
FOREST FARM

by
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“Aunt Norma,” said Violet, “you’re not listening.”

Violet was right. Her great aunt was checking a covered bowl of bread dough put out on the porch to rise. It was a warm morning in August. Norma loved such days for baking—the yeast would rise effortlessly, producing lovely high loaves of fresh bread. But not today. Today the bread had stubbornly refused to rise at all. Was it too humid? There had been thunder, lightning, and a downpour the night before. The electricity had even gone off.

Brought back from her thoughts, she acknowledged Violet. “What is it, Honey? Do you need more syrup?”

“I don’t want syrup,” said Violet. “I don’t want pancakes. They’re funny today.” Violet was five years old. She had her arms folded in front of her. It was a formidable sight. Pancakes were a Sunday favorite, but not today.

Norma looked down at Violet’s plate. Nothing looked wrong with the pancakes. Maybe they were a little flatter than usual. She glanced at her own untouched plate. Then she sat down at the table, buttered her cooling breakfast, and took a bite. A sharp taste of baking powder filled her mouth.

“Honey, let’s not eat these. I’ll fix some eggs.”

Norma picked up the breakfast plates and carried them to the garbage.

The old dog, sitting on the mat next to the door, looked hopeful as the plates of food went by.

“Not today, Dog,” said Norma. Had she put too much baking power in the mix?

Norma had not felt quite herself lately. She wondered about the pancakes. She’d been making them for over seventy years. Could she have mismeasured so poorly? Could she have added baking powder more than once? Norma shook her head.

“Aunt Norma, you’re not listening *again*.”

“I’m sorry, Sweetie. I’ve got a lot on my mind. What were you saying?”

“I want to go out in the forest after breakfast. Is that OK?”

“Sure. Do you want to pick berries? There are ripe blackberries out

by the old barn. We can make a pie.”

“No. The forest.”

“OK. We’ll go for a hike in the forest.”

“Not you! You’re too slow! I want to go by myself.”

Something about the request didn’t sound right. Violet had never complained about her being slow before, although Norma had slowed down lately. But the forest? Why would Violet want to go into the forest by herself?

Norma began to fry eggs in butter. “Violet, why do you want to go in the forest? There are things to do around the farmhouse.”

Violet squirmed in her seat.

“What is it, Honey?” asked Norma.

“I’m not supposed to say.”

Norma paused, choosing her words carefully. “OK, you don’t have to say if you don’t want to. If you’ve sworn to a friend, I won’t force it out of you. What’s his name? Benny?” Norma referred to a stuffed horse that Violet often talked to.

“Not Benny!” said Violet. “I don’t talk to Benny anymore. He’s stupid! He’s at home anyway.” Violet paused. “It was Puck.”

“Puck? His name was Puck? Did he come to you last night?”

Violet nodded. “When the lights were out. He was at the window. He called me your name. He called me Norma.”

Norma dished up the eggs and buttered some toast. She helped Violet with homemade blackberry jam. While they ate, Norma’s mind worked overtime. Puck? Could it be Puck?

“Is breakfast better now, Honey?” asked Norma.

Violet nodded, a smear of jam at the corner of her mouth.

“When we’re done with breakfast, we’ll take that walk in the woods.”

Norma thought about a variety of things: of bread not rising, of pancakes not mixing, and of Puck.

As they finished the meal, she thought of something else. Something Violet could check on.

“Honey?”

“Yes.”

“If I give you the number, would you call Mr. Wilson at the market?”

Violet giggled. She remembered that her great aunt didn’t like using the telephone. Norma had one for emergencies, but she didn’t trust the workings of it.

“Yes,” Violet said.

As Norma washed the dishes, the sun rose high. That suited her fine.

The more light the better for a walk in the woods.

Violet called from the parlor, "Auntie! He says they don't carry your milk now. He wants to talk to you."

Norma put her towel down and went into the front room. Violet held the phone out to her.

"Is it Mr. Wilson? Wispy hair?"

Violet giggled again, nodding. She could picture Mr. Wilson behind his cash register. He did have a halo of wispy hair.

Norma took the phone from Violet, as though it might bite.

"Mr. Wilson?"

"Ms. MacCready."

"What's that about my milk? Violet says you're not carrying it any longer?"

"The distributor isn't bringing it. Says unpasteurized milk won't last long enough in the cooler."

"That's not right. It will last a week or more."

"He says it's spoiling right on the truck these days. The last batch curdled in our parking lot. Can't take a chance on someone getting sick. Besides, you haven't gotten unpasteurized milk in over a year, Ms. MacCready. What do you want it for?"

"That's my business," said Norma.

After a pause Mr. Wilson asked, "Is there something else you need, then?"

"No. I'll come by in a few days for shopping."

"All right, goodbye, Ms. MacCready."

Norma returned the phone to its cradle.

Another piece to the puzzle: sour milk. *Could it really be Puck?*



Norma, Violet, and Dog had been walking in the forest for fifteen minutes. Despite the sunny day, the woods were dark and only mildly warm. The air was still, stagnant, with an unmistakable smell of decay. Although the path was disused, it was easy to follow.

"Don't get so far ahead," Norma told Violet. "We need to stick together."

"You're so *slow*," said Violet, looking back.

Norma and Dog paused. It was true enough. They *were* slow. Norma did the math and discovered that Dog was even older than she was! The terrier was one-hundred-and-twelve years old! Dog wagged his tail, and the two of them, stiff-legged, started up the trail again.

Norma was lost in thought. She had been thinking of Puck since Violet mentioned his name. Here she was in the woods just like she had been so many years before. She was Violet's age when she'd first met Puck. She had been lost that day, not far from the farm. She called for her mother, but the forest seemed to suck the words right out of her mouth—as if they went nowhere in the hushed silence. Young Norma fell down and twisted her ankle. She could walk, but it hurt. She sat down on the stump of a fallen tree.

That's when she noticed a small form at the base of it.

At first she thought it was just part of the tree—two twigs and a leaf. Then the leaf moved and spoiled the illusion. What looked like twigs were brown pants worn by a tiny boy. What seemed like a leaf was a hooded cloak around his shoulders and over his head. He couldn't have been more than six inches high.

"Hallo," he said.

"Hello."

"Are you lost?"

Young Norma wasn't sure what to do. Her Welsh grandmother had told her about the Tylwyth Teg. She knew a fairy when she saw one—and the stories.

"Yes, I'm lost," she said. "I know I'm not far from home, but I don't know which way."

The fairy smiled.

"Do you know which way?" she asked.

The fairy nodded. "But do you *want* to go home?" he asked. "The woods are a grand place to play! I've lived here all my days. There are trees to climb, moonbeams to catch, mischief to make! Have you been to a circle dance? I could take you."

Although Puck seemed sincere, Norma had been warned about fairies. She remembered the rhyme her grandmother had taught her:

*"He wha tills the fairies' green
Nae luck again shall hae;
And he wha spills the fairies' ring
Betide him want and wae.
For weirdless days and weary nights
Are his till his deein' day.
But he wha gaes by the fairy ring,
Nae dule nor pine shall see,
And he wha cleans the fairy ring
An easy death shall dee."*

It was hard to imagine the boy before her causing harm, but her

grandmother's warning had been clear enough.

"I just want to go home," she said to the fairy.

"Then follow me."

At first it was hard to follow him. He seemed to flicker rather than walk. First he'd be a few feet ahead, under a log. Then, after a flicker of light, she'd see him a few steps further next to a tree. He would point the way and flicker ahead. After a few minutes, Norma was even more lost. And worried. She was almost in tears when the fairy stopped at the base of an old oak tree and said, "There. There's your farm."

And it was true. Beyond a break in the trees she saw her mother putting the wash out to dry. The new barn was visible in the distance. She was home. As she stepped out of the gloom of the forest into her yard, she heard a voice behind her. "Puck. The name's Puck."

As a young girl Norma saw Puck several more times. Once he showed her how he could ride a badger. That made Norma laugh and laugh. It was the funniest thing she had ever seen. Once Puck was sitting on her bedroom windowsill and again invited her to a circle dance. He gave her the directions and told her to meet him there at midnight. Norma stayed up that night but remembered the old stories and decided to stay home.

Once, he even showed her how to sour a neighbor's milk, freshly left by the deliveryman. That's what got Norma thinking about calling Mr. Wilson at the market. It was a trick that Puck had liked to play on the farmers.

Sour milk. *Puck.*

Norma walked on, deeper into the forest, after Violet. When they came to a fork in the path, Norma remembered the right direction—the way to the fairy ring where she was supposed to meet Puck so many years before.

After another half hour, Violet called from ahead on the path. "Auntie! Come see!"

Norma and Dog labored up the trail. Norma could see that the trees were thinning out. Light poured from above. After a turn in the path there was a gap in the trees, and beyond that, a wide clearing.

"Look," said Violet. "Mushrooms!"

It was the fairy ring. Nearly circular, the clearing in the forest was grassy in its center and bordered with a ring of toadstools. Here in the midst of the untidy forest, it looked artificial, as if gardeners had cleared the forest, maintained and edged the grass, and planted a well-maintained border of toadstools.

Gardeners, thought Norma. *Fiddlesticks!*

Violet was about to step into the circle, but Norma held her back. She explained about the fairy ring.

“We mustn’t go in unless we’re invited. It belongs to Puck and his kind. Even then it might not be safe. Some people say that if you go into a ring, you can’t come out again. You’re invisible to your friends and have to stay with the fairies.”

Violet gave Norma a solemn look. “Why would a fairy hurt us?”

“The fairies don’t always know when they’re hurting people. Things that wouldn’t hurt them can hurt us. Sometimes they do things as tricks that cause harm—not meaning to, but real harm nonetheless.”

Violet nodded, then pointed to the far side of the ring. “Someone’s been inside. See.”

It was true. There were trampled toadstools and a gouge in the smooth green grass.

“Have you been in there?” asked Violet.

“No. I was invited once when I was about your age, but I didn’t go. I didn’t think it was safe. Did Puck ask you to come to the ring?”

“Yes.”

“Did he say why? Was it to dance?”

Violet shook her head. “He said it was important. He said you wouldn’t talk to him anymore because you were too old. He wanted to show me something.”

“The ring?”

“Something else.”

Just then, Dog lifted his head to heaven and howled. It was such a surprising sound that it made Norma laugh. Dog’s small terrier voice was comical in the somber clearing. He stopped howling and put his nose to work. With a sharp intake of breath, he turned to face the fairy ring. Sniffing some more, he pointed to a spot a few yards to the left of where they were standing.

“There’s nothing there, Dog,” said Norma.

“There’s a funny bunch of leaves,” said Violet.

Norma could see the leaves, but there wasn’t anything remarkable about them.

“Uh-huh,” said Violet to the pile of leaves. “Yes. No. I don’t know. *Yes, I did, too!*”

“Are you talking to Puck?”

“Uh-huh. He’s over there.”

Norma looked again to the small pile of leaves. No matter how hard she looked, all she could see were some leaves and twigs. She really was too old.

“Yes,” said Violet. “Puck says to follow him around the circle. He says to stay on the outside and follow him.”

“You can hear him?”

“Yeah. Can’t you see him? He has a green top and brown pants.”

Norma shook her head. She couldn’t see him.

“Let’s follow him, then, Violet. You lead the way.”

With Violet in the lead, Norma and Dog made their way around the fairy ring. It was harder now that they weren’t on a trail. The ground was more uneven and tree roots were ready to trip them. Norma had to rest once on a tree stump. After a bit, the circle was well behind them. They had gone around and beyond and approached another thinning of the trees.

Violet stopped ahead of them where the forest opened up. This time it was not a fairy ring. The forest ended in a stark line of trees. Beyond was a barren clearing, a construction site, and beyond that was the outskirts of town. She would have thought her farm was farther out of Arkham.

Parked in front of them was a variety of earth-moving equipment. Idle on Sunday, they looked like slumbering beasts. The largest of them was of mythical proportions, a dragon waiting to wreak devastation.

“Can you walk over and see what the sign says?” Norma pointed to a construction sign on the far side of the site.

“I can’t read all of them, yet.”

“Please look for me. I don’t think I can walk much more today, and we still have to get back to the farm. I bet you can read that sign.”

Violet took off across the cleared ground. It gave Norma a chance to rest and look around. Was that Puck? Those two leaves at the base of a stump? Was that twig a leg or an arm?

“Puck,” she said, “is that you?”

“Norma.” She heard her name spoken softly.

After a bit, Norma felt better, more rested. She was petting Dog when Violet returned from across the construction area.

“It’s a shopping center,” Violet said. “Forest Farm Shopping Center.”

Forest Farm. Norma listened to the sound of the name in her mind. Forest Farm Shopping Center. She had heard of it, but didn’t realize it was going to be so close to her land. It couldn’t be more than a mile through the woods to her house.

“Honey, can you ask Puck something for me? There’s something I need to know.”

“Puck?”

“Yes, the fairy.” Norma pointed to the leaves by the base of the

stump.

But when she looked, they were gone.



When they got back to the farm, Norma was exhausted. She pulled herself up on the porch. There was the bowl containing her bread dough. It had risen to the top and pushed the moist towel off.

Puck!

Norma had Violet bring the bowl into the kitchen. She pounded the bread down again and put it back on the porch for a second rise. When she checked, it looked like it was rising normally.

It was midafternoon, and Norma was sitting down, resting. Dog was at her feet in a spot of sunshine from the west window. Violet was reading a book. Her mother would be by shortly to pick her up. Weekends with Violet went fast. Norma wished she got to see her grand-niece more often.

“Honey? Could you do the telephone for me again?”

“Really? It’s not hard!”

“I just don’t like the idea of the electricity running through the wires into my head.”

“What about in the walls?”

Norma didn’t like *that* idea either. Her mother had resisted putting electricity into the old farmhouse—said it interfered with the natural order of things.

“Please, Violet. I’ve got the number right here. It’s Mr. Fiske. You’ve talked to him before.”

“Mr. Fiske isn’t there on Sundays.”

“It’s OK, Honey. It’s his home number. He said we could call.”

While Violet made the phone work, Norma was lost in thought. Forest Farm Shopping Center. That name sounded so familiar. She looked to the heap of mail stacked on her desk in the corner of the front room. Was there something in the mail about Forest Farm? She hadn’t been through the mail in months. It used to get her in trouble. When they turned the power off, Violet’s mother and Mr. Fiske set up automatic bill payments. Norma felt sure Mr. Fiske would know about Forest Farm Shopping Center.

“Aunt Norma!”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“He says it’s *your* shopping center?”

“What?”

“Mr. Fiske says it’s on the land you sold. He says *you* named it Forest Farm.”

“My land?”

“He says you sold it to pay for my college. What college?”

Norma fell silent. Forest Farm. Of course. *Her farm*. That’s the name of the family farm! Norma felt like a fool for forgetting.

“Ask him if they’re done cutting down the trees. I need to know.”

“You talk to him.”

Norma thought about how big the farm used to be. It was called Forest Farm because it was so large that her family kept half of it in woods and only farmed the other half. It was their folly to have the house surrounded by the forest and only put half of their land to work. Norma remembered that her mother had insisted on it.

Violet gave the phone to Norma. She nervously picked it up. She couldn’t *feel* any electricity, but it always seemed odd having it running so close to her face.

“Mr. Fiske?”

“Ms. MacCready.”

“Are they done cutting down the trees?”

“I don’t know for certain, but I believe so. The inspector signed off on the excavation this last Tuesday. There really weren’t many trees that came down—only the ones bordering the old pasture. They’ll be in next week to start on the foundations.”

“And the forest?”

“It’s held in trust for Violet, just as you asked.” After a pause, Mr. Fiske asked, “Has something got you worried?”

“Nothing, young man! I don’t have anything to worry about! It’s my shopping center after all, isn’t it?”

“Well, you’re certainly the largest investor.”

“And it’s making the family money?”

“Yes, Ms. MacCready. Is there anything you need? Should I come by and visit you tomorrow? You know I worry about you in that old farmhouse. I wish you’d let the family set you up somewhere a little more modern. Some place with someone to look in on you.”

“Fiddlesticks!” said Norma, losing her temper. Young people always wanting to meddle in the affairs of their elders!

She handed the phone back to Violet who said goodbye to Mr. Fiske.

When Violet’s mother came to pick her up, they all went out on the porch. The bread had risen beautifully and the two loaves baked up fine. Norma fed bits of it to Dog.

“What have you two been up to?” asked Violet’s mother.

“We made bread,” said Norma. “You should take a loaf home. I can’t eat both of them.”

“And we went in the forest,” said Violet, smiling. “We walked all the way to the shopping center.”

“Did you? That’s a long way. You must be tired, Norma.”

“I am, a bit. It was a good walk though. Even Dog enjoyed it.”

Violet’s mother looked down at the bedraggled terrier, surprised that Norma or Dog could possibly walk that far. She worried about Norma, wondering how much longer it would be safe for her to live by herself. She had a slice of buttered bread and enjoyed their time together.

When it was time to go, Violet was already outside, but Norma stopped her mother at the doorway. “You know about the trust for Violet?”

“Yes. You’ve been so generous to us, Norma. I can’t begin to thank you. It’s wonderful to know that Violet can attend college without having to take out loans.”

“I mean the forest.”

“The forest?”

“That’s part of her ‘trust,’ you know.”

“Yes, you’ve said that. I know you’re leaving her the farmhouse and the land here—that includes the forest.”

“You’re not to touch it.”

“Norma! What a thing to say! It’s for Violet, and if it’s in her trust, it will be for her to decide when she’s older.”

Norma felt sheepish and ready to cry. She didn’t mean to sound so cross. She was cross with herself, not her family. She pulled a clean hanky from her sleeve and daubed her eyes.

“Do you want to come home with us, Norma? Maybe you’d rather not be alone tonight. I’m sorry if I’ve upset you. Why don’t you come with us? We can make dinner together and watch TV.”

Norma pictured Violet in her modern house with her modern mother defrosting modern food and watching TV. That dried up her tears. “Oh fiddlesticks!” she said. “I’m fine. I’m better suited to my own company, anyway. Dog and I might do some canning tonight. We could put up some jam.”

But, as Violet and her mother motored down the long driveway, Norma thought of other things that needed to be done.



Norma and Dog started out about ten o'clock. The moon was high and full and so was Norma. She had two shots of whiskey to take the edge off the pain in her hips and knees. The forest walk with Violet had been hard on her—and here she was about to do it again.

It's hard to say if Dog or Norma led the way. They both walked so slowly. Dog's nose pointed the way as Norma's flashlight helped find the trail. Somehow, they managed to retrace their steps.

Norma expected to hear the night noises she associated with the forest: the clicking of insects, the hooting of owls, and the rustling of small game. Instead the forest was dead silent, as though holding its breath.

Earlier, the forest was cool against the heat of midday. Now the forest was holding in heat against the coolness of the evening. When her sweater snagged on a tree limb, Norma took it off and left it behind.

Her progress was slower than earlier in the day. She did not have Violet in the lead, urging her on. This was a good thing. She took time to feel her footing. Neither she nor Dog had any missteps, despite the gloom. Dappled silver moonlight helped light the way.

It was midnight when they got to the fairy ring. Norma almost stumbled into it. One second she was at the edge of a clearing and the next she looked down to see a toadstool at her shoes, lit by the flashlight. She pushed Dog back, and both of them stood at the edge of the clearing. Norma found a fallen log and used it as a makeshift seat. Dog laid at her feet. To their backs was a ring of trees; in front, a circle of grass.

Norma was tired and sleepy from the walk and the whiskey. It felt good to sit, giving her knees a rest.

The old stories said that fairies danced in the moonlight and that in moonlight mortals might dance with them. It had been a night with a moon when Puck invited her to dance. She had no intention of dancing tonight. She just needed to make something clear.

The moonlight was bright in the ringed clearing. It was almost directly overhead, and it bathed everything in light. As Norma's eyes adjusted, she noticed that the pristine grass had gathered debris. An assortment of leaves, twigs, needles, and bark littered the midnight green of the circle.

Dog looked at the circle, too, then looked up to the moon like he might howl again.

"That's enough of that, Dog," she said. "I know they're here."

And they were. The leaves, the twigs, all the debris, were disguising the fairies. They were waiting for some sign that the mortal before them was approved or allowed.

“Puck,” said Norma. “Are you here?”

Dog sniffed the air and pointed to a place at Norma’s feet, just inside the fairy ring. There, leaning against a toadstool, was a leaf and two twigs. Norma smiled, and Puck moved the leaf to reveal his deception.

Norma clapped like a child. “It is you!”

Puck unwrapped the leaf showing his handsome features.

“You look exactly the same!”

Puck nodded and smiled.

“I guess that’s the way of the Tylwyth Teg.”

He nodded again.

“I’ve done something terrible, Puck. I need to tell you about it. I’m the one who sold the land and allowed the trees to come down. They won’t cut down any more—I’ve made sure—but it’s my fault. I forgot about you.” There were tears in Norma’s eyes. “I just forgot.”

Puck looked back at Norma with sadness.

“I know you saved me all those years ago. I know you could have got me in the circle. I know you wanted to and held off because you’re a gentleman. You saved me, and all these years my family has saved you—your way of life, I mean.” Norma indicated the forest and the circle with a wave of her hand. “The ring, especially. My mother did and her mother and so on. I remember now.”

As Norma talked, the other fairies revealed themselves. Flickering through the silvery shadows they approached Norma and Dog. It made Dog uneasy. Some of the fairies looked unfriendly. A few were handsome, like Puck, but most were not. Many looked like small ruffians with sharp teeth and wrinkled faces.

Dog got on his feet, backing away from the circle, getting behind Norma.

“Now someone’s broken into your ring, and it’s my fault. I should have made them put up a fence first. I should have told them not to cut down *any* of the trees. I just forgot. What you said to Violet is right: I am too old. I can barely see you, and we can’t even speak properly like we used to.”

“Norma.” She heard him speak her name, like a pleasant memory.

“They will put up a fence, of course, to keep people out. And I promise the forest is in a trust. You’re safe—well, safe as a mortal can make things. We all get old, we all forget, we die, and our promises are forgotten. It’s the way of us.”

“Norma.” His voice was comforting. Puck outstretched a hand in friendship.

“Promise me you won’t hurt the person who broke the circle. People these days don’t understand such things. You don’t need to curse him or kill him. It’s my fault.”

Dog backed up, but Norma inched forward. One foot moved toward the ring.

“Promise me you won’t hurt Violet. She’s the trustee of this place. She’ll keep it safe.” Norma paused. “I know some sacrifice needs to be made for things to be set right. The circle’s been broken. Let it be me, Puck.”

As Norma’s foot stepped into the circle, Puck reached out to her. She reached out too, and in the flickering of fairy light, they embraced.

Dog shook his head to make sure, but Norma and Puck were gone. He looked out at the fairy circle, and it was once again clear of debris. It was smooth and undisturbed.

Not understanding, Dog tilted his head up toward the moon and howled.