... come a bit... closer.' Said Granny's fragile voice.

I got off the stool near the bedstead to make way for my little sister. With hesitation, she did as she was asked. An old, wrinkly hand was stretched out trembling, looking for Anna's. Their warm hands finally met and entwined.

'Dear Anna... I have... something for you.' Anna nodded.

Granny's free hand pulled something out from under the bedspread. Something that she must have been holding onto all this time.

'Take it,' said Mum, who moved to stand behind Anna. 'She was determined for you to receive this.'

Anna held out her hands.

'This is for you, Anna. You used to...' Granny rested her head on the pillow for a moment. She needed to catch her breath. '...play with it,' she rasped tiredly.

Anna grabbed the old doll with both hands. The doll, that used to sit in the guest bedroom, but which got moved to Granny's bedroom after Grandpa passed away. It was a little girl with curly red hair, green eyes and a dainty pale face, in a faded yellow dress. I found her creepy. Once, when I visited Granny and Grandpa, she was the reason I couldn't sleep. At least not until she was put out of sight inside a wardrobe. But at that moment, I suddenly noticed a certain resemblance between the doll and Anna.

'That doll is at least sixty years old,' whispered Dad. 'Granny got it as a child.'

'It is... not... an ordinary doll,' gasped Granny.

Anna kissed Granny on the cheek. 'Thank you very much.'

'I... love you, Anna.' Granny turned into my direction. 'And you too, Nina.'

'We love you too, Granny,' I said, tears rolling down my cheeks.

Anna bit on her lip and held the doll behind her back. 'Granny, don't die. You must stay with us.'

Granny's eyes closed for a moment and shone brightly when she opened them again. 'I will stay with you forever, Anna. As long as you remember me... I will be always by your side.'