

FIREPLACE

By Danielle Brame Whiting

Brother and sister, Maisy and Craig, are sitting in front of the fireplace in their parents' holiday cabin. Their mother, who survived their father by ten years, passed away two weeks ago and they have come up to the cabin to pack everything up ready to be sold.

MAISY

It's so weird being up here without mum and dad.

CRAIG

That's why we need to sell the place.

MAISY

Aren't you the least bit sad about it, Craig?

CRAIG

About selling? I mean, I'm assuming I'll feel a pang from the nostalgia when it actually sells. Right now though it's just... hard. It's hard to be here. You know?

MAISY

Because they're not.

CRAIG

I keep expecting mum to walk out that door with her after dinner slice of toast and a steaming cup of peppermint tea.

MAISY

What about the time dad made it for her, but he accidentally used the green tea. She actually vomited.

CRAIG

Dad felt so bad.

MAISY

None of us even drank green tea. I mean, why was it even here?

CRAIG

Uncle Ted drank it.

Maisy looks at Craig with curiosity and confusion.

CRAIG

What?

MAISY

You talked about Uncle Ted.

CRAIG

So?

MAISY

I liked Uncle Ted.

CRAIG

Everyone liked, Uncle Ted.

MAISY

He use to come up here to the cabin with us a lot.

CRAIG

Yep.

MAISY

Laughs.

Remember that time Uncle Ted got bubble gum in his hair and mum had to cut a chunk of his hair off?

CRAIG

I remember it was your gum.

MAISY

He came out of his room calling for mum and she made him sit down so she could cut it out. She asked him how it'd moved from his mouth to his head, and he lied and said it must've fallen off his bedpost.

Craig is now looking at Maisy with a mixture of sadness and hesitancy.

But he looked at me when he said it and I felt so guilty, I ran.

Craig decides it is best to let Maisy keep her altered memory and plays the chastising big brother role.

CRAIG

I remember you being old enough to know you shouldn't be chewing on gum.

MAISY

I was five.

CRAIG

Still.

MAISY

Uncle Ted knew I wasn't allowed, but he thought I was old enough. The night before, at dinner, he snuck some to me under the dinner table.

CRAIG

And told you not to tell us.

MAISY

Yeah. He told me that mum would be mad at both of us if she knew and he made me promise I wouldn't swallow it. Which I didn't, I would like to point out, obviously. And I didn't tell her our secret either. Uncle Ted always said I was the best secret keeper.

CRAIG

Your secret?

MAISY

About him letting me have gum.

CRAIG

You never told us any of the secrets you had with him.

MAISY

Of course not.

CRAIG

Mum didn't like that.

MAISY

I know she didn't.

Beat.

I remember, after that, going to his room to say thank you for not telling on me and I couldn't help but giggle at his bald spot. He ruffled my hair and thanked me for not telling on him and I proudly stated that I would never tell. I remember, he smiled and promised that, as long as I always kept our secrets, he would give me my treats. Which I thought was a fair deal. Then mum burst in the room and pushed me out into the hallway, locking herself in with him. She was screaming at him. I remember that. Then dad turned up and made me go out to the dock with you. I was so confused.

Beat.

That was the last time I saw him.

CRAIG

We might need to put another log on the fire.

MAISY

I mean, I get it now...

Craig looks at her, startled.

Kids shouldn't keep secrets from their parents. Ted shouldn't have asked me to do that. It's dangerous, you know. It sets kids up to be taken advantage of and stuff. So, I get why mum was mad when she found out he was bribing me to keep secrets, but cutting him out of our lives altogether? That was a bit extreme. He's her brother. I could never cut you out of my life like that.

CRAIG

It was more involved than that, Maisy.

Beat.

Can we not talk about this anymore, please?

MAISY

Actually, I do want to talk about this. I've always carried so much guilt for causing their fight that day and if there were other reasons, I think I deserve to know why.

CRAIG

You feel guilty? How could any of it have possibly been your fault?

MAISY

It was my chewing gum.

CRAIG

Tell me, Maisy, if it was your chewing gum how did it end up in his room? In his bed? In his hair?

MAISY

Because I hid the chewed-up gum under his pillow. Dad told me to go to bed not long after I put it in my mouth. I didn't want to waste it, but I didn't want to hide it in my room because I knew they would find it. I knew it would be safe in Ted's room.

CRAIG

You hid it?

MAISY

Yeah. I hid it, then there's a whopping great fight and he's gone. The next few months you and mum and dad, you're all staring at me like I've got a disease or something. They even made me see a counsellor. How could I not feel like it was all my fault?

CRAIG

You just hid it there. He didn't know?

MAISY

Of course he didn't know! Honestly, why would a grown man keep chewed up gum, let alone anywhere near his bed?

Beat

Craig, what happened to him?

CRAIG

I'm going to put more wood on this fire. We don't want it going out.

MAISY

Craig?

CRAIG

He's in prison.

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