

Fairy Stories

The wind is cold, but the elderly man doesn't notice as he stares at the mound of dirt at his feet. The woman next to him pulls her coat tighter.

'Dad, I think it's time to go home. It's getting cold.'

I didn't know what woke me. My bedroom was cold and the door to the hallway was closed. The light from the street was dim, making monsters on the walls. The floorboards in the hall creaked.

'Dad?'

The door opened and light from the hallway chased away the monsters.

'What do you want, Brian?'

I wanted the bedroom door left open so the monsters wouldn't come back, but I couldn't say that to Dad. 'Is Mum there?'

'Your mother's not very well so she can't come to see you now, and I need to get back to her.' Dad hurried up the hall, but he had left the bedroom door open.

I slept a little after that, but there were muffled voices around the house that disturbed me.

Mum wasn't in the kitchen making my breakfast when I got up next morning. She was still in bed, looking pale and tired, but she smiled when she saw me.

'Hello Brian, come here and see your new sister.'

Mum was holding some blankets and in the middle of them I could see a red, screwed up face and lots of dark hair.

'She's not very pretty, is she? She looks like she's angry at something.'

Mum laughed and Dad picked me up, 'Well son, you weren't much different four years ago.'

Mum stayed in bed and slept a lot. She missed most of the visitors who crept around and talked in quiet voices. Some of them brought us food, but Dad didn't eat much. He sat at the table and looked sad.

'Dad.' I had to say it a couple of times before he heard me. 'Dad, did Mum stay in bed for days and days and days when I was born.'

He was quiet for a long time, but then he said, 'No son, she didn't.'

My sister's coffin was so small it looked as though it was made for a doll. In the church the two wooden boxes sat next to each other. It wasn't right that my mum was in one of them. She should be with me, cuddling me tight, reading bedtime stories and leaving the light on.

We went to church every Sunday. It wasn't that we were religious; at least I don't think we were. Dad made me say *grace* before meals, but that was a habit, a bit like washing your hands. Everyone went to church on Sunday.

It was always cold in the stone building, and my dad would give me one of his looks if I wriggled about too much on the pew. After church we would walk out and shake hands with the vicar. He had something to say to everyone, and it took forever until it was my turn to shake hands.

He would say, 'Hello Brian, have you been a good boy for your dad this week?'

I would look up at my dad to see what he thought; and he would smile at me and nod.

I could then escape out into the graveyard. Usually, I'd hide behind one of the large headstones while the vicar spoke to Dad.

Sometimes Dad would come looking for me straight away, and other weeks he would talk to some of his friends.

One Sunday I got fed up waiting and I went to look for him. He was talking to Joe, the policeman. I walked over to them and tugged at Dad's coat. He picked me up.

'I have to take your dad to prison,' Joe said to me.

I didn't understand it was a joke, and I made my hands into fists and leaned over close to him. 'If you take my Dad away, I'll punch your face.'

Dad and Joe laughed, but Dad gave me a hard squeeze and held me close.

It was a summer day that change came. I was playing in the street with my friend George when Dad called.

I ran into the house and Dad told me to wash my hands. 'There's someone here I want you to meet.' His voice sounded strange.

He took me into the best room which we only used for visitors. A thin, serious looking lady stood there.

'Brian, say hello to Miss Elliot. She's going to be your stepmother.'

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Mum had been soft and smiley and pretty.

'He's a bit shy,' Dad said.

Later, I went out to see George, but he didn't know anything about stepmothers either. Margaret, George's sister, was a year older than we were, and she said she knew all about stepmothers.

'You boys are useless. You should read more. Stepmothers are horrible and really nasty. All the books say so. She might even try to kill you like Snow White.'

For the first few days I didn't eat much, but Dad didn't seem worried about being poisoned.

One evening my stepmother said, 'Brian, I think it's time we got to know each other a bit better. I'll put you to bed tonight.'

Dad said it was a good idea, but I thought she was going to try and kill me.

When I was under the covers, she sat down on the bed. She stayed there for a minute or two looking at me, and then she said, 'I know this is hard for you Brian, but it's not easy for me either. I can't be your mother or take her place, but I'd like us to be friends. I always liked my mother reading me stories at bedtime. Would you like that?'

Would I ever, I'd really missed stories at bedtime. I nodded.

She smiled, 'Is there anything else you'd like me to do.'

She wasn't soft and cuddly like Mum, but she looked prettier when she smiled.

'Could you leave the bedroom door open and the hall light on?' I whispered.

She nodded, 'It'll be our secret.'

'Dad, you'll catch a chill if we stand here any longer,' repeats the woman, and then she notices the tears in his eyes. He bends down awkwardly, and places flowers on the old grave.

'Fairy stories,' he grunts. 'She loved me like a mother.'