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Category: Flash Fiction

Assumptions

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I stared into the wall of greenery beyond the wrought-iron gate. Somewhere inside that artificial jungle, my baseball had landed. And, since I was the one who had carelessly tossed it in there, I was the one who had to retrieve it.

My buddies, Joe and Charlie, stood behind me as I reached through the bars, undid the latch, and pushed the gate open. The rusty metal creaked with age; it seemed everyone in the world could hear the metallic screeching. I stepped onto the overgrown pathway leading into the gloom.

We wouldn't have risked playing so close to Miriam's yard, but Joe's mom had forbidden us from playing ball anywhere near her house after we broke a flowerpot, and Charlie's parents were having their driveway fixed. So that only left my yard—which was right next to Miriam's.

As I walked—slowly, carefully, hardly daring to breathe—all the rumors about Miriam circled through my head like vultures. Apparently, she always wears a black veil over her face. The other kids at school say she's a witch, with a giant cauldron in the middle of her kitchen, always bubbling with some horrid concoction. She's a cannibal, too, and keeps the skulls of her victims on display around her house.

I glanced behind me; I couldn't see the gate anymore. The foliage had swallowed me whole.

I looked ahead again, determined to be brave.

Was it just my imagination, or was it getting darker? The trees seemed to be shifting ever closer on either side. Twisting branches grabbed at my clothes, and roots jutted out of the path. I felt like an explorer lost in an uncharted swamp.

I paused for a moment, unsure of whether I should keep going forward. Perhaps the ball wasn't worth being eaten alive by a crazy old hag. Maybe I could just turn around and tell my friends that I simply could not find it. Would they believe that? Or would they know that I was a coward?

I had nearly made up my mind to turn around when I heard a voice to my right.

"Looking for this, perhaps?" it said. I nearly leaped out of my skin and turned to face the voice's source.

Standing amongst the foliage was an old woman. Her hair was long and silvery-white. A black veil hid her face. She wore a black robe, and she appeared to be holding something.

I couldn't move.

"Are you alright?" she asked, taking a step closer to me. Her voice was quiet, like the soft rustling of leaves. I knew I should be running for my life, but my legs were shaking too much for me to do much of anything. And even if I did run, surely she would catch me; she was a witch, after all. I was going to die no matter what I did.

"I—I'm just—" was all I managed to say.

"Well, I believe this is yours," she said, and tossed something to me. I jumped back and nearly fell over, trying to avoid it. It bounced, rolled, and bumped into my shoe, then was still.

I dared to glance down at it; it was my ball. Shakily, I picked it up, then looked back at Miriam. All the things I wanted to say got caught in my throat.

Miriam chuckled. "You don't need to be afraid of little old me; I don't bite."

"Um," I said, then fell silent, knowing that I really didn't have anything to say.

"I know people have been spreading rumors about me, but I'm really not that bad," Miriam said. "Sure, I might be a bit strange, but aren't we all?" She chuckled again.

"Yeah... I guess so," I said.

"Well, I suppose you'd better run along now. You're welcome in my garden any time," said Miriam, and then she turned around and was lost in the foliage.

I was about to run back out when I heard her voice again: “You know, maybe it’s time to trim some of my trees. They’re starting to get out of hand.”

When I returned from Miriam’s yard, still trying to wrap my mind around the encounter with her, Joe asked me what had happened.

I wasn’t sure what to say at first. But after a moment’s hesitation, I answered: “Not what I expected.”