

## The Night Train

‘Nopesy grandma. I’m sures I’ll be okay. Nope, not too cold and yesh I knows my way home. Don’t worry, don’t worry. Mandy’s a big girl now. Okay, okay, I’ll be really, really careful. Don’t worry grandma. Takey cares.’

With a large stride, Mandy stepped boldly out of the warm, welcoming house, pulling the door closed behind her. A strong, sweet smell of cinnamon drifted around her, bidding her farewell. Outside, the air was cool, and the sky smooth and black, like silk hung across the stage of the world. Mandy shivered slightly and pulled her scarf tighter round her neck. She was small even for her age, and against the tall crooked trees, writhing and outstretching as though trying to grasp the moon, she seemed even smaller, like a little cloaked pixie. Her hair, invisible under her little red hood was hanging in soft golden curls at her shoulder. Suddenly aware that she was alone, her intelligent sapphire eyes flitted around the forest as she stepped cautiously onto the narrow dirt path. The magnificent full moon was her guide as she trekked and trudged until finally she arrived at the train station, a crooked little hut offside the uneven path.

Mandy seated herself down on a small rock beside the platform edge, embraced her knees in her skinny arms and made herself comfortable. She waited patiently for the sign of a passing train but nothing disturbed her until her heavy eyes finally closed and she dosed off, dreaming of the warm fireplace and the sweet scent of cinnamon cookies fresh from her grandma’s most treasured possession, the ancient stone-oven.

She was startled suddenly by a sound of a whistle. She sat bolt upright and scanned the area. Catching a glimpse of light in the horizon, she squinted her eyes and peered at the rail. Something was silently rushing along the tracks, swishing past bends and out-running the trees and bushes. Something wasn’t right about it though. For one thing it was yellow, striped with brown, and huge with large round bulbous headlights, and it didn’t have wheels. But most of all, most importantly of all, it was furry. The thing stopped in front of Mandy, whose eyes were so large it almost looked as though they had fallen out of their sockets.

Without warning a gap appeared on the train and a trill voice echoed in the scarce countryside.

‘This is Isotille Station. Thank you for using the Night Train. The next stop is Mirandatown Station. Please step back. The door will be closing in nine seconds.’

Mandy stared in awe as a large furry paw reached out and lifted her onto the train, dropping her with a thud onto a soft bouncy chair. The paw vanished as suddenly as it appeared. Colour returned slowly to the girl’s face as she broke into a mischievous grin. Overexcited and bewildered, she laughed and jumped up and down on the seats, making them squeal and squeak until she was so exhausted she collapsed on the bench.

The passenger beside her turned with a face of disgust and shifted away from her, his large fluffy tail swaying from side to side as he hobbled on the moving floor. Mandy laughed hysterically and skipped after the creature until it stopped abruptly and turned. The impact caught her off guard and caused her to bounce off its flabby belly and land on the floor. Towering above her, the enormous creature turned to face her and glared at her through huge green eyes.

‘Whaddaya want? I ain’t got nothin’ for ya, so just move along, eh kiddo?’ growled the huge blue cat. Mandy giggled, jumped to her feet, prodded at his jiggly beer-belly and wrapped her twig-like arms around him.

‘You’re funny,’ said Mandy, yanking at the long swishy tail, ‘What are you?’

The creature stopped glaring and turned away as though genuinely hurt by the question. He made his way to the seat on the other side of the carriage and sat, his head hung in shame. His eyes watered and a tear, sparkling like an emerald in the dim fur-lined space, slogged down his fat face.

‘I’m a no man now. A ain’t got no place to go. ‘Em things, horrid things conquered our kingdom. We’ve lost to ‘em now. Now we’re all homeless. Nowhere to go.’ Mandy seated herself beside the creature and rested her head on his large plump arms.

‘Where d’you comes from?’ she asked, her eyes closed.

‘It don’t matter now. I ain’t going back. A can’t go back ne’more,’ replied the giant cat. But Mandy was not prepared to take this as an answer, and excitedly urged him to tell her his story. He did so obediently, glad to be heard and fussed over for a change.

And thus she began to learn of mysterious kingdoms she had never realised existed, where magic did exist once and animals and wondrous, magnificent creatures all lived in harmony, and war between inhabitants had long since ceased to exist. But, now these kingdoms are destroyed and all the inhabitants homeless. Perhaps some will find a new home, a new place to survive but others may not be as lucky. We the humans, so destructive and harmful to nature, are the ones who turned the forest animals out of their rightful homes in order to satisfy our own selfish greed.

The train stopped. The cat looked at the sleeping girl, nodded with a smile and stepped out of the train, into the dull rainy streets of the city.