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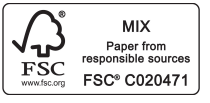
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BEFORE ...

Early on midsummer's morning, as the first blackbird sang and as the last white moth fluttered away, a baby was born in a clearing amidst the trees.

The first creature this baby saw was a hart with magnificent antlers. The baby looked at the hart and the hart looked at the baby and for a tiny moment all was still in the endless forest.

So Ma gave thanks to the hart and named her baby Hartboy, because all this happened 6,000 years ago, and it was just how things were done.

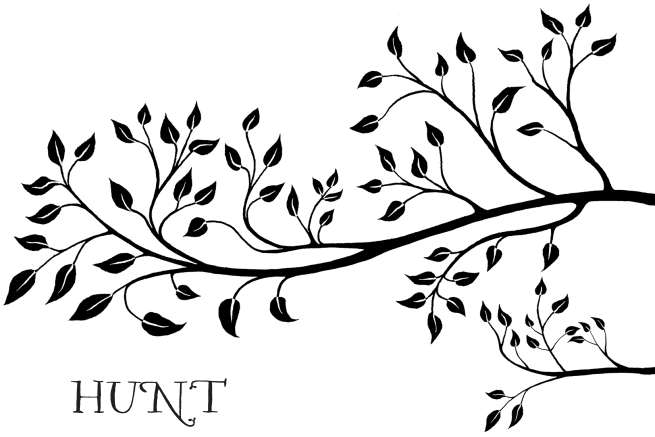
From that morning onwards, Hartboy, like all his people, wore a deertooth threaded on his necklet; the deertooth made him safe. Seasons came and went; leaves sprouted and fell; Hartboy learned and grew. With each midsummer

Ma carved a fresh line on to Hartboy's deertooth to mark the passing of his time.

Then one midsummer, when there were twelve lines in all, Hartboy's deertooth was lost …



AFTER ...



HUNT

I hide on the mossy branch of the hazel tree, my legs dangling into nothing. I wait. The wind rustles the leaves; a wood pigeon coos; the forest creaks and cracks like old bones.

A wordless shout. From the direction of Deadman's Cave. The Hunters are coming.

I squint into the hazy sunlight; I can see a ripple of trembling trees where they carve and smash through the forest. The crack-thump-rip of sticks grows louder as they tear their way closer and closer to my hiding place.

The Hunters hack through the bracken and out into the patch of sunshine, right at the foot of my tree.

It's them.

Lamont. Beaky. Nero.

I don't dare breathe.

Lamont stands, hand on hip, and peers into the forest. Beaky circles the tree, jabbing at rabbit holes, prodding the undergrowth with a long, sharp stick. Nero growls, black ears pricked, hackles raised, nose to the ground.

My heart thuds hard and loud.

Nero stops. He sniffs and lifts his nose towards me.

Then Nero turns his head sharply away. He can hear something, something else. Then I hear it too: there's rustling in the bracken.

Nero looks to Lamont. Lamont lifts a finger to his thin lips. Beaky nods.

They think the noise is me.

The thing in the undergrowth rustles again.

Lamont signals a countdown with his fingers:

Three.

Two.

One.

The Hunters charge into the bushes, yelling, their sticks raised high.

A young deer bounds out on the opposite side, tail pale amongst the tree shadows. It springs away and is gone.

Nero chases after the deer, barking.

'NERO!' yell Lamont and Beaky, waist-deep in a tangle of brambles.

I see my chance.

I touch wood, just for luck, then I scramble from my tree and I run.

Beaky shouts, 'It's Charlie!'

But I don't look back. Down the hill, through the forest, towards the river. My feet pound the ground and my fists pummel the air. I charge over the wooden bridge, and up the steep gravel path on the other side. Each breath is heavy. My chest hurts. At Druid's Well, I swerve off the path and run straight up through the bracken. I know exactly where I'm going.

I hear the thump of the Hunters running across the bridge. They're gaining on me.

I pass the rope swing and run through the patch of wild mint until I reach the edge of the clearing. Panting, I look back over my shoulder: all clear. I run out of the tree cover and up the mound, tugging on tufts of grass to heave myself right up to the top.

I reach the Spirit Stone and I lean with my forehead pressed on to the cool grey rock.

'Home!' I say, high-fiving the Spirit Stone.

Slumping down on to the grass, I close my eyes and gasp air into my aching lungs.

I won the game.

Nero reaches the Spirit Stone next. He just stands there panting. Lamont and Beaky don't bother running the last bit, not once they know I've beaten them. Lamont clambers up the mound and flops down next to me.

'Close one, Charlie,' he says. 'That deer put us off.'

'Just you blame the deer,' I say. Lamont does a little half-laugh and pokes me in the side. Nero comes over, long tail wagging, his eyes on the stick in his owner's hand.

'Go get it, Nero.' Lamont tosses the stick into the clearing. Nero charges all the way back down the hill again.

'Oi!' yells Beaky, still staggering up the mound. 'You nearly got me with that stick, Lamont!' When Beaky finally reaches the Spirit Stone she collapses beside us, breathing hard. 'Next time,' she pants, 'there's absolutely – no – way – I'm being – a Hunter – that forest is far – far –' she swallows – 'far too big – to find – anyone – in.'

'Just you blame the forest, Beaky,' I say. We all laugh, even Beaky.

We sit there, saying nothing, gazing out over our forest. I look at the gleaming river; I follow its twists and bends all the way through the forest, right out to where it widens and becomes the distant silver haze of the sea. I look at the far-off farmland cut neatly into green rectangles of fields, like slices of cake. I look at the town, how it spreads greyly up from the riverbanks, surrounding our forest, which surrounds this clearing, which surrounds this mound, which surrounds the Spirit Stone. *Home.* If I stretch my neck, I can just about see the roof of my actual home, where Dad is probably making tea for poor Mum, still stuck in bed waiting for the baby who'll be born soon.



STONES

The baby was supposed to come three days ago. 'D-Day,' Dad called it.

Mum's been counting the days off on the kitchen calendar with a big red pen; she's not been well so the doctors put her on 'bed rest' last month and it's driving her absolutely bananas. I breathe in the warm summer air, watching a flock of noisy swifts flit and swoop in the clear blue sky. I wouldn't be able to stand it either, being stuck inside in summer, not able to do anything fun at all. It'll be worth it in the end though. A little tingle creeps up my spine; soon I'll have a brother or a sister, and everything will change.

The light has that golden tinge now and the shadows are stretched. I take a smooth pebble out of my pocket.

Squinting up at the Spirit Stone, I move the pebble back and forward in the air, taking aim at the Spirit Stone's pointy peak.

Beaky sits up on her elbows to watch. I fling the pebble; it arcs up and over the Spirit Stone.

'Missed!' calls Beaky, flopping back down.

'Don't eat stones, Nero!' shouts Lamont as his dog charges off to find the pebble. Seconds later Nero's back, crunching away.

'Wow! He really listens to you, Lamont,' I say, in fake admiration.

'Shut up,' says Lamont, wheedling the pebble out from Nero's jaws. 'Do you want this back? Maybe add it to your collection?'

I laugh. 'No thanks. You can keep it, Lamont.'

'It's not just a *collection*, it's *Mandel Museum*!' says Beaky in a posh voice.

'I haven't called it that since we were in Year Two, Beaky!' I protest, laughing.

She ignores me. 'And that slobbery old stone's not quite weird enough. What's it going to look like next to the badger skull, and the arrowhead and the bird's nest, and the …' Beaky lies there and lists all the things I've collected from the forest since we were little. Her eyes

are shut and her long red hair is spread out on the grass. Lamont balances Nero's wet pebble on her forehead. Beaky shuts up, sits up and thumps him. I laugh again.

The evening sun is warm on my face. Shutting my eyes, I stroke Nero's silky soft ears. I sigh. I really ought to go home. Check on Mum. See if I've got a brother yet … or a sister.

'I'm off,' I say, standing up. 'See you tomorrow.'

'… for your birrrthdaaay!' sings Beaky. 'I can't wait! D'you think you'll finally get a phone, Charlie?'

'Maybe,' I say, crossing my fingers behind my back.

'Are we still camping out tomorrow night?' asks Lamont.

'Of course we are,' answers Beaky, before I even have a chance to think about it. Nero wags his tail like he's in agreement.

I pat Nero's black head. 'I guess it depends on the baby.' My shrug turns into a little shiver of excitement.

'Maybe baby!' grins Beaky, nudging me in the ribs.

I grin back. 'I'd better go.' I scramble to my feet. 'Bye!' I yell over my shoulder as I turn and run back down through the clearing and on to the gravel path through the forest.

Among the trees the air tastes cool and shadowy. The

branches on either side of the path lean in slightly, so it's dark like a tunnel. I can still hear the faint echo of Lamont and Beaky's laughter. A big clumsy bird flaps out of a tree, so close to my head I duck. My foot skids out in front of me and I end up sitting on the path. The bird lands on a branch, beady eyes staring at me. It's a wood pigeon with feathers the colours of early morning sky: grey and pink and silver.

I look down at the gravel I disturbed when I slipped. One small, pale stone catches my eye. I pick it up and rub it on my shorts to clean it. It's whitish, smooth, about the size and shape of an almond. I stare at the dull gleam of the stone on my muddy palm, and I realise it's not a stone at all. It's a tooth! A little shiver tingles like a breath across my shoulder blades.

A tooth, root and all! Wow! And it's not small either, must be from quite a decent-sized animal – a badger? A fox maybe? Or a deer? I don't care if Beaky and Lamont tease me about it; this tooth is definitely going in my collection. I've never found a tooth in Mandel Forest before. I get to my feet, pressing the tooth's pointy end into my fingertip; it leaves a little dimple there. I slide it into my pocket.

I feel the weight of someone watching me.

'Lamont? Beaky?' I call. It would be just like them to sneak up on me, get revenge for not winning the game.

There's no one here.

The wood pigeon in the tree ruffles his feathers noisily and I nearly jump out of my skin. 'You scared me!' I say as I gaze up at him. His feathers shimmer, swirling colours of oil on water.

The wood pigeon stares back. 'Whooo?' he says, his head cocked to one side. 'Whooooo? Whooooooooooo?'

I laugh.

'I'm Charlie Merriam,' I reply, and the wood pigeon flaps off.

Chollie. Murr. Umm, says a low voice from high in the tree behind me. A human voice. A voice I do not know.

I run. Faster than I've ever run before. Because this time it's not a game.

HOME

The forest is a blur of green and the only sound I can hear is the pounding of my heart. I reach the fork, then I sprint up the path and along past the high wooden fences, to my gate, to my garden, to home.

I burst in the back door.

'Mum!' I yell.

'What's the matter with you, Charlie?' asks Dad. He's cooking spaghetti in the kitchen.

I can't even speak I'm so out of breath.

Mum shuffles to the doorway in her dressing gown. She looks really tired even though she's been in bed for weeks.

'Are you OK, love?' she asks.

I try to work out in my head how to explain to them

what just happened. I always tell Mum and Dad everything, even the bad stuff, even the scary stuff, even the silly stuff. I open my mouth to tell them about the voice I heard in the woods. Then I realise how utterly ridiculous and stupid it sounds; they'll just say my imagination's running away again. I close my mouth, because even if they *did* believe me they'd only worry and then they'd probably cancel my birthday camping.

'Charlie?' Dad already sounds worried.

'I'm fine,' I finally answer.

'O … K … ' says Mum, drawing out each syllable and raising one eyebrow.

'I'm fine,' I say again with a pretend smile, remembering last summer when I told my mum about the leech Beaky thought she saw in the river and we all got banned from swimming right through the holidays.

'Are *you* OK?' I pant at her. 'No baby yet?'

Mum puts her hand on her utterly massive belly and rolls her eyes. 'Not quite yet,' she says. Dad laughs. Mum doesn't.

She looks me up and down, then shakes her head wearily. 'Charlie Merriam, you are absolutely filthy! What have you been doing in that forest?'

'Sorry, Mum,' I say, knowing she doesn't really want

an answer. I wash my hands and glance at the black-and-white baby scan stuck to the fridge. The baby looks like a little alien, its head almost the same size as its body, its arms and legs so small and wheedly they look more shrimp-ish than human.

'Hello, Little Big-Head!' I whisper to the picture, like I always do.

'Dinner's ready!' says Dad.

Mum lowers herself into the chair and sighs at me.

'Always late and always filthy,' she grumbles.

'That's Charlie's motto, don't you know?' says Dad chirpily as he brings the bowls of spag bol over to the table.

'Wild thing!' he chuckles, ruffling my hair.

A smile flickers across Mum's face.

'We used to call you that when you were little, Charlie.'

'I know, I remember,' I say, smiling back.

'Some things never change,' says Dad, twirling up a forkful of spaghetti. Over his shoulder I stare at the scan of the alien baby, curled up like a prawn, waiting in the dark, getting ready to be born.

I slurp up a worm of spaghetti, licking the sauce from my lips. For as long as I can remember I've wished for a brother or a sister, and now my wish is nearly really

actually about to come true. Excitement flutters in my chest and I grin so wide I can feel my ears hum.

'Maybe lateness runs in the family,' I say, nodding at Mum's belly. And even Mum laughs this time.

I kneel on my bed and look out of the window. Even though it's almost bedtime the sky is still pale blue; the moon, round as a coin, glows silver in the half-light. Downstairs I can hear the TV mumbling away and the rise and fall of Mum and Dad's voices.

Next to me on my bed is the battered black tin chest where I keep my collection. On the lid is a grubby old bit of masking tape; written on it is *Mandel Museum*, in my clumsy writing from before I could even do joined-up. I pull off the tape and squish it up into a little ball. I open the lid. It used to be Dad's fishing box and the inside is divided up into loads of different sections, and each little section contains something I've found in the forest. There's so much stuff that sometimes even *I'm* surprised at what I've got in here. I peer at the owl pellet full of tiny bones; the green glass fragment washed smooth by the river; the four-leaf clover, folded in Sellotape for protection; the sharpened flint microlith; the curled-up scrolls of papery birch bark.

I reach into my pocket and set the tooth carefully on my window sill; it gleams dully in the fading light. Then I pick up the book that's always next to my bed; it's called *The Wild* and it's my favourite book. I won it in a raffle at school, before I could even read. Back then I just liked the pictures: the amber-eyed lynx on the prowl, who looked like a bigger, more dangerous, more exciting version of our cat, Howard Carter; the dragonfly nymphs, like giant earwigs with their horrible pincers; the bats … when I was little I always used to turn the book the wrong way up when I got to the bats page so that I could look properly at the roosting pipistrelles.

Downstairs the TV audience does a big laugh and I hear Mum and Dad's laughter like icing on top of it. I flick to the index and run my finger down the columns of words, pausing at any possibles, hoping I'll find the once-upon-a-time owner of that tooth.

Badger …

Bear …

Bison …

Deer … I read and I flick through to page 245. And there's the photo of the fisherman who's gripping the antlers of a massive ancient deer skull that he's just pulled out of a lake. I pick up the real-life tooth and hold it close

to the picture, trying to compare it. A breeze drifts in through the open window, ruffling the pages. 'Deer tooth?' I whisper, pressing down on the tooth's tip.

Then, from somewhere else, somewhere outside, I hear that low gravelly voice again. Cholliemurrum, almost like it's saying my name.

I freeze, staring out of the window into the stillness of the garden and the dim of Mandel Forest beyond.

'Who's there?' I squeak.

But nobody answers.

Of course not.

I *am* just imagining stuff.

The summer breeze swishes the leaves. It's only the wind. Only the wind.

'Charlieeee!'

My heart lurches but it's just Dad calling up the stairs. I laugh at myself then.

'Charlie Merriam! Stop reading and turn that light out – it's late and you've got a big day tomorrow!'

'OK, Dad!' I slip the deertooth back into my shorts pocket, pack my collection away and start to get ready for bed. Tomorrow will be here soon, and tomorrow's my twelfth birthday!



BIRTHDAYS

'Charlie,' whispers Dad, 'Charlie, wake up.'

I roll over and open my eyes. It's still dark. Dad's crouched down by my bed; his face looks pale in the moonlight. My clock says 03.03. Not even morning! I close my eyes again.

'Charlie!' This time I hear the urgency in his voice. 'Charlie Merriam!'

Something's wrong. I sit straight up.

'Is Mum OK? Is the baby coming?'

'The baby's here, Charlie! We had to dash off to hospital in the night; we didn't want to wake you up so Margot from next door came over.' Dad grins the biggest, cheesiest grin. 'Charlie, you've got a little brother!'

I smile back. A baby! A baby brother!

Then I stop smiling and go all cold inside.

'Mum?'

'Don't worry, love, Mum's fine. Women have been having babies since the beginning of time. She's just very tired and a bit … surprised – the baby came much faster than you did when you were born.' Dad reaches out and strokes my hair.

I smile again and at the same time my eyes fill up with tears.

'Why're you crying, you big banana?' Dad cuddles me. His chin is prickly and his breath smells of coffee, but I cuddle him back.

'I'm not crying.' I sniff.

Dad kisses the top of my head.

'Hang on a minute.' He gets up and darts out of my room. I hear him galloping down the stairs.

I can't believe the baby's been born.

Today.

I kneel on my bed and look through the open window at the full moon; it's all blurry because of the tears. I rub my eyes and take a deep breath of cool night air.

Today is *my* birthday.

Just thinking it makes my eyes well up again. Why am I even crying? It's my birthday! And I've got … a

brother … the one thing I've always wished for. That's way more important than having a birthday all to yourself.

'You're a nutball, Charlie Merriam,' I say to myself through my stupid tears.

Outside a blackbird starts to sing. Another bird joins in and another and another until the whole dark garden and the whole dark forest beyond are alive with birdsong. I try to stop myself from crying by thinking about birds, not babies.

Birds don't have birthdays. They only live for a few years and then they die.

Then I'm thinking about dead birds, and that doesn't exactly cheer me up.

The photo in the silver frame by my bed catches my eye. It's the one of Mum and Dad and me from when *I* was just born. Twelve years ago today. I lift the photo into the moonlight so that I can see us properly. Mum and Dad look kind of the same, just a bit less old and a bit less chubby. But it's hard to believe that I was that baby; that baby is actually me.

But now there's another baby. A new one. The hot tears rise again.

I hear Dad galumphing back upstairs.

'Happy birthday to you.' He comes round my door, singing, his face lit up with candlelight. 'Happy birthday to you.'

In one hand Dad is holding one of Mum's scented candles from the mantelpiece so the air smells of waxy jasmine blossom; on his other hand he's balancing a Mr Kipling French Fancy. He's kind of got it all wrong and kind of got it all right at the same time. I giggle and wipe my eyes on the corner of my covers.

'Happy birthday, dear Charlieeeeeee.' He smiles so wide when he sings the end of my name. 'Happy birthday to yooooooooo!' he hoots.

My lips make the blowing shape and I shut my eyes to make the same secret wish I've always wished. But then I have to open them again because I can't wish my old wish any more. For as long as I can remember, I've wished that I could stop being an only child. And now …

I grin at Dad. 'A brother!' I say. 'My brother!' The words feel all new and strange in my mouth.

'Yep.' Dad grins back. He looks all dazed, like he doesn't quite believe it either.

So I close my eyes and blow out my candle.

Dad bows grandly and presents me with the yellow French Fancy.

'Thanks.' I take it and bite off the creamy top bit. 'The lemon ones are my favourites.'

'I know. Mine too.' Dad produces another, slightly dented, French Fancy from his jacket pocket. 'Cheers!' We clink our French Fancies together and Dad sits down on my bed.

We munch and listen to the skyful of birdsong. It's just starting to get light.

'Your brother wasn't born today, you know,' says Dad, staring out of the window. 'Eleven thirty-two last night in fact.' Dad puts his arm around me. 'So you can have your birthday back.'

'Thanks.' I look up at him and he gives my shoulder a squeeze; Dad looks tired and happy and crumby. The little balloon of happiness in my chest starts to puff back up again. 'What's the baby called?'

'Dara.'

'Dara.' My new brother's name sounds soft and wispy when I say it; I try it again, this time in a strong voice. 'Dara!' Now he sounds like a warrior. 'Dara. OK.'

I lean into Dad's hug even though I'm twelve now and probably getting too old for so much soppy cuddling. Then Dad starts to hum quietly; I recognise the tune right away and I sigh: it's the first song I ever knew – the

silly song Dad always used to sing to me at bedtime when I was little. I know what's coming, but for some reason I don't tell Dad to be quiet. Sure enough, Dad starts to sway gently, then soft-as-soft he sings:

'Row, row, row your boat

Off into the night

And if you meet a tiger

Don't give him a fright …

… Raaaaaaaaa!' Dad growls in my ear, trying to make me jump.

I just giggle. I remember how he always used to change the animal every bedtime so I never quite knew which one we'd *meet*. I shake my head at him, still laughing. 'You're such a nutball, Dad!'

Dad pretends to be offended. 'Don't know what you think is so funny, Charlie Merriam. It's a very serious life lesson; ah well, you'll thank me one day … should you ever find yourself in tiger country, that is …'

'Oh, Dad!' I say, and I snuggle in. Just for a moment I let myself feel little again, little and loved and safe.

We sit together and listen to the singing of the birds in the wide-awake forest. Dad yawns a big long yawn. I gaze out of my window; in the last of the bluey dark a tiny moth flutters up, up and is gone. She's heading for the moon.