

The Apple Tree

It was the best birthday present Katy had ever had. It was by a long way the *biggest* present she had ever had.

“It’s even taller than me,” Katy said with wonder “and I’m one of the tallest in the class!”

“It’s still a baby,” cooed Sally. Sally loved babies: baby ducks, baby kittens, even her baby sister.

“It doesn’t have any leaves,” Mary pointed out, matter of fact.

“Not yet. But when it’s fully grown it will have leaves and big red apples,” said Katy. “My dad says when it’s strong enough I can climb it and maybe even hang a swing from it.”

Katy felt hugely proud of her baby apple tree. She woke up that morning full of excitement. Today was her tenth birthday! Both her mum and dad gave her a big cuddle and wished her happy birthday before telling her to look out of her bedroom window.

There on the edge of the lawn by the back gate stood her very own baby apple tree, with its dark glistening bark and white buds. She knew all about saplings and apple trees because she had read about them in her book about trees and she had said to her dad that a girl must be very lucky to have an apple tree in her garden.

It was fun being the birthday girl at school, but Katy couldn’t wait to get home to show her friends her surprise. Mary studied the sapling carefully like a specimen. Sally playfully pulled one of the branches to see the sapling shake back and forth.

“This is definitely the best birthday present ever” declared Katy to her friends.

“Bah, that weedy thing?” said a voice from the other side of the gate. “What’s so special about a few branches?” It was George, the big boy who lived down the road.

“It’ll grow big and strong,” said Katy defiantly.

“Not if I snap it in two first!” said George coming into the garden. “I reckon I could do it with just one hand,” he grinned.

Without thinking twice, Katy stood between George and the apple tree and made herself as tall as she could. Then she remembered she was scared of George. She was very scared of George. Last

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week he had snatched Sally's sweets and the week before he had pushed young Johnny over on his bike for no reason at all. Katy had never seen him with a friend and she had never seen him smile.

"Leave us alone," said Katy looking straight at him. Yes, she was scared of George but she was more scared of losing her beloved apple tree. Mary swallowed hard and stood next to Katy.

"Yeah, leave us alone!"

Now Sally stepped forward, slipping her hand into Mary's hand for courage, and together the girls stood up to George. George looked at them for a long time. No one moved or spoke. Then George shrugged his shoulders, turned round, and walked back out the gate. The apple tree was safe.

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"Is that the end of the story, Granny? Can you tell it to me again?"

"It's time for sleep now, Freya."

"But I'm not tired," yawned Freya.

"Good night sweetie." Granny kissed Freya softly on the forehead and quietly moved to the bedroom window to admire the full moon. There on the edge of the lawn by the back gate stood her beloved apple tree. It was a whole lifetime ago, but Katy could still remember how happy and reassured she felt to see the thin, flexible trunk grow into a thick and solid one, and the handful of spiky branches turn into a grand dome thick with leaves. There was something quite magical about it.

Katy had spent hours climbing the tree, hiding in the leaves and spying on passers by. It felt wonderfully free to be up so high and wickedly powerful to study everything and everyone in secret at her leisure.

Every winter they picked apples for warm apple crumble on Sundays, and there was never a shortage of apple sauce. Katy would often sit in the kitchen and watch her mum chop the beautiful red fruits and transform them into something delicious.

Standing by the window, admiring her apple tree in the white light of the moon, Katy smiled to herself. Boy, had she thanked her lucky stars that she had had the courage to stand up to George!

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And yet for many years the look on George's face, before he shrugged his shoulders and walked away, had haunted her. It wasn't an angry look. It wasn't even a jealous look. George looked from Katy to the apple tree and back to Katy and as his chest sunk and as he hung his head Katy saw a deep sadness in his eyes.

She switched the hall light off and crept downstairs. The step creaked and she froze until silence reigned again. She had never noticed what a racket they made! It wasn't often Freya would come to them to stay - usually, they would visit her.

"Fancy a cuppa?" she was greeted as she came into the living room, but no reply was needed. "Here you go love. Is she asleep?"

"I think so."

"Did she go for the pirate story?"

"No, I told her the story of the apple tree."

George smiled. "Your favourite."

Katy smiled too. So many years had passed. George's face was so familiar to her; the straight brown hair that hadn't changed style in 50 years, the strong round face that suited his tall strong frame and steady true self. She most loved his beautiful brown eyes because they always betrayed his feelings. In their younger days, George would do all he could to hide his feelings, but she often saw the sadness in his eyes, that same look that haunted her that afternoon of her tenth birthday. She knew, or hoped, that George's sadness would heal one day, though there were times when she doubted it would ever happen, especially when their Pete and Helen were young.

"Yes, my favourite story, but told by popular demand!" Freya had asked for it every night.

By the time they heard the stairs creak for the third time, there was no surprise when the door handle turned and the door slowly opened. Freya stood in the frame of the door, watching Granny and Grandad, waiting for their reaction.

"Can't sleep?" asked Grandad.

"I'm just not tired," declared Freya as she sat on the sofa. "Grandad, would you play Top Trumps with me?" she asked with her best smile.

"Yes, but not tonight my love."

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Freya's smile fell.

"C'mon. My turn to tell you a story."

"It's very late," said Granny, knowing Helen would be arriving early to fetch Freya. Freya had stated many times during her visit that she didn't want to go to live in a new house or start a new school, and wanted to stay at Granny and Grandad's for ever. It would be a teary goodbye in the morning and an overtired Freya would only make things worse.

"Don't worry Granny. It's only a short one."

"What is it called?" asked Freya starting up the stairs.

"The apple."

"Not the apple tree?"

"No, just the apple."

"Oh..."

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Once upon a time there was a boy called George. He lived in a small house on the edge of the village with his younger brother, two younger sisters and his mother. George didn't spend too much time at home because he just got in the way. He didn't mean to get into fights with his brother and he tried to be helpful at home, but sooner or later he would get something wrong and get into trouble, so he preferred to stay out of his mum's way.

One day after school, he set off towards the river to pass the time. He had a favourite sitting stone there. It was large and flat and if he wanted to lie down and stretch out and gaze up into the trees he could. There were enough bushes and trees around to hide him completely from the whole world.

On his way to the river, he passed the white house with the nice lady who once gave him some biscuits. In the garden, some girls were admiring a scrawny, weedy tree as if it was a magic one with golden pears like the one he had read about at school. What a lot of fuss over nothing! The girl who was showing off her tree was just so pleased with herself, and her friends looked truly impressed,

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even though they were probably just pretending. A birthday present? Bah! He'd never had a birthday present, but he didn't think much of hers!

"This is definitely the best birthday present ever!" he heard her say to her friends.

George couldn't help himself. There was something about the girl that drew him in.

"Bah, that weedy thing?" he barked across the garden. "What's so special about a few branches?"

"It'll grow big and strong," said the girl. George didn't like the way she spoke to him. When his mum and teachers spoke to him like that it made him feel stupid. When his younger sisters said anything he didn't like he would make them regret it.

"Not if I snap it in two first!" he said stepping into the garden. "I reckon I could do it with just one hand." One thing George knew he was good at was making little girls cry. But this little girl was different. She took a step towards him, protecting the tree, and didn't seem so little any more.

"Leave us alone!" she said.

Next thing, the girl with brown hair took a step forward to stand next to her friend. Soon the blonde girl also joined them. George stared at them. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to fight all three of them. He hadn't wanted to fight at all but he hadn't expected the girl to stand up to him. Why was she protecting that damned apple tree when she had so many things already? Two kind parents, a warm house, nice clothes, sweets every Saturday. And friends. George couldn't think of anyone who would stand next to him and fight for him. He was no good at making friends. He was only good at making little girls cry. And now he couldn't even manage that. He shrugged his shoulders, turned around, and walked back out the gate.

After that, George made sure he didn't bump into the little girl or her friends any more. He would take a different route to his sitting stone by the river and spent hours listening to the rustle of leaves on the branches swaying above him and the trickle of the water running beside him. When he was a grown up he would be a sailor and travel everywhere and know that when he came back this spot by the river would always be his.

But as the days passed, curiosity got the better of George and he ventured past the girl's house again. He saw how the apple tree was steadily growing. From time to time he would check on the tree, and when he saw the first apples appear he was thrilled.

One day, as he was hurrying down the girl's lane, he heard her call to him.

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“Hey, George!”

Wow, she had changed! It wasn't just the apple tree that grown tall and strong. And what a beautiful, wide smile!

“Haven't seen you around much,” said Katy. Apart from the times she had spied him rushing past, from her secret hiding place in the tree, she thought to herself.

Katy stood smiling. She seemed to be waiting for something. Maybe he should say something. He'd never notice before how dark her eyes were – almost black. They drew him in, until he realised she was offering an apple to him.

“Would you like an apple?” she asked. “As a thank you. Thank you for not spoiling my birthday present. You could have snapped the branches but you chose not to. Now you can help yourself to as many apples as you like.”

George was stunned. He was not used to people being kind to him and to his horror he thought he might cry. He took the apple from her swallowing back a big lump in his throat.

Once again she stood smiling, waiting, until finally she gave a little chuckle.

“Well, bye then. Enjoy!” and off she went into the house.

A few days later, George gathered enough courage to leave a little figure he'd made out of acorns and twigs under the apple tree for Katy. George wanted to show Katy that he could be kind too. Another day, gathering more courage still, he showed her his sitting stone by the river. He hoped that one day Katy would care for him like she cared about her apple tree. And in time he knew that if he ever needed a friend to stand by him, Katy would be that friend. She would stand up for him and care for him like no-one else had before.

The end.

Freya had been asleep for a while but it felt good to tell the story so George didn't stop until he reached the end. In all the years that had passed, he had never met anyone as brave as Katy, but it was her kindness that had made such an impression on him. Some sixth sense told him if he stuck by her he would learn a lot about kindness. And he did.

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Next morning, Freya was trying her very hardest to keep still, despite the branches digging into her side. Every time she relaxed she felt the jab and jerked up straight again. She was pretty sure her mum wouldn't spot her behind all these leaves and what a surprise she would get!

Finally, after what seemed like hours of waiting, Freya heard a car and watched her mum park. Out came her mum and just as she was coming through the gate Freya swung on the branch and let herself drop.

"Surprise!"

Helen was completely absorbed in her thoughts and certainly wasn't expecting to see Freya jumping out of a tree, or to see her so happy.

"Mummy, Mummy! Granny said she would buy me an apple tree like hers so we can plant it in our new garden. It will only take a few years to grow and when a big boy tries to break it I will stop him with my new friends and then he will become one of my new friends too!"

"Well, that sounds excellent!" said Helen. She wasn't at all sure that she had understood, but she was very happy to see Freya making plans for their new house and talking about making friends.

"Can we go now? I've had my breakfast and Granny and Grandad said they would come with us to the garden centre to pick out a good one."

"An apple tree in our garden? What a wonderful idea?!" Helen took a step back and for the first time in a long time had a proper look at the apple tree. It was so familiar to her. She thought of all the time she had spent playing on it, her and her brother Pete; all the swings they had hung off it, and they had even crashed their bikes into it a few times – nothing had made a lasting dent. She had never been a big fan of climbing; she preferred to lie under the leaves and watch them swaying in the breeze. The patterns of the branches were beautiful to her, each of them following a seemingly hap hazard order that together formed a perfect canopy, with each leaf placed in the best place to get the most sunlight. The tree had a special place in her childhood and Helen loved the idea of them having their own apple tree in their new garden.

"What a clever girl you are, Freya." Helen said with a smile. "Of course we shall get our very own apple tree!"

Freya could see Granny watching from behind the window and gave her the thumbs up. She hated the idea of a new house and a new school, but she would be as brave and kind as Katy in the story and perhaps things would work out fine after all.