

Out of the Woods

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HERE THEY GO, Carma without her cane—she'll hang onto Dan if her legs give way—through the glass doors into the maze of parents and teenagers and little brothers and sisters, milling, waving, shrieking, whimpering.

"I can't find the camera," screeches a frantic woman up to her elbows in a canvas bag. Stepping serenely around the woman, Carma and Dan raise eyebrows at one another and attach themselves to the end of the line that snakes through the lobby to the locked high school auditorium. *Their* camera is around Dan's neck. From Carma's canvas bag erupts an enormous bouquet of yellow roses.

"Oooh, roses," a voice behind them squeals. "Who're they for?"

Carma turns and smiles. "Our daughter."

A girl in tight Levis and a sequined halter smiles back. "What's her name? What's she playing?" A rhinestone, or maybe another sequin, pierces her tongue. She is tugging on the belt loop of a torpid boy with chartreuse hair.

"Sophie Cusins," Carma says. "She plays the witch."

"Sophie!" The boy stirs and becomes alert. "Sophie's in honors English. She's way cool."

"And the witch!" the girl adds.

"She's been rehearsing for it all her life," says Dan.

"Says her father." Carma wrinkles her nose at him. The girl lets escape a thin, sequiny laugh.

The doors are pushed open—late, as always—and the throng streams in, the teenagers coalescing in bunches and yelling at each other. Carma and Dan take their usual places, on the aisle, right side, third row, where Dan's fullback frame won't block too many views. From here, he can bound to the front at the end of each act, kneel, and snap away.

Carma settles into the rickety folding seat. Even though she left work early and tried to nap this afternoon, her joints throb. She takes a breath and composes her face carefully. "Look at the bright side," those insipid self-help manuals say. The bright side of rheumatoid arthritis is that Sophie has never had to deal with a zealous stage mother like Alicia

Sanchez, standing over there in the middle section, flailing her lumpy arms around. Her daughter Maddy looks a lot like her—meaty, freckled. Maddy usually gets those character parts. She's Jack's mother in this production. She wanted to be the witch. But in *this* version of the fairy tales, Stephen Sondheim's version, the witch turns into a gorgeous vamp, and Sophie has all the equipment to be a gorgeous vamp. She sings better than Maddy, too. Carma doesn't understand why that is. Sophie doesn't seem to work very hard at it. When Grace was in these musicals, she was always crouched over the piano, practicing her part, and her part was never a big part. But Sophie—every evening she sits at that same piano bench, sings her songs through once, then curls up on her bed with her telephone.

"Hello Dan, Carma." It's Natalie Green, motioning towards the seats to her right. "Those taken? May we sit there?"

Dan stands and Carma swivels her legs to the side, wincing at the pain in her hip. Natalie and her husband—Ted? Tom?—shake Dan's hand, try to suck in their bodies, and squeeze by. Natalie plops down next to Carma so the husband has to press past everyone to get to the seat next to the wall.

"We almost didn't make it." Natalie fans herself with her program. "We had to arrange for the Sorensons to pick Billy up from soccer, and the babysitter wasn't ready when Tim went to get her, and then Peggy had a tantrum. Oh, you brought Sophie flowers!" Carma's bag is wedged under the seat in front, the flowers spilling out, one crushed by Natalie and Tim-Tom-Ted. "We should have brought Craig something. What do you bring boys?"

Carma tries to remember what part Craig plays. One of the princes certainly; he's such a pretty boy, Sophie has told them with a dismissive lilt in her voice. "Balloons maybe," Carma says, "but I don't know where you'd keep them during the show."

"Oh, balloons." Natalie makes a face. "I didn't think of balloons. Craig says Sophie is just marvelous. She's so talented. You know there's a great group of kids at church now, just like when Grace was in high school. Sophie would really fit in."

Sophie would not fit in, Carma thinks, but she says mildly, "Sophie's free to go to church if she wants to. Any church."

Natalie pretends not to hear the addition. "Craig could give her a ride. We let him take a car. He's so responsible."

"She can always get a ride with Dan." Carma peers through her glasses at her program and checks Sophie's name. For a change, it's spelled correctly.

"We'd love it if you came too," Natalie says hopefully. "If you feel well enough. And you know we make tapes for people who can't come to meetings."

Carma forces a smile. "Dan relays the most interesting bits." She feels Dan's light touch on her shoulder. Knowing how heavy his arm can be, he rests it mostly on the back of her chair. She turns away from Natalie, and the auditorium is suddenly black except for the music light on the piano.

The music teacher drops her hands onto the keyboard and starts to play. When the curtains are drawn, Cinderella and Jack and the Baker are all lamenting their losses. The music is shrill yet sweet, thinks Carma, like sweet and sour. She's been listening to Sophie's songs for weeks. They all sound alike.

The preliminaries over, Red Riding Hood has skipped off into the woods, and Sophie steps forward to witchily harass the Baker with the salient points of his family history and the reason it is to end with him: She caught his father "rooting through my rutabagas."

"Don't ever never ever mess around with my greens," Sophie spits out, and the audience snickers and guffaws.

She's always been good at working the audience. Now she is offering to reverse the curse—for a price. She controls this scene, Sophie does. Ah, but Carma knows that before the act is over, the witch will be only a beautiful woman stripped of her magical powers, at which point she'll turn her full attention to the creaky seats and work her theatrical sorcery on those in them.

Carma never worries about Sophie forgetting her lines or even losing her composure if she misses a note. When you belt them out, what's a wrong note here and there? This isn't opera. She and Dan just lean back and enjoy the show, wincing only at the other kids' performances. When Natalie's son squeaks out his adoration of Rapunzel, Natalie and Tim exchange little moans and shuffle their feet.

That's how it was with Grace. "You know," Dan said once, "it was more of an achievement for Grace to sing in an octet than for Sophie to be the star."

Carma understands Grace's inclination to gravitate to the back of the stage; she understands Grace's penchant to please. But she can't understand how Grace could put college on hold to marry someone as sweetly bland as Ryan. And a baby now before she is 21. The baby, though—Carma smiles to think about Bradley, fat-cheeked and sunny, she calls him Buddha-ley. The baby is spectacular.

"How is Grace?" Natalie asks after the Act I curtain drops and the whistles and foot stomping die down. Carma does happen to have two shiny snapshots of Grace and the baby lying on the red and blue sailboat quilt that Carma and Sophie, mostly Sophie, had put together and tied.

"He's gorgeous." Natalie stands and shows the pictures to Tim.

"He is, isn't he?" Carma pushes herself to her feet.

"They're still in Utah?"

Carma nods.

"When does her husband graduate?"

"He's got two more years." Alicia Sanchez is pushing her way towards them. Dan has stepped across the aisle and is shaking someone's hand.

"Sophie's great," Alicia gushes. "She's got the part down pat. Bernadette Peters couldn't do it better."

"Maddy's doing well, too," Carma says. "They're all doing well." She stands back so Natalie isn't excluded.

"And Craig. Craig's doing just fine," Alicia says, without conviction. "Oh, there!" She points at someone and swooshes up the aisle.

Natalie hands the photos back to Carma. "They're very different, your daughters."

"Yes."

"Is Sophie," she hesitates, "more like you?"

Carma laughs. "I don't think either one is very much like me."

"Sophie has your lovely thick hair."

"With pink streaks instead of gray."

"Kids shout with their hair now, neon colors, everything." Natalie sighs. "I don't know how I'd raise mine without the church." For a minute, Carma realizes, Natalie has forgotten her. Then she remembers and laughs nervously. "Their world is so different from the world I grew up in."

Carma lowers herself into her seat. "Where did you grow up?"

"Idaho. Rexburg." Glancing at the children rushing back to front-row center, Natalie sits down. "You know, my kids aren't like me either. To get up on a stage in front of the whole school and sing with nothing but a piano behind you—I would have died first. I was never any good at anything that people might watch. Sports. One summer I played tennis every morning and by the end of August I was still missing half the balls and hitting the other half past the base line."

Carma has to nod. "Sounds like me. I tried volleyball once. And badminton." She laughs. "I was always a klutz. And that was even before the arthritis."

Natalie lowers her voice. "How long have you have had it?"

"Twenty years." Carma looks at her hands, covers one with the other. "I was diagnosed right after I had Grace. I couldn't get out of bed."

"Is it—inherited?"

Carma shrugs. "It seems to run in families. The girls *probably* won't get it, but you never know." She pauses. "I'll never forgive myself if they get it."

Natalie looks alarmed. "There's nothing you could do."

"I could have *not* had them."

"No," Natalie says. "You had to have them. We can't any of us know

what will happen to our kids. We just pray for the best." Her voice goes up as if this is a question.

Carma answers it with a sigh.

"Is it—do you hurt all the time?"

"No." Carma stops herself from making an accordion fan out of her program. She wants to make copies for the grandparents. "Sometimes it's in remission. I felt great when I was pregnant with Sophie. But afterwards it was a lot worse."

Natalie touches her very lightly on the arm. "I didn't know it was so bad. Do you hurt right now?"

Carma doesn't want to itemize, quantify her pain. Suddenly she doesn't want to talk at all. "You get used to it."

Dan creaks in the seat beside her. The theater darkens. Behind them, she can hear two boys talking. "I know Sophie," one says. "Oh yeah? What do you know?" asks the other. Carma holds her breath. "She's all right." Carma lets her breath out as the piano starts the monotonous jingle that begins Act II.

Sophie as Witch is mother-by-bribery, and she is quite a convincing mother, especially after the Giantess squashes her Rapunzel. Carma's glasses steam up as Sophie sings out, "Children don't listen." She is surprised at her tears and can see that Dan's cheeks are wet too.

Their daughters have listened, but it was hard to know what they heard. She and Dan didn't shout. Dan, in fact, always sounded calm, whereas she always sounded—at least to her own ears—whiny. Dan didn't pretend to have answers for all her questions. He honestly didn't have questions himself. "I don't know about religion, organized or disorganized," she wept after he baptized Sophie. "I just don't believe it anymore. I've tried to believe it. I'm not saying it's not true. It's true for you. I even want it to be true for you. You should do what you have to do. And I should do what I have to do. I have to stop pretending it works for me."

Eight years ago now. That whole year the arthritis flared and nothing helped and nobody slept well. Grace was sad. Carma's mother was sad. Dan's parents, visiting from Seattle, were sad. But Dan was shocked when Carma asked if he wanted to divorce her and find someone who could believe as he believed, who could join him in that hierarchical hereafter. And she was grateful that he protected her, as he must have done, from visits by those who wanted to persuade her that she was ruining her family's chances for salvation. "Take the girls to church," she had said. But given the choice, Sophie usually opted to "stay home with Mom."

In Carma's childhood home, it was her father who didn't go to church. The common pattern—believing, determined women; rebellious, indifferent men. But at least she had some kind of precedent. Carma did

what her father had done—if Grace were giving a talk or getting an award or singing in a group, Carma would go.

But she couldn't go everywhere Grace went. When Grace got that scholarship—the one she gave up after a single year—and set off for Provo, Carma surmised, correctly, that her daughter would eventually be married in a ceremony she could not witness. Twenty-three years after she and Dan had driven quietly to Arizona to get married so that no one would feel left out, Grace and Ryan had driven quietly to Utah to marry so that Carma wouldn't feel left out. "You go," she had insisted to Dan, and he went. A week later at the reception in Carma and Dan's garden, Grace, in the simple white dress she and Sophie had sewn together, greeted guests with a tranquility that astonished her mother, that separated them in a way the sadness couldn't. Ryan's true-believing family treated—still treat—Carma with profuse, bewildering courtesy.

The light is focused on Sophie, singing, "It doesn't matter now, it's the last midnight." She is singing as if it matters very much. "I'm not good, I'm not nice, I'm just right, I'm the witch," she croons. "I'm what no one believes."

Sophie is not sexually active, Carma is almost sure, not yet. She hasn't had Grace's reasons for chastity, but she has held onto it, up to now. How will she feel when Sophie lets it go? Dan will be devastated. Dan is good. Grace is good. Sophie is good. And she, even *she* is good. Probably. Where do our ideas of goodness come from, Carma wonders. Can anyone get there all on her own, no current church or past church, no great mentors or influential parents, no Dostoevskys or Kierkegaards? Can she get there? And where oh where is there?

Dan takes her hand and holds it, touches lightly the fused joint in her ring finger. The finger is swollen so that if she did want to take off her wedding band, someone would have to cut the gold.

"Careful the things you say," Sophie is singing with the Baker. "Children will listen." The rest of the cast is singing now, children themselves, children playing children and children playing adults. Natalie and Tim's prince son Craig swells up his chest and looks, indeed, very handsome. Sophie and Cinderella and the Baker are in the center, and their eyes are shiny and their voices sweet and strong. The piano is barely audible as they all sing, then shout, "Happily ever after!"

No one believes it of course, the happily-ever-after, but the audience has been transported out of the woods. They stand and shriek and clap and stomp and whistle. Dan is on his knees at the front of the aisle, with four or five other parents, snapping pictures, offering homage. The curtain closes, opens again, and the whistles and applause resume.

Natalie sits back down beside Carma. "You must be proud."

Carma nods and smiles. "You too."

"Yes."

"Go on ahead. We'll wait till the aisles are clear." The cast will be in the lobby, surrounded by ecstatic friends. Natalie and Tim edge by her. Up front, Dan is staggering under a bear hug from the Baker's mother, a willowy woman, pretty, young enough to have given birth to the Baker when she was 14. A hug like that would break Carma in two. I don't have to worry about Dan, Carma thinks. Why is it she doesn't worry? Is it because of the church that separates them? Is it the code that one is responsible for a partner, no matter how she changes? Neither of them had envisioned that she would be unable to pick up either baby, that at times she would be fat-faced and dopey from the drugs, that she would be taken apart by surgeons, that some days she would stare out the window at the laurel hedge and disappear into it for hours. And neither of them had envisioned her arthritic soul.

Natalie returns and crouches beside Carma's seat. "I was just thinking—I guess you've had blessings," she hesitates, "to ease the pain?"

"A lot of blessings," says Carma. She pats Natalie's hand. "And maybe they helped."

As Natalie stands, she brushes Carma's cheek with her lips. "I'll be praying for you," she says and, eyes lowered, runs back to the lobby.

Carma says suddenly, silently, to Natalie, to Dan, to God, if there is a God, even to herself, "Yes. Pray for me." Then she smiles at Dan, now disentangled from the Baker's mother. She hands him the bag of yellow roses and pushes up out of her chair. "Shall we make merry?"

"Let's," he says and offers her his arm, and they set out, stumbling just a little, up the empty aisle.