

*“God can restore what is broken and change it into something amazing. All you need is faith.”*

*What utter shit*, Annabelle thought and slammed the bible shut. She looked outside from the chapel they used as a school and grabbed her brother’s hand.

“It’s time to go home. Mother and father are waiting. Do you have your books?” she said.

William nodded.

“Good. Don’t let go of my hand this time, and don’t talk to the sailors or barmaids, aye?”

“You don’t have to tell me every time.”

“I do. And most importantly, don’t run off the jungle path. It’s easy to get lost on this island”

She took her bamboo basket and led her brother out. As she opened the door, fresh Caribbean air brushed through her long and golden hair. Searing sunlight flooded in and made them both cover their eyes before exiting.

Annabelle stomped through the main street kicking up mud with each step and looked to both sides for any trouble, but the town looked quiet today. A row of weathered houses and small wooden shops stood like half-broken barrels to their right.

Annabelle knew one of the merchants sold books from time to time. Almost every week she went inside hoping to hold them, read a page or two, maybe smell the paper if nobody saw her. The merchant always told her though, no touching if you’re not buying.

William pointed towards the pier sticking out from the beach to their left.

“Look, a new ship. It has cannons.”

“Not now.” Annabelle yanked her brother’s arm and kept up the pace as they passed the shops.

“Did you buy the fish?” William asked.

“I did. Five of them. Even got us a lump of butter from the merchant.”

“Can we afford butter?”

“No, but I put on a smile for him,” she said with indifference.

Walking past the taverns, she squeezed William’s hand harder. Barmaids hollered at passers-by. Drunk sailors slept on benches outside. Annabelle remembered one time a sailor lay dead for three days, before someone bothered to bury him. The smell chased away customers, she later heard.

Once outside the town, they came up to the garden of unmarked graves, and Annabelle finally slowed down and let go of William's hand.

They both looked at the improvised tombstones and unmarked sticks tied together in crosses in the abandoned graveyard. Annabelle breathed and looked at the hill up ahead. They knew the way, but the jungle path often played tricks on them. Its tree canopy blocked sunlight and made it harder to see. Animals deafened them with loud and often strange noises the deeper they went. The vegetation grew so fast Annabelle felt something always reached for her, slowly wrapping its rooty tentacles around her and dragging her off the path and consuming her.

She hesitated for another moment but committed. "Come William. Mother and father are waiting"

They dove into the jungle and started walking uphill. As the path narrowed, heavy shadows lurked around them.

Among all the animal and insect sounds, William suddenly heard something new.

"Did you hear that?" William said.

"What?"

"A twig or a scratch or something"

Annabelle stopped and turned around to face him. "A twig made a sound?"

"Aye. Do you think someone is following us?"

"It's probably nothing. Let's just go home," she said and kept walking.

William ran up to his older sister. "What if someone wants to rob us? Or a tiger wants to eat us?"

"If anyone wanted to rob us, they'd grab us in the town. And there are no tigers here." Annabelle checked her basket, making sure her schoolbooks and the fish didn't touch.

William grabbed Annabelle's arm. "Maybe a snake?"

"Where do you get these ideas? Sure, perhaps a snake. But you know what, if it's a snake, we should really keep moving, right?"

"Yeah, and once I thought I..."

Annabelle pushed him in front of her, almost tripping him to the ground. "Move!"

"Okay, okay."

The siblings continued on the path, towards their little village further up the hill. The foliage thickened and branches and palms snuck further into the path, erasing both light and visibility ahead.

William pushed a few palm leaves out of his way. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" he said and let go of the branches swinging them back towards Annabelle's face.

"Watch it!" Annabelle said.

"I want to be a car-peener."

"A car-peener?"

"They make houses. And boats"

"A carpenter, William. It's called a carpenter."

"Yeah... But what do you want to be?"

"I don't know. There is not much for me to want really. I can't go to a university, and there are not exactly any jobs for 17 year old girls on this island I see myself doing. Probably keep looking after you for another year or two and end up getting married off to a drunk sailor."

"Can a girl go to university?"

Just as Annabelle opened her mouth to tell him, a sharp scraping noise raked through the air from behind them.

"It's that sound again," said William. "Did you hear it?"

Before Annabelle could answer, the birds stopped singing. No insects buzzed. The trees didn't brush their leaves against each other in the wind.

"I did. Get behind me," Annabelle whispered and sat down on her knee. "Where did it come from?"

William pointed towards a boulder down the path. Annabelle heard him draw his breath to say something, but immediately raised her hand to stop him, while guarding her eyes on the big rock. She held her breath and sat down on one knee. She felt as if the bushes were creeping in on her, and the tree canopies slowly sunk towards her. Her breathing stuttered. She took a careful step back and felt something touch her back. As she jumped around she noticed a small branch, and exhaled.

As she turned back around, the noise behind the rock pierced the air again, like rusty metal being pushed and dragged against something hard and coarse. Annabelle noticed the tall grass behind the rock moving as a second sound deafened the former. The scream of an animal in excruciating pain rang in her ears so loud it even forced her eyes shut.

“Be quiet but move fast.”

Hearts raced as they hurried deeper into the jungle and further up-hill, quickly pushing branches and leaves aside while trying to stay silent. William barely managed to keep up.

“What was that?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but we don’t need to find out.”

“I think it is following us,” he said as his sister looked back and noticed movement in the bushes behind him.

“Faster!”

Annabelle sprinted up the path and punched her way through any and all obstacles, with her brother falling further and further behind.

“Hurry up!”

She saw quick movement in the bushes closing in on her brother. William slowed down and tried to catch his breath.

“No, it’s right behind you”

He looked behind him and started to run again, only to get his foot stuck in a vine lying in the path and trip. Annabelle saw nothing of the thing chasing them but ran towards him regardless.

“Are you hurt?”

“I think I’m fine, but my knee hurts, and I ripped my trousers.”

Annabelle picked up a stone and threw it with all her force at the bushes. “Then you better limp your way up the trail right now. I don’t want to fight whatever is in there.”

William stumbled up the trail. Annabelle picked up and raised another stone. She quickly looked to all sides like a predator backed into a corner. She listened for movement and smelled the humid air around her, but nothing happened. Slowly, she walked backwards up the path to join William while clutching the stone in one hand and the basket in the other.

The final stretch of the way home crawled steeply uphill, and offered a grand view of the island.

“Mother has started the fire. See the smoke?”

“Aye,” William said while catching his breath.

“Just up the hill now and we’re home”

“Wait. Can we rest?”

She stopped and soaked in the view of the lush jungle below and the town in the distance. The air always seemed more fresh higher up, she thought. She closed her eyes and felt the wind cool her cheeks and looked at her brother and nodded.

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"Could you wait outside Annabelle?"

"Why mother?"

"We just need to finish talking to the man"

"What man? Can't I be inside while you talk?"

"We are almost done. Just sit over there. William, come here."

Annabelle sat down on a tree stub outside the hut. Sweat trickled down her back from the long walk up the hill. Gazing back down at the town they called Tortuga, masts from three sailing ships reached for plummy clouds while the few chimneys slowly puffed their smoke out and up like an old man's pipe.

She grabbed her basket and made sure the fish hadn't ruined her books. She never really liked fish, but cuts of red meat rarely made it to the island. And when it did, the price alone made sure it ended up on someone else's plate. *Fish is not too bad*, she thought. *Mother and father do as best they can.*

She placed her schoolbooks in her lap; she only owned two. One bible, and another book called "*Review of Arithmetic, Geometry, and Proportion*". She gently put the bible back in the basket, opened the other book and flipped to the pages with the puzzles.

Just as she got to the right page, the scraping sound whirled through the air again. Her head shot up and she quickly looked to all sides. *It's close*, she thought and slowly got up from the tree stub. She noticed something moving in the bushes in front of her, and slowly took a step back. Then, out from the shrubs, came a small monkey rushing towards her. Annabelle breathed a sigh of relief, but noticed the monkey's wounds and blisters. One of its eyes was missing.

"You're sick."

The monkey twitched and rubbed its head furiously with one paw, popping several blisters. In its other paw it held an old rusty key, covered in scratch marks. It crawled closer to her.

"I don't want to hurt you." Annabelle said and raised her hands.

As the little ape approached her, she took another step back with her arms raised and back crouched. The monkey stopped and stared at her with its eye. Annabelle thought of something to say to comfort it, but the monkey suddenly leaped towards her and threw the key, hitting her in the shin.

“Ouch!”

Annabelle fell on her back and waved her arms frantically. She jumped up and scouted for the monkey, only to catch a glimpse as it ran away back into the forest. *What in holy hell?* She thought to herself as she bent down and pressed on her shin where the key hit her.

When the pain finally went away she picked up the old key and examined it. It lay heavy and dirty in her hands. In addition to all the scratch marks, deep inscriptions ornamented the shaft. She rubbed the dirt and rust off it.

“Por Dios”, it said. Annabelle shrugged and put the key into her pocket, before walking back to her books.

As she read, her parents walked out of the hut together with a man she did not recognize.

“It is settled then?” the man asked Annabelle’s father.

“It is.”

“Very well. I’m glad we came to this arrangement”

Annabelle’s parents escorted the man around the hut and towards the path leading to the town. As they approached Annabelle, her lips tensed up and she frowned at the man. His belly stuck out from his large black leather coat. Wrinkles carved their way around the man’s mouth and eyes. He smiled and revealed the few teeth barely hanging on to his gums.

“And this must be young Annabelle right here?” he said with a coarse voice.

“That’s her,” Annabelle’s father said.

“Excellent,” the man said while looking her up and down.

“Perhaps this is not the best time for an introduction,” Annabelle’s father said. “As we agreed?”

“Sure. You know where to find me,” the man said before heading for the path down to town.

“Who was that?” Annabelle asked. “Can I come in now?”

“Yes dear” her mother said. “Let’s go inside. We want to talk to you.”

"But who was he? Was he selling something?" *He must have been selling something*, she thought. *We really have nothing to sell. Then again, it's not like we have any money to buy anything either.*

Annabelle's mother took the basket of fish. "Henry, can you tell her?"

Henry and Annabelle sat down at the only table inside the flimsy straw hut. "As you know, mother and I love you and your brother very much."

"I know," Annabelle said and looked back and forth between her parents.

"And we know you want to go to school more and learn about calculating and the sorts"

"Aye. Wait, really?"

"Well," Henry said. "You have to travel far for these schools, or..." Henry looked at his wife. "What did the man call them again?"

"Universities"

"Right. And these universities only accept women from wealthy families. Like royals. Do you understand this Annabelle?"

"Oh, I see." Annabelle said and looked down. "It's fine father, and mother. I can help around here and maybe save some money for another book someday."

"Well, we have actually made a decision for you," Henry said and looked at his wife again. "The man you saw us talking to is headed for England in two days, and he is an architect. He has agreed to teach you all he knows about mathematics and science"

Annabelle looked at her father who broke eye contact with her, then quickly at her mother who turned away too. "What is going on?"

"Well, there is one thing"

"What?"

"We agreed he will take you to England and teach you, and..." Henry folded his hands and took a deep breath. "... you accept his hand in marriage."