

A Place of Sorrow

by Keppiehed

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This was written for Brigit's Flame, week #4. The prompt is "Those Who Do Not Remember". I would like to say that this is probably the most oblique use of a prompt that I have yet attempted, but I feel that it is still there. Also, I feel I must pay tribute to my peerless beta, Literaryspell, who keeps me on my game, makes me reach inside myself and won't accept less from me than she knows I can give. I know she's beating her head against a wall because I still don't stretch far enough and I'm so lazy, but there is no pulling the wool over her eyes. Everything I am is because of you, hon. I love you! Thank so much for putting up with me.

If history repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must Man be of learning from experience-George Bernard Shaw

Momma had a new suitor. Whenever she did, she didn't want us around as much. It was always the same story, only the faces changed. This time he only took her out twice before he wanted to stay in. I don't think this one ever brought her flowers, not even on the first date.

"Go on, go play, the two of you." Momma tried shoosing us off with sweeping motions of her hands, but we remained motionless on the couch.

"Play? Momma, come *on*," I whined. "We aren't little kids anymore. Anyway, can't you get at least one more dinner out of this guy before you give it to him?"

Momma's face turned red and I knew I had gone too far. "Get out," she spat through clenched teeth. "And don't come back 'til you see that porch light on."

"Fine." I begrudgingly got to my feet and kicked at Josie's sandal-clad foot with my own sneaker. "C'mon. We aren't wanted here. Time to make ourselves scarce."

"Now, Ben, I never said you weren't..."

"You didn't have to!" I whirled on her fiercely. She stood a few inches shorter than me, and I hated that. I didn't mind my height with anyone but her. She was supposed to be the mother. It felt out of place to look down on her, both in fact and in virtue. I was still getting used to it, towering over her, and I could tell she was too, the way she looked first where she expected my eyes to be and then tilted her head up. It was disconcerting for the both of us, and we looked away uncomfortably. There hadn't been a man living in this house for far too long; it was unnerving to have the ghost of one cropping up here now.

I made a noise in my throat to convey my annoyance. "What are we supposed to do? Just wander around?"

"Oh, you can find anything to do. You children have the best imaginations. Just... go poke about someplace." I heard the pleading in her voice.

"We aren't babies anymore! You can't just expect us to be carefree and not notice what's going on here, Momma!" I felt the childish tears start, belying my words.

I grabbed Josie's hand and we made it to the screen door before we heard her voice float out after us, "It won't be too long. Just a few hours..."

I let the door slam to show my scorn, and then we were gone in the space of a heartbeat. She wanted her precious time alone; we left nothing but a shadow on her doorstep and even that was a memory as we fled from that place as fast as our feet would carry us.

I kept tight hold of Josie's hand and pulled her unresisting weight behind me, up the hill, until the house was gone from our view. We knew every blade of grass on those bluffs as if we had planted it with our own hands, and it didn't take long to lose ourselves in the wilds. We didn't have to own this country to be kings of it. No one came out here, and we were alone at last in our playground and shelter.

I could have gone any number of places; we had more hideouts, the two of us. There were treehouses galore in these old woods, not to mention the fragments of old forts and shacks that we'd spent a good part of our youth making. Josie had been uncomplaining as to which games we had played, and my imagination had run the gamut over the years from cowboys and Indians to knight in shining armor. I had had quite a long Robin Hood phase, and there was a stash of rotting longbows somewhere to prove it. All of it moldering now, the remnants of childhood slowly turning to dust. One brisk wind and all of our treasures from the past would be nothing but a memory. I could see it happening almost before my very eyes, the things we had so cherished now worthless heaps of twigs as they returned to the nature that birthed them. We had grown up out here, raised ourselves. I felt like we had one foot in the doorway, and that made me uneasy.

I slowed our flight near The Place of Sorrows. I didn't even realize I was coming here, but my feet automatically turned where they wanted to go. This was one of my favorites; it was a little clearing encircled by trees that had fallen. The roots reached their arms in the air, twisted and gnarled and standing taller than a man. It looked like some sort of council place of the great Indians of old, and as a boy I had easily imagined that we were treading on hallowed ground. At the time, it had made an illicit thrill run up my spine and the hair stand on end. We had given names to all of our playgrounds, and this one took both of our combined creative effort: *The Place of Sorrows*.

I let go of Josie's hand and stood in the circle. We had come here to play many times, but much to my disappointment I had never witnessed anything supernatural. Gradually the suspense faded and was replaced with a sense of peace whenever I came here. The wind brought calm on its warm whisper. The roots were ideal for curling up in and just thinking. It ended up not being a place of sorrows, but of boring contemplation. So much for misnomers, I thought wryly.

A humming distracted me from my thoughts of the past, and I turned my head to see Josie kick off her sandals and scramble to the top of one of the stumps. She was nimble as an acrobat as she picked her way across the withered edges of the tree. The clumps of grass and dirt that still clung tenuously didn't even stir at her intrusion. I watched her in her grace. She reminded me of a fairy, as light as the wind that barely blew. She skittered surefooted and free as if she were part of the very forest air, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

I had seen her climb many a time; indeed, it was I who had taught her what skills she now possessed. Together we had scaled the dizzying heights of the forest primeval. The trees were so high that I convinced her you could see the curve of the earth if you looked out far enough. What was certain was that the swaying of the pines in the wind took a sturdy heart to weather. How many times had we clung to the trunk, laughing and scared, enjoying the crazy tilt of the horizon? Countless games we played until we were one and the same as the saplings that sprung up fresh as the morning dew. Creatures of the wild.

I considered this as I assessed my sister. She was still so young, but there was something new about her that I couldn't help but notice as I watched her make a leap to the next tree. Her legs stretched out long and limber, the flash of white impossibly pure against the bracken. Something stirred within me as I watched the breeze flatten her thin cotton shift against her. Her body had the clean lines of a dancer, so elegant... Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to touch her, to taste her. Where did this come from, this flash of longing? Like a fire in my veins, it burst forth and I was helpless to do anything except feel the desire bloom in my heart and race through my unresistant limbs.

She stepped lightly, her laughter a cue that she was unaware of the danger of my shift in mood. A shaft of sunlight pierced the clouds and laid her figure bare to my gaze. She twirled, as open to me as if she were unclothed and beckoning. A wood sprite, here for my pleasure. I had only to reach out and take her for myself.

Anger at myself, at my mother, at *her*, for not knowing, not realizing the picture she painted for me, flared up. It was too much, sensory overload, and I wanted to scream at them both, at us all, "STOP!"

Josie froze. "Ben?" she asked innocently.

I looked at her. I didn't realize I had yelled it out loud. I hadn't meant to scare her. I couldn't get the thoughts out of my head. She was looking at me, so trusting...

"It's nothing," I assured her. "Do you want to play a game?"

She nodded. I remember her, standing above me, the wind blowing a strand of hair across her eyes before she cocked her head and it rippled out behind her like a long banner. It seems like a moment frozen in time, the last time I was good and whole and pure. And then I held out my hand to her.

"Then come here to me," I said.

And she did.