

A kite got stuck in a tree. A little girl found it, rolled up in its wings, its leg caught in a loop in a branch. The girl got the bird down and took it into the kitchen, where she laid it on the table, gently. The bird was muddy, and it had a broken leg. The girl made the bird a splint out of cardboard, and wrapped its leg in a bandage held with string. The bird tried standing. Each time it got up, the bandage fell off. Eventually it died.

The girl asked her mother why that had happened. Her mother told her life isn't fair.

The little girl had a good head for heights and a fondness for the bottom of the garden. One day she found a man there, asleep under a bush, and she ran inside to tell her mother, who was a counsellor. The girl's mother gave a listening ear to soldiers. Soldiers returning from war, whose families couldn't hear their stories. Soldiers who put their stories of battles in bottles. Bottles to drown the shame that came of beating the children who couldn't listen to their stories. The more bottles emptied, the more they were reminded that even in the very depths of sadness, you can find an end. The more bottles emptied, the more ends found. Bottles and bottles and bottles of all kinds. The little girl's mother would carry home their empties.

The little girl's mother was a very good mother. She cooked lemon meringue pie, and cleaned the chimney and chopped the wood for the fire to keep them warm. She made lace doilies, and sewed the little girl's clothes. She built the girl a wooden house to play inside down the garden. She took the girl on walks in the fields, and runs in the woods with the dogs. She showed the girl how to reach the highest places in the trees and followed underneath the girl when she walked the old battlements of the castle ruins, so she could catch the girl if she fell. When the moon was full, they climbed together to the top of the hill that looked down into the village, and named all the shapes of the stars.

One day, the girl was running a bath. The hot water made the enamel steam and when she touched it the red came up on her hands so brightly she thought for a moment they'd been cut off. Quickly, she twisted the cold and tried to stem the flow of the heat pouring from the tap, but she couldn't turn it back. It was stuck. She tried one way, then the other, but the water only flowed faster, and hotter. She began to panic. The steam was getting thicker and the water was rising. She thought of what might happen if the water came over the edge and flooded the bathroom, and her feet would be burned, and it would drip down through the floorboards and flood the kitchen below, and pour out into the hall and under the front door into the drive, and down the drive along the road and into the village, where it would pour and pour and pour and soon the whole village would be drowned and burned. She squeezed and twisted so hard her bright red hands were screaming and then her mouth was yelling too.

In ran the girl's mother. And she took a small piece of cloth, dampened it, and with it she turned off the tap and stopped the flow of the water.

'I couldn't turn it off, I didn't know which way!' cried the girl.

Her mother held onto her hands.

'No!' - the girl tried to pull away.

Her mother kept hold. As the girl pulled away, her mother held tighter to her wrists.

'Stop crying.'

'No! Let me go'

'Not until you stop.'

'LET ME GO!'

'There's no need for this. Stop crying and I'll let you go.'

'You're hurting me..'

'The harder you pull, the tighter I'll squeeze, now stop crying.'

And the girl stopped pulling, and her mother stopped squeezing. 'Here.' Her mother gave her a small piece of cloth. 'If it gets stuck again, use this. If you're not sure what to do, or which way to turn, hold it over you mouth and nose and breathe deep, and ask *which way?* You're OK.'

The next day the girl found the man hanging at bottom of the garden. After that, her mother didn't come home. The little girl looked in the woods, and in the castle ruins, and because it was a full moon, she climbed the hill over the village and looked down into the valley where the silver light touched the edges of the houses and made them shimmer like a midnight ghost village. But her mother did not come home.

The house was cold and the girl was hungry, even the bricks of house had turned blue, and the paint had begun to crack in the damp, so she knocked on her neighbour's door.

Her neighbour sat with her two children in the living room, furs around their collars, slippers on, socks pulled up under their armpits, hot water bottles in their laps, each of them. A fire was roaring in the hearth.

'My mother has gone and the house is cold - do you know how I can make fire?'

'Fraid not,' the neighbour says, 'They've stopped all the fires for the poor. All the fires that heat the houses for the poor, they're all stopped. New authorities. New administration. Not enough money to cover the heating for the poor. There's not enough money for lights neither. Shame really. The house here's really is falling apart, and well, me I don't barely have a biscuit to feed my own with.'

'What'll we do?' asked the girl.

The neighbour looked slyly over to her children.

'You could always ask the Firekeeper?'

'Firekeeper?' asked the girl.

‘Keeps the fires going for the poor. Old Honey Bones. Far though, don’t think you’ll make it. And if you do, I’m sure you won’t make it back. ’

Well, thought the girl, there’s no one who’ll miss me anyway. But it might do some good in the village. I’ve a good head for heights and I don’t mind the dark. Yes, I will ask Old Honey Bones for fire.

So the girl packed a tiny bag and set out. She walked for a long time, before she found herself seated on a cold roadside. Freezing rain splattered over her ankles and up her trousers each time a car passed by. She flipped a coin. Heads, the head would choose where she’d spend the night, tails, the tail would choose. The tail had won. Now the girl was trying not to think too much.

She put her hand in her pocket and pulled out the cloth given to her by her mother. She whispered ‘which way?’ and her eye was caught by a group of people huddled at the end of a farm track. They had tents and sleeping bags, and a little fire they were sitting around. It didn’t smell so nice, but they were friendly, especially when she told them she was going to find the Firemaker, and they gave her drink that let her sleep without feeling any cold at all.

The sound of clopping hooves bringing up the ruby dawn and the cows lining themselves ready for milking. The stench of the slaughterhouse drifted across the valley into the corner where the girl slept, and she knew it was time to move on. She whispered ‘which way?’ while she was tying her boots, and made off through the grass to the edge of the forest.

The forest. Fear. Fear would stop her heart from beating and without a heart to hold her she’d never find the Firemaker. She had a smile that said I am not harmful. Her smile said, approach me, I won’t bite. And that had been useful. It had got her out of many difficult situations. But now these

smiles were for nothing. There's no one to smile at in the forest where Old Honey Bones lives. No one to smile at in the dark. In the dark you need only hold a light out in front of you, and hope that the path doesn't run out. And if it does, hope that you keep walking in a straight line. Many a wanderer has been lost in circles, trying to find something to smile at.

Other sweet and smiling maidens before this girl had been in search of Old Honey Bones. Other sweet and smiling maidens had grinned innocently at the thorns surrounding the forest. Other sweet and smiling maidens had been tossed on the horns of catastrophe, far away from where they stood balanced on two legs, into the sucking depths of swampy ditches. Though they could smell the smokey trail of the Firemaker's hearth, they abandoned their shoes in the swampy ditches, and turned back the way they had come. If a maiden wishes to search for Old Honey Bones, and wishes to get close to the Firekeeper, they must have all shapes and faculties of wits and sense about them.

The girl sang a little tune, and whistled a song, and slapped her thigh along with the merry tune that filled her cheeks. She danced a little, and clicked and looked at the sky and saw its blue and thought how wonderful. She whispered to the cloth, and though nothing happened, she imagined that she ate welsh rarebit that it had made appear in front of her, and rubbed her belly and picked the cheese from between her teeth. With her belly full, she crawled slowly, cautiously, soundlessly to edge of the forest. She wondered, what if she was to pretend it was not a forest at all, but something like plain sailing. She might get no further than the end of her nose. But still this way, she would have come to no harm. The girl crossed into the forest as if it was an open lake and she was a giant whale, or as if it was the calmest Arabian sea, and she, a boat with straight tiller and strong mast and a wind in her sail. The ground under her nose had been soft and flat, and her shoes gripped the soil as if they were made of roots.

The thorns reared their pointed heads but the girl whispered 'which way?' into the cloth, which turned her skin to a thick hyde. She gritted her teeth like a bear child, and pushed her way through the thorns that would toss her back into the ditch.

The trees were so thick she could not see further than twenty metres in front her. In the gloom, the trees looked all the same and no path was clear. 'Which way?' the girl whispered to the cloth. And she looked to the trees and the branches were an arrow, pointing straight ahead. The girl did not know for certain how long the journey would take, though she knew in an instant that the boundary to this threshold was a delicate membrane. She moved deeper in the darkness.

After some time, snow began to fall and the ground was covered in the thick cold crystals. Old Honey Bones's house was in the deepest part of the forest. The girl trudged on through the snow, touching the edges of the birch trees she passed and hoping the snow would not give way underfoot. In places it was eight foot deep, elsewhere the trees were almost submerged. The girl whispered 'which way' into the cloth and it became a stick she could drop ahead of her, which showed her where the pitfalls were.

And soon the smell of burning wood floated through the pine.

A house with windows missing. Pigs in the courtyard. Crumbly bricks and peeling red paint on the woodwork. An outhouse with broken door ajar. A chimney with grey smoke and a yard cluttered with every kind of junk and scrap possible to imagine. Enamel baths, bed frames, broken bikes and stilts and bits of wood, a tarpaulin half covering a ladder an expensive looking wardrobe, stained glass windows, a spiral staircase, ladders, chimney pots, flowerpots, stacks of tiles and chair legs, a broken TV, yards and yards of rope, an old canoe, shelves and shelves and shelves of books and crockery and bobbins, engines and wires and parts of old tractors. There were boxes of wine,

pianos, and guitars, and drums made of leather and drums made of plastic, and drums made of metal and metal lamps, and rats ran in and out of bags and buckets of rotting bread. This was a hoarders dream. Or the dream of a changing spirit. Old Honey Bones was a Transformer. An animator. One who could turn this into that and throw away what was unnecessary.

The girl picked her way up through the yard. And knocked on the door of Old Honey Bones.

She knocked, once, twice, three times, and the door was opened. By a gust of wind that blew up between the gables of the veranda where she stood. Twisted vines crept up over the door and knots of half rotten figs and drooping passion flowers grew around a pergola, up steps that lead up to the house. This was the way to look at Old Honey Bones's house. First make one's way up the garden path, through the gate, and onto the yard, then head down trudge through the debris that littered the drive, then one step two step up to the front door, before looking back the way you had come. Then you might see the fungusy fruit growing around the entrance way. And then you might see the mounds of earth and the burial site, and the skins hanging over the doorframe. Then you might see the knocker, made from spoons hung together with a drooping arch of molten silver that never seemed to still. When you looked, it seemed to flow back in on its itself, and as you reached out a hand to grab it, your fingers would seem to grasp nothing more than water, though it was hard as steel and made a noise as loud as any knocker that ricocheted off the pine forest around. The echo was strange for a house made of crumbly bricks, and seemed not only to ring through the house but under the girl's feet. She heard a crunch and turned sharply, as a hand reached out and touched her roughly on the shoulder.

'Standin' there on my doorstep, are ya?'

'Excuse me - I -'

'Choo gunna stand there all goddam day and pap pap like a fish? In you go girl. S'open!'

And before she had a chance to turn herself properly around, the girl found herself pushed into the hallway of the house of the wildsome and much feared Grandmother of the forest. Her head was gnarly, and round, and completely bald and her ears were giants ears, hairy tipped and pointed straight up - elven giants ears. Her eyes were tiny, one black and one milky white, and her nose was flat and hooked with two round nostrils flaring.

‘Choo gunna tell what it is you’re after then, girly?’

‘I - yes, well, I’m here to... er... to ask you for a word or two, about the fire. Well, that is...’

‘...And SPIT’

‘...Sorry... excuse me?’

‘SPIT IT OUT!’

‘Oh, I see - the er, well I’m, you probably know, already’

‘Know what? Who are you and why are you dribblin’ on my carpet?’

‘Not, dribbling - er - OK. My mother is gone, and I’m.. I’m looking for fire.’

‘Fiiiiire? What makes you think I know anything about fire?’

‘Because you’re the Firekeeper?’

‘Am I indeed. ‘Choo think you knows ‘ow to find a FireKeeper do you? Rrratted me out did ya?’

‘Thinks you got hold of a special one did ya?’

‘Special... no no. I just saw - the er, the smoke, coming from the chimney - you can see it the other side of the forest.’

‘Choo’ think you can just come ‘ere and ask me for whatever you likes then do you, girly? Like I’s got plenty to go round? What if everyone comes aksin for fire from Old Honey Bones then? I’d be left stone cold and miserable, dead as a rock, out ‘ere in the forest all lonesome!’

‘There’s trouble in the village. The fires have been turned off. The council have...’

‘Council? ‘Choo comin ere and talkin about no council for? Got nufin to do wiv any council.’

'I thought - never mind. Everyone knows, your fires never go out. And I wondered if I could just ask you, how, but nevermind. I'll go now. Sorry to disturb you.'

'You wants to know how to *make* fires is it? Well that I can tell you. Why din' you just ask me that? After you clean me up. I need a change. And I aint had a bath in ten centuries. And I iz not walking one more step. Bin out in the forest all goddam day. I is tired. Carry me!'

And Old Honey Bones, raising her arms motioned upstairs with her eyes. The girl puzzled a moment, doubting the strength of her spindly arms. But the old woman was light as air, and the girl carried her up to the long open room with a bed in one corner and a bath in the other.

The girl looked more closely at the bath.

'There are no taps.'

'Course there's no goddam taps. Why do think I aint had a bath in ten hundred thousand centuries! But now you're here Girly, you can help me. I'm goddam stinky! I is gun res my eyes jus now, but soon as I'm awake I wants that bath filled you hear? An not so quick that by the time I wake iz all gone be cold.'

And Old Honey Bones closed her eyes and in seconds was sound asleep and snoring.

The girl pulled out her cloth and held it over her mouth and whispered 'which way?' Just then she saw a bucket with a silver handle. The girl went downstairs to the kitchen, and hanging over the fire was a bucket just like the one she was holding, full of water. Out of the window she spied a well. She ran out and filled the bucket with water from the well.

'I must be quick before Old Honey Bones wakes', she whispered to herself, but in her haste to get it inside, she dropped the full bucket and all the water in it over the ground.

‘Quick, I must be quick!’ but the bucket became heavy, so heavy there was only one way she could carry it when full, and that way was slower than slowly slow. She carried the water inside, took down the boiling water down from where it hung over a fire that was lit in the kitchen, hung up the full bucket of water from the well, and carried the hot water upstairs. When she had emptied this bucket into the tin bath, she repeated the trip downstairs, out to the well, into the fire, swapping buckets and carrying the heated water upstairs to the tin bath. But when she returned with this second bucket, the water from the first had disappeared. Panicking she ran downstairs, but running again only made her trip, and she fell down the rickety stair case, smashing her chin on the flagstone floor. ‘Which way?’ She said, thinking she might see something new. But nothing appeared. The girl could only carry on filling the buckets in turn from the well, heating them over the flame and carrying them upstairs and dabbing her nose to stem the blood as she went. But each time, when she returned, the water had disappeared. Thankfully, all the while, Old Honey Bones slept. After forty-seven trips up and down to where the tin bath was, the girl's arms were tiring, after fifty-seven they were damn near falling off, after one-hundred-and-seven she was numb. But she kept on, terrified that Old Honey Bones was going to wake.

The girl was downstairs hanging the bucket over the flame, when she heard a grumble, a mumble and a groan from upstairs. Old Honey Bones was waking up. The girl thought to bolt, thought to run back where she had come from, Old Honey Bones had said she would cook her alive if there was no bath when she woke.

‘GIIIRLY!’

The girl put down the bucket and tucked the cloth back in her pocket.

‘GIRLY GET UP HERE’

She climbed the stairs slowly.

When she reached the top, she saw Old Honey Bones struggling to get a shoe off. The bath was full.

‘Quick Girly, else it’s gun done be freezin cold!’

The girl helped peel off the old crone’s crispy gown and almost had to chisel the shoes off her gnarly feet. Gently, ever so gently, she lowered her into the bath.

‘AAHHHHH. Do my elbows’

The girl moved the creaky limbs about in the water, scrubbed behind ears and around the neck. She scooped water and gently sponged the liver spots over the old woman’s bald head, and scraped between her toes, she oiled the dry and crusty skin behind her ears, and extricated the crunchy bogies from her nostrils. And then she noticed, tiny white hairs beginning to sprout. Bright white hairs - the white of light full of every colour. By the time the girl had helped Old Honey Bones out of the bath and into a fresh gown, fresh socks and clean underwear, the scalp that had been completely bald was covered all over with shiny white hair.

‘Dinner. I’m hungry as a mammoth.’

‘What is there to cook with?’ asked the girl.

‘Not a sausage! Get to it, I’m starved Girly!’

The girl whispered into the cloth ‘which way?’ and just then, she noticed a cross bow and arrow. Out to the yard went the girl to find one of the roaming piglets. A fat one, juicy and covered in spots muzzled through the debris.

‘You best be a dam fine shot, I don’ wan none o my pigs suffrin the shot of silly Girly aint got her eyes on straight,’ yelled the grandmother of the forest.

The girl took aim and with a tiny squeal the pig was downed and deadened. She hacked up the carcass and sent the meat through a sausage maker twirling and twisting the skin to make twenty-

four identical chipolatas. She fried chops, and battered the ears, and boiled the trotters in a soup and the old woman chomped her way through the entire pig.

The girl ate a biscuit, drank her tea, and slept.

In the morning when she woke, the girl looked about for Old Honey Bones. The bed in the corner of the upstairs room was empty.

She went downstairs and almost tripped over a giant bottom down on its hands and knees peering underneath the staircase.

‘Old Honey Bones? Are you OK? Have you lost something?’

‘Girly!’ she leapt up with a surprising agility - as if she’d grown springs in her knees overnight.

‘Choo gunna be getting up this time for then? Might swell a stayed in bed all goddam day the use you are now. Tis nearly 8 o clock of the mornin! Suns bin an gone and roosters done roosting hours ago. Fetch me a cripsy bird for breakfast and I gun want everythin in that yard cleaned up an piled afore I be done eatin it then.’

‘...Everything in the yard cleaned and piled?’ the girl says slowly.

‘Thas right. All them hunka junka piles of crap, I want them sorted out soze I knows whats I got out there.’

‘...Everything...?’

‘You heard. Orite fine. I gots to be headin into the forest there anyway get me some sprouts for the spring. I’ll be back this time tomorrow and I wanna see two neat piles. Pile’a the good stuff - pile’a stuff thas for the incinerator. Dun be past its sell by date!’ and Old Honey Bones made her way to the door, pulling a floor length waxen cloak over her shoulder, ‘else you’ll be next in those sausages!’

With that, Old Honey Bones picked up her walking stick in one hand, her breakfast chicken in the other, and charged off out the front door.

The girl listened for the sound of the stick click clicking down the path, and for the sound of the gate squeaking open, banging shut. She rubbed her fingers over the bottom of her smock shirt, dusting its edges like she was rubbing butter into flour. She followed the dusty footprints left through the hallway out onto the veranda and surveyed the yard. It was worse, much worse than she remembered. Perhaps picking your way through a place like this the first time, there's something clearer about the destination, the need to just get to the door, which allows the eye to run it's way over the deeper grime, the ionised rust, the muck set and baked between clutter by the sun, the glass turned to sand, melted in summer, frozen in winter, mixed with stuff of piggies and cats and dogs and geese, and all of it strewn in amongst objects of every kind of human utility imaginable. This was a not a museum, not even a graveyard. This was a site of excavation, wherein the bric-a-brac of centuries of lives had been dumped, like the satchel of someone tortured by school on the last day. Thrown aside and forgotten about and left to the elements and the stacks of histories earthen shelves.

The girl trudged down to the bottom corner of the yard, thinking she would begin there and work her way up and down in strips, as if ploughing a field. A huge cabinet had fallen over a table, cream coloured and pattered with symbols taken from paintings, it had been broken in two by the weight of the cabinet, three out of four legs still attached. The cabinet doors were bolted shut, a world war two relic. The table legs had been french polished, but bore deep scratches now, probably chewed by the rodents nesting there. The girl got her hands underneath the cabinet and began to heave. It was icy cold and difficult to grip, and after ten minutes of pushing and twisting, she had only just about managed to get the cabinet up to the top of the path. Wind froze the droplets that formed on her upper lip. She began gathering pieces of the table to form a pile, before realising, aside from the

path cleared between the gate and front door, there was not a square inch of space to make any pile at all.

‘Burn as I go?’

The incinerator was at the back of the house. A charnel house of bones, bones over the door, windows of bones, a chimney of boney joints, sprinkled with ash and covered in bone dust. The girl picked up a few sodden pieces of cardboard and some bits of carpet, a few bags of mouldy clothes and some papers covered in mould, in a supermarket bag. She carried them around to the incinerator and tickled the grinning sheep’s head hung on the door. Which remained firmly shut.

‘Not a chance I’ll sort all this before Old Honey Bones gets back in the morning,’ she cried. The girl whispered into the cloth ‘which way?’ and her feet took her back inside. She cooked herself a small bowl of rice and dug out a fur night mask from a drawer. She lay down by the coals in the kitchen. In minutes she was asleep.

Soon, the click click of Old Honey Bones’s stick could be heard on the icy gravel. The girl slowly approached the morning, pulling back the eye mask at the same time as front door opened.

‘Snoozin are we! Get me a drink, I’m thirsty as dried up old fish’

The girl hurried to her feet, panicking. She’d only meant to sleep for a few minutes. Now Old Honey Bones was back and she was going to be a made into a sausage.

‘After - you can sweep this here kitchen and I needs my clothes be washin from the forest. Don’ you be thinkin jus’ coz all that’s clear out there you can jus be sleepin all day.’

The girl gasped an inaudible gasp, and took a few steps towards the door. Sure as sure can be, the yard as sweet and inviting as a quaint forest farmhouse. Nothing remained of the junk. Cobbles glistened through under the hay laid down for the goats, and the chickens pecked happily around in their shed, waiting to be let out in the spring. A thin layer of snow had settled meanwhile.

‘Pride doesn’t pay, Girly. Stops all that wonder admirin - I gots undies need scrubbin.’

A night past. Ice crystals were gathering again on the stones of the yard. There was something of a turning occurring that the girl found rather confusing. She had watched Old Honey Bones click her way over the cobbles, as hibiscus rose between the cracks, and geraniums appeared in beds along the dry stone wall, and lavender and turmeric and fennel, and samphire sprung up. Butterflies had followed the old woman down the path, bumblebees zoomed around the pergola and tiny sparrows had sat along the gate. Now it was later in the day, and here were the ice crystals again. The girl positioned herself on the veranda to observe the transformation. She would squat to stay alert, worried that if she sat in the rocking chair she might fall asleep and miss the return she felt was coming. Her calves hurt though, and her thighs were starting to burn, and the sun still had not set. Watching for the edge of the ruby circle to dip below the trees she wanted to be sure the cover of stars would throw a chilly blanket around Old Honey Bones’ fire, so she could ask her one or two things about the time they had spent together.

How had the yard had become so clear of junk, as she slept? How was it that the yard had been full of flowers, and grasses and butterflies just like that, when the forest was still deep in winter? And how was it now that it had returned to winter so soon?

Old Honey Bones was busy with the goats out in the barn where the sauna was. There were three barns separate from the house. One housed the chickens, pigs and hay, one housed the goats and

cows and the sauna. The last was where the incinerator still smoked, and the tractor was kept to help haul the trunks back for the fire when she'd felled them in the woods.

Nighttime and the ghosts of the things unsaid still lingered. Nighttime and the shadows of the questions never answered loom between the black and white of the birch trees drowned in winter.

The sun dipped. As she had imagined they would, the birds flew off, the butterflies settled on primroses that turned orange and perished, and the petals of the primroses fell and crisped and tumbled into the wind, and they themselves sunk back into the soil, which was soon covered over with snow that began to fall lightly over the forest. The girl pushed herself up and stamped a few times to get the blood to tingle in her toes again. She trudged down through the snow to the barn and gave a knock.

'Old Honey Bones? Can I come in?'

'Whas' that Girly? I can' hear you! Come in if you wants to arks me something', came a voice from behind the barn door, 'dumb trollop' the girl heard her mutter as pushed open the door.

'Wot d'yu want - don' you be disturbing my nanny here she's concentrating on 'er milking.'

Old Honey Bones was sat on an old milking stool, skirts up round her shoulders, tugging determinedly on the nanny goat's teats with big firm hands and a small flick of her limber wrists, directing the rich yellow cream into a silver bucket in front of her.

'Tsh, come over 'ere girly, I can' 'ear you propley, muttrin' over there!'

The girl took a few steps closer.

'Old Honey Bones...'

‘What is it now Girly, you best be quick coz I gots another o’ these ladies to do now and eggs to pick up.’

‘Yes. Right. I was wondering. How was it that today, flowers grew in your yard, when it has been a ruin for so long?’

‘Springtime Girly!’

‘And then the butterflies came?’

‘Summer Girly!’

‘And then the leaves on the apple tree turned and the apples fell to the ground?’

‘Autumn Girly!’

‘And how is it that it’s winter again now?’

‘Wint... oh,’ she stopped. ‘Coz thas’ what comes next, dumb trollop! Why else? Now are you gona arks me more questions or can I gets on wiv my milkin?’

The girl touched her nose, and put her hand in her pocket to feel for the piece of cloth. She was desperate to know how the yard had cleared so quickly. Desperate to know what Old Honey Bones had done with those objects that had blocked her house from being seen by the forest. But the yard was clear and full of the seasons again, and as she felt the edge of the cloth she said to herself ‘which way’. *No more questions*, thought the girl to herself.

‘No. No more questions. I’ll be getting inside - I can make a start on the soup for supper.’

‘Thas right. You’ll do jus’ that,’ and the old lady sat back from her milking for a moment, and she gave the girl a long hard look. ‘Mm. Yous’ smarter than I fink you looks, Girly.’

A pair of wooden clogs clattered up the steps of the veranda and into the kitchen, where the girl had the table laid and the soup in a giant pot on the stove. A buttermilk loaf was steaming on the window sill.

‘Good. I’m starvin,’ and Old Honey Bones took the soup off the hook, and the loaf off the window sill, sat down at the table, and finished the lot.

‘Ere I found what it was I was lookin’ for in that yard,’ she said between mouthfuls ‘Good job you cleaned it up, would never ave found em uverwhichwise.’

And she handed the girl two pieces of flint.

‘Like this...’ she said, wiping the last of the soup from around her mouth and dusting the crumbs off her smock. She turned down the lanterns on the walls and closed the door on the hearth so the room was completely dark. And with her big hands and a flick of the wrists, she threw a spark at a candle on the table, and lit the room with it.

‘S’all you need is a good bit of stone. Now you best be hurryin’ off home afore I thinks about turning you into another one of those tasty soups, and whiles I think on it, got a big ol’ round stone out the back there, could crunch up a lickle morsel of that rump on yours, munch on a loaf o’ girlybone bread couldn’t I. Just better be outta my sight afore I gets too hungry...’

The girl took the two pieces of flint and without waiting a second, thanked the Old lady and ran off into the forest. Before long she was at the edge of the forest, and not so long after that, she came to village she had left. But when she got there, the neighbours’ house and the house where she had lived with her mother were just two piles of ash. The girl held tight to the Firemaker’s stones in her pocket. She told herself, wherever I go, I may not have a roof over my head, but I will be warm. This was just moments before she realised, though she had the Firemaker’s stones in her hands, she had not the first idea how to use them.