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Sensible Child

By

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The scent of stale furniture polish was always the first thing to greet Melissa DeGrange upon entering her Uncle's house. The atmosphere of the place, were it given corporeal form, would be an unpleasant creature indeed. It would never smile cheerfully and say 'how d'you do, young Miss?' Rather, it would pull faces and delight in the promise of shutting her indoors. She did her best to ignore it, and resigned herself to face the dull hours of imprisonment her parents called 'babysitting.'

"Now be good for your uncle, won't you dear?" said her mother, with a hug. "But of course you will; you've always been a sensible child."

"A little *too* sensible," her father was quick to add. "For her age, at any rate."

Melissa pouted. They used to just get a sitter, but she'd soured all the competent teenagers in the neighbourhood with her 'sensible' behaviour. So that left Uncle Vincent. *Strange* Uncle Vincent; who never let her play outside when that was all she ever did at home.

"Are you sure Vincent's all right to take care of her this evening?" said her mother. "He sounded quite ill on the phone."

"Hush dear, here he comes," said her father.

A hint of mothballs crept into the sour air, preceding the grim figure of Uncle Vincent. He was strange enough on most occasions, but this time looked as if he hadn't slept for weeks. His eyes had a driven look.

"Vincent, how are you? Gosh, you don't look at all well."

"I'm fine – really," he said. "You know how I get lost in my studies."

"Listen, if you'd rather we didn't leave Melissa with you—"

"Nonsense; Belinda will see that she's well looked after."

"Ah, good. Well, we'd best be off."

Melissa watched her parents retreat down the gravel drive. Halfway to the car they waved. She didn't wave back.

"Come now, Melissa, dear," said Uncle Vincent. His voice flowed like syrup – the kind for curing coughs. "You'll see them again soon enough."

He closed and locked the door. Its escape having been cut off, the fresh air was beaten into submission by the close atmosphere of the house. Uncle Vincent knelt and put a large bony hand on her shoulder.

"You have the house to yourself today."

"What about Belinda?"

Vincent frowned, as if he couldn't remember. "Belinda... left us. Amuse yourself as you see fit. You know where the food is, of course?"

Melissa nodded.

"Good. I shall be upstairs in my study." He gazed up the staircase with hungry eyes. A tortured look crossed his gaunt face. Then he smiled, but it was as false as his interest in taking care of her.

Words seemed to fail him now, so he opened his hand to the living room and started up the wooden stairs. Before he reached the first landing, Melissa called up to him:

"Uncle Vincent, might I go outside?"

Vincent stopped dead. His hand tightened on the railing till you could see the veins.

"No," he said, ashen white. "You aren't to go outside. You mustn't... you mustn't go."

He hurried on his way. Melissa sighed. It was the answer always given; but she asked every time.

She cast her eyes around the living room; at dusty chairs and tables, signs of disarray; an ashtray full of blackened leavings of pipe tobacco. The house never used to be so untidy, but one by one the servants had left or were fired. And as each departed, so too did another portion of Uncle Vincent's state-of-mind. Now not even Belinda – her Uncle's most loyal maid – remained. What, then, was left of his sanity?

I guess he never played outside when he was a child, thought Melissa.

There was no television, not that Melissa watched it; but she wondered what Uncle Vincent considered amusement in this tomb of a place. She wandered from room to room, checking all the doors. She paid particular attention to those that led outside. But they were locked. So too, the windows. When she'd exhausted the possibilities, she sat upon the sofa to sulk.

Up until now, her desire for freedom was all that compelled her efforts. Now curiosity took hold, as she hit upon a thought:

What can be out there that he's so worried about?

She leaned on the sofa-back so she could see out into the yard. There was a high wall running the length of the property, and a barred gate at the end of the drive. It could hardly be fear of her abduction or wandering onto the road, that so vexed him.

Glancing up, she caught sight of the window catch. If she stood on the back of the sofa, might she just be able to reach it? She wasted no time putting it to the test, and found herself thankful that Belinda wasn't there to stop her. Although the catch was stiff from under-use, it was no match for determination of her calibre. It quickly submitted, and the pane pushed open with a creak. She turned, not for fear of her Uncle's interference, but to poke her tongue out at the mustiness; which was reeling now and clawing for her in vain.

She tumbled out into the yard, pleased at her own resourcefulness, and closed the window behind her. She gazed up at the house: two storeys of ominous brick with all-seeing windows and an attic suite. The grounds were equally imposing, their inherent gloom intensified by a thick overcast. But, being a sensible child, Melissa found nothing particularly scary about it.

Her wan, heavy-lidded eyes scanned the desolate lawn and neglected garden before her. An ordinary five year-old might have raced back indoors at such a sight. But, beyond pausing to consider returning for a sweater – and thinking better of it lest her luck fail – she began the trek to the bottom of the garden. She was wearing her blue flannelette dress and some plastic sandals. The dew soaked her feet immediately, and she wished her parents had thought to pack her some socks before abandoning her while they went... wherever it was they'd gone this time. Some function or other, she imagined.

She quickened her pace to keep warm. The grounds were hedged by briars that had been left to go wild. The woods beyond were encroaching; not least some thick, evil-looking creepers.

She passed under an arbour which some sick roses were failing to grow upon, and came to a large garden-bed where a few equally sorry plants were willing themselves toward quick

and painless oblivion. She frowned, and skirted the bed. Not even weeds seemed willing to grow here. A few had tried, but given it up as pointless.

At the corner of the hedge was a garden shed which the vines were slowly strangling. This too was spooky-enough to send a normal child running for Mother, but Melissa knew there was no danger. It was just a shed: wood, nails, shingles. A place to keep gardening tools.

"I'll make you well again," she said to the garden, and to the shed she went.

The door was far from locked, but tricky for the diminutive child to open. It was lopsided, and the bottom corner dug into the ground. But she persevered and was soon looking into the shed's dingy insides; at shovels and hoes and spider webs. Here was a rusty old watering-can, and there some mouldering packets of seeds. With a collection of these treasures, and a trowel, she left the shed; its door gaping as if in utter astonishment.

As she passed by the hedge there was a noise. It wasn't the sort of noise she expected a hedge to make. A sort of tittering noise, like someone stifling a laugh. She paused. Putting down her seeds and things, she stared at the hedge expectantly.

"Well? Is someone there?" she said.

The hedge remained as it had been. Prickly, ugly, and totally silent. She turned to pick up the watering-can and heard it again. This time she whirled 'round, expecting perhaps some neighbourhood kid to be spying on her. There was nothing.

The sensible thing to do then, was to take a closer look – armed with a trowel, just in case. She walked up to the hedge, stepping over masses of creeper, and probed the dark shadowy places with bemused nonplussedness.

Suddenly bits of the hedge seemed to come alive. They transformed themselves into two little toad-like creatures. She jumped – more out of surprise than anything else. The creatures tittered again, and smiled nasty little smiles at her.

"What are you, then?" she said.

"We? We're faeries," said one, in a croaky voice.

"*Good* faeries," put in the other.

Melissa frowned and considered this. She'd never believed in fairy-stories; in fact she found them boring. "You can't be," she said.

The toad-things looked at each other.

"Why not?"

"Cos faeries don't exist, that's why. And if they did, *good* faeries would never live in a horrible bramble hedge."

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"I didn't expect that," said the second faerie.

"You're DeGrange's niece, aren't you?" said the first. "We've seen you many times, staring out of the windows."

"So what?"

"So, come with us, we'll show you the faerie-world. Maybe then you'll believe us."

"Yes, come with us," said the second.

"I've got to help the garden. If you're good faeries, you ought to want that too."

She turned to leave the briars, but a creeper whipped up and barred her way.

"We tried asking nicely. Now we'll just have to make you."

"I knew you weren't good faeries," Melissa said, struggling to get past the vine. "And I know vines can't come alive and—"

As she said this, the vine dropped limply to the ground. She almost tumbled over, but checked herself, and came to a stop a few feet from the hedge.

"Blast," said one of the toad-things.

More had appeared now. The hedge was alive with their pallid, glaring eyes. The hedge too started moving. And the creepers one by one lifted themselves. The ones wrapped about the shed untangled, and inched their way towards her; forming a circle of writhing foliage from which there was no escape. She batted one away, but it snatched the trowel from her grasp.

As if things couldn't get any worse she heard a cry behind her, and turned to see Uncle Vincent running across the lawn. His harrowed face was now even more so, and his mane of blonde hair seemed afire.

"Didn't I tell you, child," Uncle Vincent cried, "to stay inside!"

Melissa was torn between relief and despair. The vines closed in. They wrapped about her; strangling, tugging, and dragging her towards the briars and the toad-things tittering there in droves.

Uncle Vincent, in his tweed trousers and tattered smoking jacket, began yanking at the vines, spouting curses at the creatures that now chanted his name.

"Leave the child!" he yelled. "It's me you want! It's always been me you want!"

"You should've thought of that before you summoned us, DeGrange!" said one of the toad-things. "Meddle not in what ye do not know!"

"Lord forgive me!"

Vincent was hysterical now, tears streaming down his face as he fought to free Melissa from the vines. Melissa fought for breath; no amount of denial could help her now as the impossible vines wrapped tighter and tighter. In her sensible way she wondered what the creatures had meant by their words. She saw the vines wrap about her Uncle's arms; but he fought against them with all his might until he finally reached her. His eyes, full of sorrow and regret, were the last thing she saw before she blacked out.

She awoke feeling cold and damp, lying beside the garden and her packets of seeds. She glanced over at the hedge. It was still, and silent. The creepers were... gone?

"Uncle Vincent?" she called.

She called again, a little louder. Her voice rang empty and met no reply.

As she got to her feet, she bumped against the watering-can. It was full of water. Puzzled, she looked about for the trowel and found it stuck in the garden; awaiting an able hand.

"Perhaps they *were* good faeries after all..." she said, and started digging.

The End.