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THE PIXIE PARADE

Mae and Widget were the best of friends. Widget had been given to Mae for her third birthday present. He was only a puppy then, very cute and full of energy; and when Mae wasn't at school they did almost everything together. And there was plenty to do.

The family lived in a house not far from town near a spreading woodland, and this was where Mae used to take Widget most afternoons; unless, of course, it was raining. "Not today," her mother would say as she saw her daughter trying to sneak out. "You know what I've told you – no going out in the rain. You and Widget will just have to play in the house." With no other choice and stuck indoors, Mae tried to find things for the pair of them to do; but they were all pretty boring. So she kept an eye on the weather through the window. As soon as it was fine again, and with her mum's okay, off they went.

Once out through the back gate it was usually a race to the woodland. Widget won, of course, and this was to be expected because he was very fast. Mae didn't mind – it was all part of the fun. She was, however, always keen to start their next game of hide and seek, which she thought she stood a better chance of winning. Widget obviously had other ideas, and no matter where she hid, he would find her every time. On one such occasion, Mae had said: "Now, you stay, Widget, and count to twenty. No cheating. I'm going to hide where you'll never find me."

Her plan was to go deeper into the woods to somewhere neither of them had been before. And this was where she came upon it – a small glade that looked to her like a green wonderland. There was green everywhere, high above in the treetops; and especially lower down on the ground. What was most striking was the bright green moss that grew on rocks and stones and on tree trunks; and it was like velvet. Mae was brushing a hand gently over a patch of moss when Widget came bounding up. Under normal circumstances she would have demanded to know if he had counted to the full twenty; but this time she simply waved a hand around. "Look at this, Widget. Have you ever seen so much green? I bet it's a magical place, and we might see a fairy or two if we look carefully. We'll have to look really hard, though, because they're probably green too."

They spent a long time there playing chasey in and out of the bushes and around the mossy rocks; always careful not to touch or damage the green velvet covering. Apart from winning most of the games, another thing that Widget was good at was telling the time; at least, knowing when it was time to go home for tea. So when he stopped playing and went to sit waiting at the edge of the glade, Mae nodded and said: "Okay, I'm coming." She walked to stand next to him and turned for a last look around. "This will be our special place, Widget. We'll visit our magical glade every day, and we won't tell a soul about it."

True to her word, Mae took Widget to their very own secret place every day; except when it was raining; and sometimes that might be for days; but the little girl didn't mind, because as soon as the rain stopped they would be away with the fairies again; even though they hadn't

seen any, yet. Then something unexpected happened to put a stop to the fun and games – Widget became sick.

Mae's dad took her dog to the vet a few times, and he had always assured Mae: "The vet's doing all she can and I'm certain Widget will get better soon."

But he never did. In fact, poor little Widget just got worse and worse. Mae would sit beside his basket, stroking him and talking softly: "It won't be long now, Widget. You will get better, I know it. And here's something to cheer you up – mum's made apple pie, and you love apple pie, don't you? I'll bring you a slice after I've had my tea, alright?" Widget barely raised his head. Looking up at her with sorrowful eyes, he opened his mouth to bark, but all that came out was a pathetic little whimper. "Back soon," she said as she walked away.

Recently, after Mae had left Widget to have her tea, her mum and dad usually asked how Widget was; but when they didn't, Mae knew something was not quite right. The worried looks on her parents' faces prompted the little girl to ask: "What's wrong?" When there was no reply, she urged: "Tell me, please. Is it to do with Widget?"

"I'm afraid we have bad news, darling," said her mother very quietly. "Widget has an illness that the vet hasn't been able to cure. Dad's taking him to Doctor Lee in the morning..."

"Does that mean she's found a cure, something to make Widget better?" Mae asked hopefully.

Her father shook his head. "I'm sorry, but no..."

"So why are you taking him to the vet?" Mae demanded to know. "What's the point if Doctor Lee can't make Widget better?"

"He's in a lot of pain," explained her mother, "And that's something the vet can fix. She'll give Widget a little needle. It won't hurt, and Widget will just close his eyes and go to sleep."

Maybe there was a glimmer of hope after all. "And when he wakes up he'll be alright?"

"No, darling," said her mother sadly. "He won't wake up, not ever."

Although the silence in the kitchen was heavy, Mae's head was filled with sounds – buzzing, humming and something like a rushing wind. She was finding it hard to breathe, harder still to accept what she had been told. Aware that her parents were speaking to her, she came back to reality. In a tearful voice she said: "If this is my last night with Widget, can he sleep in my room?" Before they could remind their daughter that this was against house rules, she added: "I just want us to be together until morning when..." She couldn't say it and broke down crying.

Mae got her wish and her father carried Widget up to her room still in his basket which he put on the floor. Once he had left, Mae decided they needed to be closer, so she picked Widget up very carefully and placed him on her bed. Sitting next to him, she stroked him while she talked: "We've had some really fun times, haven't we? Remember the chases and the hide and seek? And the really special part was finding our secret magical glade. If only there truly were fairies – they could have made you better, I'm sure..." Her head came up and she was suddenly staring at the ceiling. "Maybe there were fairies, but we just didn't see them. I'm going to do something I shouldn't – I know I'm not allowed out at night, but I'm going to take you to the glade, Widget. If nothing else, I think you deserve one last look."

With her dog wrapped in a blanket, Mae tip-toed out of the house and headed for the woodland. By then it was almost dark, but there was a full moon which made it easier to see the bumps and dips in the ground. She took it slowly, trying to make it a smooth ride for Widget. He was whimpering a lot, especially when she stumbled and he felt the jarring; but she kept assuring him and crooned: "Sorry if I'm hurting you, but it won't be long. We'll be there soon."

By the time they eventually made it to their special place, the sun was well down and their only light was from the moon. This barely made it through the trees overhead, so the green in the glade appeared almost black. Mae found a spot to put Widget down and sat next to him. "Now all we have to do is look for fairies. Can you do that?" Widget replied with a small whine.

In truth, Mae had never quite convinced herself that there really were such creatures as fairies, so she never expected to see any. And as it happened, she didn't, not fairies anyway.

What she would see was probably even more fanciful; and she didn't actually see them, not at first; but she heard them approaching. It was like music drifting through the woodland. As it came closer, Mae realised it was singing; and not just one person, but quite a few. When the first one came out of the forest, the little girl could hardly believe her eyes. It was a person, a very small one wearing sparkly clothes that picked up the light from the moon and shimmered. Another little person followed, then another. In minutes there was a whole line of them, all singing; and all carrying something. The one in the lead noticed Mae in passing and halted beside her. "What are you doing out here on your own at night, little girl?" asked the person.

"I'm not on my own," Mae replied. "I'm with Widget; and who are you – what are you?"

"My name is Silk, and I'm a pixie," replied the little person, turning to look back along the line of pixies. "That's Milk, next in line is Blink, then comes Wink; and the pixie at the back is Studdly. Now you know our names, what's yours?"

Mae told Silk her name and asked: "What are you all carrying?" She peered at the thing cradled in Silk's arms. "That looks like a squirrel."

"It is," said Silk, "And it's not a well squirrel, not well at all." She turned to look along the line again. "Each one of us has a creature that is not well and needs fixing."

The comment jarred Mae as she thought back on the conversation with her parents. Her tone was agitated as she queried warily: "What do you mean by fixing?"

"We are taking them to a place where they will be put to sleep..."

Mae cut in: "And I bet they'll never wake up again!"

Silk gave a little chuckle. "Oh, my dear, they will wake, I assure you; and they will be well again – as good as new."

Mae glanced down at Widget laying on his blanket, then back to Silk. "This fixing, is it only for forest creatures, or can it work for other animals too; animals like dogs?"

"As long as the unwell one is a creature," Silk replied. "It doesn't work for humans such as yourself. And there is one other thing – the creature must be carried to the pool, preferably by someone who loves them. Love is a great healer in itself."

The little girl knelt beside the blanket. "Do you hear that, Widget? I can take you to a place where you can get well again." She glanced at Silk and noticed a look of doubt on the pixie's face. "I can carry Widget there myself, can't I?"

"It is unusual," said Silk. "Human people aren't really supposed to enter the enchanted grotto." The pixie thought for a moment. "Why, may I ask, did you bring – er, Widget was his name? – to this place on a dark night if he is unwell?"

"I was hoping to find some fairies who would make him better again," replied Mae.

"Hah!" Silk gave a little laugh that sounded like a snort. "Fairies, indeed! Flying pests! You won't find any here. They left long ago and are likely making nuisances of themselves elsewhere. And they never did make unwell creatures better. Only pixies can do that; with the help of the Pool of Wellness. Now..." She looked deep into Mae's eyes. "If we let you come with us, you must promise never to tell about where you have been and what you have seen."

"Oh, I promise," said Mae, "I really do."

It may have seemed a strange parade: a line of little pixies, singing as they wound their way slowly through the forest, each carrying a sick creature; stranger still, now that there was a much taller human person cradling a blanket in her arms. Not that anyone would see – the pixies made sure of that. When they entered Mae's and Widget's secret glade, she was thinking this might be the enchanted grotto; but Silk kept going, deeper into the glade. Were it not for the sparkling from the pixies' clothes it would have been pitch black; but the shimmering bathed the surroundings in an eerie, mystical glow.

Soon enough the parade was nearing the enchanted grotto. First sight was ahead, another glow much brighter than the one in the glade, and it had a different colour. This seemed almost white except for a soft blue tinge. As she entered the grotto, Mae could see that the light was

shining from a pond of water in a small clearing. “Here we are,” said Silk, “The Pool of Wellness.”

The line of pixies broke and each of them went to stand around the edge of the pond. “Come, my dear,” Silk encouraged Mae, “Let’s join them, and in a moment we shall bring wellness and life back to these poor, unwell creatures; but first a pixie prayer...”

Mae had a sudden thought. “I don’t know it, Silk. If I don’t say the words, will that mean I can’t make Widget well again?”

Silk gave her a soft, comforting smile and explained: “There are no words, only those in your head, in your thoughts, in your memories; thoughts of times past and those that will surely come. And love, of course: the love we feel and share with the ones in our arms. Just close your eyes, Mae, and let your love flow to your dearest friend Widget.”

The next step was an easy one for the pixies. Not only had they done it many times before, but they were little people and the pool was only quite shallow. Silk instructed Mae to follow what everyone else was doing: “Lift Widget out of the blanket and walk into the Pool of Wellness with him the same as we do with our unwell creatures.” In walked the pixies until the blue, glowing water was up to their waists and their creatures were just above the surface.

For Mae, however, even when she waded right into the middle of the pond, the water only came up to her knees. “You’ll have to sink down, Mae,” said Studdly. “Like, down on your knees.” He watched as Mae sank to her knees. Still, the water wasn’t quite up to her waist, but Studdly wasn’t concerned. “That’ll do,” he said. “Over to you, Silk.”

“Ready, pixies?” Silk called out, and added: “Ready, Mae?”

Mae shrugged. “I suppose so. What do I do now?”

“Simple,” said Silk, “Just lower Widget into the water. He must go right under.”

“But he could drown,” said Mae. “He’s too sick to swim.”

Wink giggled. “He doesn’t have to, and he won’t drown, trust me. He will just go to sleep.”

The little girl wasn’t at all sure and was thinking: what if he doesn’t wake up? Then she reasoned: if he doesn’t, he won’t be hurting anymore. That was when she realised - although they had sounded cruel and unfeeling, her parents were only going to do what they thought was best for Widget. Which was really all Mae was about to do. Taking a deep breath, she began to lower Widget into the Pool of Wellness. “I love you, Widget,” she whispered. “Please stay with me. Hold your breath if you have to.” She looked up and asked: “How long does he have to stay under?”

“As long as he needs to,” said Milk, and she added: “You’ll know when that is.”

Still unsure, Mae lowered her dog into the water and held him there, wishing and praying; and wondering how she would know when it was long enough. It seemed to her that minutes had passed and Widget was still unmoving. Maybe he had drowned...? At one point she almost pulled him back up, but she resisted the urge and waited some more. Then the miracle she had been hoping for happened – Widget stirred in her hands, just a little at first; more as seconds passed. In less than fifteen seconds he was squirming to break free. Next, he broke the surface and began splashing around and clawing at Mae trying to climb up. “Oh, Widget,” she crooned happily, “You’re back. Let me give you a cuddle.” And she pulled him close and wrapped her arms about him.

Her journey home was amazing; just like old times with Widget running ahead, then back before racing off again. There was just one problem for Mae – how to explain this miracle to her parents without actually telling them about the pixies and the Pool of Wellness. When they arrived home the grown-ups were certainly surprised to see Widget back to his old self, and Mae was expecting lots of questions that she wouldn’t be able to answer without breaking her promise to the pixies. Her dad came to the rescue: “The vet did say that sometimes animals can recover from incurable illnesses on their own; if they really want to.” As far as Mae and Widget were concerned, they already knew that; and, of course, it needed lots and lots of love too.