

You Scared Me



Though it was late, the air outside was hot. But here, inside the dark gap in the sheer earth wall, the air was cool. Just a few paces back, it was almost cold. I led, with one hand on the curve of the wall for balance, and the other stretching back, holding my friend's hand. She followed me.

She had been afraid to go in before; into the slit in the sand wall, the cave like a narrow canyon, carved by unseen water. She had been afraid of the weight of the earth above, afraid of the darkness, so all day long we had ridden elsewhere, walked elsewhere, talked, and laughed, until she felt ready. And now, we set foot inside.

The walls were close. In places I even had to turn my shoulders, but the ceiling was high, unseen above the shadows cast by my small light and hers. Our lights were still dimmed by the light behind us, the light of the open desert.

We rounded the first sharp turn in the passage. The channel of the cave hooked back and forth through the earth like a slow stream might wind across level ground. Around the corner we left behind the outside light, and now only our own two points of light filled the darkness, bright here against the narrow walls, dim upward and away. I squeezed her hand. A second later she squeezed back,

softly. And after another step she squeezed again, harder.

I looked back at her. She had stopped. Her eyes were enormous, and her lips pressed tightly shut. Her hand was cold in mine. She held her light loosely in her other hand, low, sideways, so the wax spilled out the side.

I took my light out of my teeth with my free hand, and said, "It's okay."

"Let's go back." she said.

"Come on, it's only a little further. It'll be worth it. I promise." I whispered back to her.

"This isn't safe." she said. "Let's go back."

I realized she was not looking at me, she was looking at the wall of the cave near my head. I looked also. It was no different than any other curve of the wall. Hard-packed sand, carved by time's unseen hand.

"It isn't going to fall in." I said. "It's been here a hundred years, and it hasn't fallen in."

"But nobody was walking through it then." she said. "I'm afraid. I want to go back."

I let go of her hand, and touched the wall. "Touch it." I said. "It's okay."

"Don't do that! Don't do that!" she cried, backing away.

I was surprised by the sudden urgency in her voice. I drew my hand away from the wall. My fingers came away covered with grains of moist sand.

I reached out to her, but she was already several arm-lengths away, still backing up. Her leg struck a low curve of the wall, and she lost her balance, and fell against the wall, pressing her full weight against the cold sand. I had just touched it and knew what it felt like. It was hard, but not solid like a rock. There was a measure of softness to it.

She emitted a little strangled noise, dropped her light, jumped up and fled around the corner, out of the darkness, toward the light.

For a few breaths, I stood alone in the passage, then I dusted the sand off my fingers, collected her now-extinguished light, and followed her.

The light outside felt painfully bright, even after just a few moments in the cave. There she was, standing by the horses. Her back was to me. There was a dusting of sand on her shoulder and all down her side.

I set down the lights on a little rise in the shadow of the wall, and went to her. I came close behind her and put my hand on her shoulder, but before I could speak, she spun around.

"You scared me!" she exclaimed. "Don't ever do that again!" She hit my chest with both her fists, not hard, just lightly. There were tears in her eyes.

I didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry." I said. "I just wanted you to see..."

She spun away from me again, facing the horses again. She put her hand on her horse's neck. "It doesn't matter." she said. "I don't really care to see it."

"But..." I began. Showing her the cave had been my whole reason for bringing her here.

She opened her saddlebag and extracted some of the leftovers from lunch. "It doesn't make any difference to me." she said, and handed me a piece.

I took a bite, and sat down in the shade of the wall, trying not to show my

disappointment in my face.

"It has been a lovely day." she said. "We had a lot of fun. Let's not ruin it now."

For a long time she stood, eating and staring into the distance, and I sat watching her and saying nothing. the sky darkened just a shade, and the shadow of the wall slid out just a little further.

Finally she sat down beside me.

"It's getting late." she said. "Lets go back."

I sighed. "Alright... Maybe tomorrow we can--"

"Can't." she said quickly. "I promised my sister that I..." and her voice trailed off.

"Then maybe we--" I started.

"No, I..." she mumbled.

We were both silent. My stomach twisted itself into a knot.

The moment of silence stretched painfully.

Finally I blurted out, "I just wanted you to see! Ever since the day I first saw it I wanted to show it to you! I always thought it would be..." I hesitated. "... our... special... place..."

She stared at me, her expression unreadable. Then she stared at the cave slit.

"It-- I-- I'm afraid." she said. "I don't feel safe. I can't go in there." She looked back at me. "It's dangerous! ... Isn't it?"

I closed my eyes. "I guess so." I said. "Maybe it is a little bit dangerous. But I would never have brought you here if I didn't think it was worth it. Aren't there lots of things in life that are a little bit dangerous, but are still worth doing?"

She bit her lip, and looked at the cave again.

"You're always so fearless." I continued. "You've taught me so much about not being afraid when it comes to emotions and social things. But I have never been afraid of physical things, like the dark, or like--"

"Closed spaces?" she interrupted, looking at me again.

"Yes. Things like that." I said.

"Or the thought of a hundred thousand tons of sand above you and all around you, with nothing to hold it up but more sand?" she asked.

I hung my head. "Yeah. I have never been afraid of things like that... maybe I'm just stupid." I looked up again. "I'm sorry." I said. "I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do. It's getting late. Why don't we go."

She stared at me, and bit her lips.

I stood up, and walked over to the horses. I took the extra water from my pack and gave them both a drink.

When I turned and looked back, she wasn't sitting down anymore. She was standing by the cave slit, with a light in each hand. She had re-lit her light from mine.

"Come and let's do this, before I change my mind." she said.

I walked over to her, my heart in my throat.

She offered me my light.

"Go behind me," she said, looking left and right and not making eye-contact.

"so I won't run away." She smiled, but the corners of her eyes were tight.

I passed my light into my other hand, and then took hold of her hand.

And we went inside.

The air felt colder than before. The darkness got darker faster. As we passed the point where we had stopped before, I could hear her breathing. She was breathing fast. We moved slowly around the second bend. For a short distance the passage was straight and wide, and we crossed the space quickly. Then the third turning. She was hyperventilating.

"It's okay." I whispered.

She stopped. "Let's go back!" she whispered in a choked voice.

I squeezed her hand. "Breathe deep." I said, and I repeated it when she didn't do it.

She took a long deep breath, and another, and another.

I gently pressed her hand forward, and she took another step, and then we were walking again.

Around the fourth turn. The floor was less even here, and we walked slowly and carefully. She was breathing slowly and carefully.

And around the fifth turn. The walls ceased to be tight. They spread back and away, and the cave opened wide before us. Too wide to see across at first.

She hesitated again.

"We're here!" I whispered excitedly, close to her ear.

I walked beside her, and then ahead of her, our arms stretched out. She was looking up and around.

We stopped together in the center of the chamber.

"Why can I see the moon?" she asked softly. Her voice was trembling.

"It's not the moon." I explained. "It's a skylight. When the spring rains fall on the plateau, water flows through it. This room is the basin of a dry waterfall."

I looked around at the dark walls of the chamber. Our twin lights cast dancing shadows on the lowest bounds of the walls, but everything above us was hidden in pitch blackness except for the circle of light directly above.

"May I do something?" I asked.

Her eyes met mine.

I let go of her hand, and took from my pocket a book of matches. I held it open to her, so she could see that it was full.

She tilted her head, and for a moment, didn't understand. Then her eyes grew wide, and she bit her lips again. After staring at me for a long moment, she nodded gently.

Keeping my eyes on her eyes, I lifted my light to my lips, and blew it out. I set it carefully on the ground by my foot, and held out my hand to her. Very very slowly, she offered her light. Still keeping my eyes on hers, I blew the second light out in the same way.

As darkness enveloped everything, she emitted a soft little squeak.

Carefully, trying to keep my balance, I set down her light, and then reached out into the darkness, and wrapped my arm around her.

She jumped just a little at my touch. I could feel that she was shivering, and held her close.

Together we stared up at the skylight.

Slowly, as our eyes adjusted to the darkness, we began to see the detail of the chamber in a way that would have been impossible in the dancing shades of our lights. The arched roof of the waterfall chamber took form, vertical ridges and grooves defining five pillars, as if they were the supports of the sky in this little dark world. Each of the five pillars was unique in shape, and they all mingled together near the skylight, like branches of a tree, like twisting vines escaping up into the world of light. And after a while, the five pillars seemed to take on almost human form, like statues, like petrified angels reaching towards the heavens from their prison within the earth.

I don't know how long we stood there together. Finally, the light from the false moon began to take on a deepening blue hue, and a star appeared in it. I felt a drop of water on my wrist. For a moment, I thought it had fallen from above, and then I realized it was her tear.

Without letting my hand leave hers, I picked up the lanterns. I only re-lit one of them. We didn't say anything. The walk back out the narrow passage felt like a dream.

It was not until I had helped her onto her horse, that she broke the silence.

Looking into my eyes, she said, "You scared me." and then she smiled.
"Promise me you will do it again sometime."

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