

When I was a child, the Mustache Man was the oldest story I knew. He lived down the block and around the corner from me but the other kids told me the stories. The stories that they heard from the kids who were bigger than them, that those kids heard from the ones even bigger than that and on and on back to the beginning of dirt—or so we said. He was *old*. He ate kids who went into his yard, even the ones who went there by accident. Even the parents didn't like him; they told us to stay away because they didn't want us getting eaten up.

At least that's what they said, what all the stories said. All the stories I knew were true because they were way older than me and I was getting to be a big kid, almost eight I think, the first time I met him.

I was running from some of the boys, ducking down that back slip between Cherry Road and Rosewood Lane when I fell through a hedge I didn't know and realized I wasn't anywhere I wanted to be. "Well now, aren't you a surprise?" He was sitting with a woman in the shade of a tree bigger around than the circle my hula-hoop made. I'd never seen the woman, not that I'd seen much of him either—all the other kids and I made it a point not to see him.

"Yes. No. Sorry, sirmister, I'm jus—Please don' eat me." I was trying to push back through the hedge but the woman caught my arm. I hadn't even seen her leave her seat. Her hands were long fingered like Mama said a lady's should be but had hard spots on them too, like a man's.

"Eat you? Now why would I eat something like a little boy with no meat on his bones?"

"Oh hush, can't you see she's hurt?" The woman was looking me up and down with eyes that looked happy, even when she was shushing the Mustache Man. The story man that no one talked to or shushed or anything like that. Ever.

"She? Juniper, I think you might be getting a little—"

"Call Wise Child, please, Mr. Jyles? Tell her to bring me the elderflower salve." Her free hand was reaching for my face just above a scrape where the hedge had got me; I sucked in hard when her fingers got too close. "Mmm." She made a sound in her throat. "It *is* nasty. Hold still." A girl taller than me but no bigger around than I was came out of the house carrying a jar, even though the Mustache Man hadn't gone anywhere to call her.

The lady didn't have any free hands so she made a move like the girl should smear the green smelling gunk from the jar on me. I flinched but the gobs were cool when they hit my skin and my scrapes quit hurting almost as fast.

"Very good, Wise Child." She called the girl that but those were real words, not a name. I was confused because the only time people ever called me real words and not

my name was when they were teasing me, singing things like *piggy girl* when I fell in the mud or *la-azy bones* when I fell asleep in school. Real words that were names were never nice but when Juniper called the girl with the green-goop jar Wise Child she said it in the nicest way I could think of and it made me wish she'd say my name too.

"My name's Teresa," I mumbled, while Wise Child screwed the lid back on the jar, "but Mama calls me Terry sometimes."

Wise Child looked at me. Her eyes were big with smiles tucked into them around the edges. "St. Teresa, patron against bodily ills and of the sick." She told me and I knew she was trying to be nice; I smiled back at her with more than just my eyes.

"I don't like being sick either," I told them both and Juniper laughed from all the way inside her, letting go of my arm to take up a handful of the cloth draped across her shoulders even though it was summer.

She wiped the green gunk from my face with the edge of a shawl that was too pretty to be wiping gunk with. "Well, you've no bodily ills in you now, little saint Terry," She told me, and she was right, I couldn't feel my scrapes at all. When I reached for them with my hands I couldn't find them either.

"Saint Terry hmm? Now if that won't give a child a head-swell I don't know what will." The Mustache Man was still there even though I hadn't noticed him. He was talking around a big U-hook pipe that was clamped under the hair under his nose. He looked like a one-toothed walrus I saw once on Discovery while I was channel-flipping for cartoons.

I knew I was staring at him and Mama told me once it wasn't polite to do that but I couldn't help it. His mustache was too big to not stare at. When he started staring back I think I squeaked a little but then he looked away and wandered off with Juniper and Wise Child took me to a corner of the yard that was farther off than it should've been to introduce me to the cow and the donkey that were grazing there.

Evening came fast, even in the summer, and that meant it was time to say goodbye to Wise Child and Juniper and kind of wave at the Mustache Man without saying anything and go back through the hedge to go home. I did all that and ducked through a gap in the bushes that I'd never seen before. When I stepped through I was back out in the mid-afternoon sun.

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When I got home Mama asked why I was home already, hadn't I just been playing with some of the neighbor boys?

She didn't believe me when I told her I'd been gone for hours. When I told her I'd been playing at the Mustache Man's house, she told me I'd best be fibbing.

I didn't understand why she wanted me to tell her a lie when I'd already told her the truth but she did, so I did. Then Daddy came home and Mama got busy with supper and forgot all about it, I think. She didn't say anything about my fib, or truth or whatever, at supper. She didn't say anything afterward either while I sulked on the couch waiting

for my turn with the remote.

When I went back through the hedge next day I didn't tell her where I was going and she didn't notice, or ask.

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Juniper and Wise Child weren't there the second time I pushed into the Mustache Man's backyard. He was alone sitting under the tree drinking lemonade and reading, of all the dull things he could be doing. "Um, is Wise Child here?" he hadn't looked up when I came through his shrubbery; I wasn't sure he even knew I was there.

"They might be here later. What was your name again?" He barely glanced away from his book even though it looked big enough to be boring; it was the grownup kind of book that didn't even have pictures.

"Teresa, but my Mama calls me Terry."

"Your Mama hmm? Now what do your friends call you?"

"I don't know."

"And why don't you know?"

"Cause they don't talk to me."

He finally closed the book but kept a finger between the pages like a bookmark. "Now why wouldn't your friends talk to you?"

"Ca-ause..." I pulled the word out like it was longer than it was while I thought up an answer.

"I see." He glanced at the book wrapped around his finger and then back at me. "Come here little Saint Terry, there's someone I want you to meet." There wasn't anyone else in the yard but a second glass of lemonade was on the table where there hadn't been before. I came forward just a little to get a better look.

I didn't come all the way up to him but I was under the shade of the tree when he began to read out loud from the book, and even though there were no pictures or anything like that to show me, I listened the whole way through.

*Now Rann the Kite brings home the night  
That Mang the Bat sets free—  
The herds are shut in byre and hut  
For loosed till dawn are we.  
This is the hour of pride and power;  
Talon and tush and claw.  
Oh, hear the call!—Good hunting all  
That keep the Jungle Law!*

He had the most beautiful voice, like he was singing but he wasn't. When he closed the pages I begged him to read more but instead he handed me the book. I'd inched closer while he read; close enough that I could take it from him without stretching

much. I read right there folded up on the grass near his feet with lemonade beside me even though I never put it there. I struggled through first one page of close-together print and then the next only asking him for help when I had to. The light was starting to go when he shooed me home, telling me to take the book with me and not give it back 'til I was done.

I forgot to thank him I was running so fast. Running home to keep reading.

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Over dinner Mama asked me where I got that big nasty book I kept holding like a baby animal, a soft one. When I told her I got it from the Mustache Man she turned a funny color, like bad oatmeal, and told me not to fib again. "Tell the truth, Teresa; where'd you get that book?"

"The Mustache Man gave it to me. He read some of it and then wouldn't no more so he gave it to me so I could on my—"

"Teresa, have you been to Mr. Jyles' house?"

"Well not *in* the house, we were in the yard. He's got the biggest yard and—"

"Honey, what have I told you about strangers' houses?" The funny oatmeal color was turning grayer like she was getting sick in her gut.

"But we weren't *in* the house; we were in the *yard*." There was a sore spot in my throat; I wasn't fibbing and she wouldn't believe me and it *hurt*.

"Teresa, don't argue with your mother," My Daddy called from behind his newspaper without her asking him to.

"*But-*"

"Tomorrow you and I'll take the book back to Mr. Jyles and you won't go over there anymore, you hear me?" She was using her not-listening-anymore voice, the one that won by default.

"Yes, Mama."

"Good." She held out one hand. "Now give me the book." I'd been cradling it in my lap all during dinner, afraid to leave it alone.

"But—"

"*Teresa.*" I laid the book on her palm and she looked at it like it was alive, like it could hop out of her hand and skitter after anyone at any time. "Good girl. Off to bed." It was too early to go sleep but she was still using the voice so I slumped up the stairs without talking back.

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Later I snuck down the stairs a little, hoping to angle myself so I could watch TV without them noticing. They weren't watching TV but from the landing I could hear them. "*Books, and books like this.*" I could see from the shadows that she was waving the copy of *Jungle Book* around while she talked.

“It’s advanced but it’s not a *bad* book.” My Daddy’s voice was slow and muffled, like he was still hiding behind his paper.

“I *know*. But just the *idea* of her and that man. You remember the cases in California a couple years back? Why not here? It could *happen* and our girl—”

“Would’ve told us if she’d been, you know.” There were crinkles like he’d laid the paper aside. Mama might know but I sure didn’t. I wanted to know.

“That’s what you think but then...”

“Alice.” Daddy was standing now; his shadow was facing Mama’s and his hands were on her shoulders. “Teresa’s fine. Mr. Jyles is *just* a funny old man who gave a book to a kid. We’ll give it back tomorrow and ask him to leave her alone and explain to Teresa and it’ll be *fine*.” He was hugging her now; I could see from the way their shadows leaned against each other. “It’ll all be fine.”

I crept up to bed then. I wasn’t sure what I’d seen but it made my tummy go funny. What if I couldn’t finish the book? What if I never found out about the red flower or what Shere Khan was up to or...”

I fell asleep and dreamed about wolves who fought tigers and boys who grew up surrounded by a forest I’d never seen.

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The doorbell for the Mustache Man’s house wasn’t just a *ding-dong* sounding thing like every other doorbell ever, it was a song. A whole minute of piano music echoing all around us on the porch while Mama fidgeted and I wished I could have the book back. When he opened the door he was in a bathrobe even though it was afternoon, and half his walrus looking face hair was shaped into a teardrop with the fat end under his nose like the ringmaster at the circus. “Can I help you?”

Mama just looked at him for a second like she hadn’t really thought this through. “Mr. Jyles.” She shook herself and kept going. “Mr. Jyles, I believe this belongs to you.” She held the book between him and us like a shield.

The Mustache Man squinted at the book. “No, I don’t believe it does.” He was looking at her now; he hadn’t even glanced at me. “I believe that book belongs to Miss Saint Terry.”

“Well in that case she’s returning it to you. She thanks you very much and will not be bothering you ever again.” Mama was talking fast now like she was running across ground after the rain and wasn’t sure where the sink holes were. She didn’t even ask why he called me saint.

“Is she now?” Mustache Man was still talking slow, calm.

“Yes, good day, Mr. Jyles.” Mama stretched the book out closer to him expectantly.

He didn’t take it. “Miss Saint Terry, how’d you like *Jungle Book*? Did you finish it?” He was finally looking at me. His half one way half the other way mustache was twitching like there was a smile underneath it.

I looked at Mama before I answered. “No sir but I wanted to.” Mama made a little

move at me with her free hand like she wanted me to be quiet, but I wasn't going to. "I was really sad when she made me give it back."

"Well then it's a good thing I'm not taking it back, now isn't it, Miss Saint Terry?" I grinned wide at him, but Mama dragged me off his porch before I could say anything else to embarrass her. She left the book on his doormat.

"Teresa, I *forbid* you from going over there again. If you *really* want the *Jungle Book*, then we'll just rent you the VHS and then you won't have to plod through that silly old stack of pages."

I knew the response she expected even though I could already tell that the movie and the book wouldn't be the same. "Okay, Mama, thank you." I didn't mean it.

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The movie wasn't fun.

Mama sang the song with the snake all the way from the kitchen and Daddy hollered at me to turn the TV down and the screen did funny jumpy things because it was a rental. When it was over and Mama asked if I liked it I told her yes and thank you again, even though I hadn't, and ran out into the backyard to play. "Stay in the yard, Terry," she called after me. It was getting on toward twilight by then and Mama always went funny over me staying out past twilight.

"Yes Mama" I called back and slipped out the gate when she turned away from the screen door.

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The Mustache Man wasn't in his yard when I ducked through the hedge for the third time. That stopped me; I hadn't considered what I was going to do if he wasn't there. Did Mustache Men ever leave their homes? I had no idea.

"And hast *thou* seen the elephants dance?" It was a boy, maybe my age or maybe older or maybe younger and just big for his age, standing in the falling dark with a big shadow behind him that made me wish I hadn't lied when I told Mama I'd stay in the yard.

"At the circus, once, I think." Or had I seen that on TV?

"Hua, cover thine ears, Kala Nag." I was pretty sure he wasn't talking to me. "Thou art too good to hear of such places."

A snake with no head was feeling its way from around the boy's side. Then it wasn't a snake; it was the nose of an elephant with the rest of the animal standing there quiet in the dusk like it'd never not been there.

"You talk funny," I told him, staring at the long nose end that was probing the boy's shoulder now. The kid was wearing weird, flowy clothes, like he was out of a movie I probably wouldn't have stopped to watch if it was on while I was flipping channels.

“You too.”

“I’m Terry”

“Mem Saint Terry?”

“Um, yeah?” His accent confused me and the elephant was distracting me. Why wasn’t he reacting to the animal ruffling his hair?

“Jyles-sahib asked that I give you this.” He offered me a book he hadn’t been holding a second before, and I took it without looking away from him and the elephant. He finally followed my eyes up to the dark bulk of the animal. “Wah, hast thou never seen an elephant?”

“I *told* you, once, at the circus... maybe.”

“Hua, tonight Kala Nag would dance with the others, will you come?”

The others? “Mama wants me back home.”

The elephant, whose name sounded like it came from my book, was so quiet I wasn’t even sure I was seeing him right. How could something that *big* be *quiet*? “Hup-up, Kala Nag, we go.” The elephant wrapped his trunk around the boy’s middle lifting him into the gloom high over my head.

I wanted to go too.

Mama wanted me back. She told me to stay in the yard; I’d already lied to her once. I shouldn’t do it again. But I *wanted* to, bad. I wanted to figure out what this strange boy with his barking sounds at the beginning of sentences meant about elephants dancing; I wanted to know *everything*. Kala Nag was turning away. The moon was higher than it should’ve been for that early in the night. I could suddenly see the boy and the elephant and the jungle stretching forever in front of us where there had been no jungle the last time I was here.

“*Me too, I’m coming!*” I ran after them, squeaking only a little when Kala Nag caught me up in his trunk and raised me to where I could settle behind the boy. When I glanced back I could see the Mustache Man on his porch, watching us rolling into the gathering jungle on the back of an animal that didn’t belong in our neighborhood. He saluted me, when I waved, and returned to his house like it was time for him to turn on the news or something.

In front of us the whole world and all the stars waited. I didn’t look back again.