The Tickling Tale of Smoo



Louiza Kallona

©2022 by Louiza Kallona

ISBN: 9798370066535

Imprint: Independently published

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

The author can be contacted at: louizakallona@gmail.com

Cover Art and design by Nicholas Child
www.thechildrensillustrator.com

Proofreading by James Anders Banks

Layout/interior design by Michael Vito Tosto

For Marina and Clio

THANK YOUS:

Oodles of thanks to the talented children's book illustrator Nicholas Child for the beautiful book cover, James Anders Banks for his insights and proofreading, and to Michael Vito Tosto for the interior design of The Tickling Tale of Smoo.

Extra oodly thanks to all the amazing friends who encouraged me along the way.

And, for everyone we lost, oodles of love and appreciation.

Time spent laughing is time spent with the Gods.

— Japanese proverb

Time spent not laughing is time spent in the waiting room.

— Uncle Patrick

CHAPTER 1

McClafferty Middletoun Melancholy



It was a crunchy cold afternoon somewhere up a sheep-lined, tractor-chugging, coal-tit-twittering track in Fiddle Wood, in the Scottish Borders. The McClaffertys were huddled around a crackling fire in Middletoun Farmhouse's kitchen when something hairy howled outside...

'Aaawooooooo!'

...something as hairy and clammy as a half-eaten, hair-covered pork pie.

Uncle Patrick jumped, Lucy shuddered and baby Rowan wailed, matching the howls.

'Aaawooooooo!'

Usually, Lucy and Ben spent many hours a day sitting high up in two of the old chestnut trees, Groan and Creek, looking out for grey squirrels, spies and other dangerous people. But not this holiday—the last three weeks an unre-

lenting sleet had grown fangs, biting into their soft, freckled skin.

'Bored! Bored! Bored!' sulked Ben, scuffing his shoes along the wall.

'Aaarrgh!' groaned Mum, throwing a pan of burnt sausages onto the fire.

'I've had it!' Lucy growled, doodling unhappy badgers all over her fuschia TOP SECRET UNDERCOVER diary, which Ben liked to tell her didn't have a very undercover colour at all.

Lucy always doodled badgers when she was in a bad mood but this was the first time in her twelve years on the planet that her mood had lasted so long. Her diary was covered top to bottom in growling badgers.

Lucy was in a terrible mood for two reasons. One reason was the vicious weather, which left her feeling as flat and salty as Salar de Uyuni, a salt flat in Bolivia known to be the flattest place on Earth. The other was that Lucy hadn't heard Grandma laughing for months. Grandma had an incredible hooting laugh which made everyone else laugh too. Lucy loved her, as she always said what she really thought, not just what other people wanted to hear, unlike most adults. She spoke eight languages and told Lucy and Ben stories from all around the world. Of course some people who looked at Grandma saw a batty old woman and talked to her like she was a baby. Grandma would go along

with it and gurgle back at them. Then, when they were gone, she would slap her ample thighs and roar with laughter at their silliness. But that was then.

Nobody had laughed, or even giggled, for months. Nobody had chortled, sniggered, guffawed, hooted or even smiled. Baby Rowan was crying more than usual and the milk was turning sour. Even the house martins nesting under the eaves of the roof were squabbling and the twittering coal tits had stopped twittering.

Lucy felt a strange emptiness inside, like a cold wind whistling through an abandoned school playground. It wasn't just Middletoun Farmhouse that had stopped laughing. All up and down Scotland, and in fact all up and down and round the world, no one was laughing anymore, except maybe among some uncontacted Peruvian tribes deep in the Amazon jungle, but that we'll never know.

An announcement bleated on the radio.

'The happiest man in the world, Bhuti Phuntsok from Tibet, hasn't smiled for months. Grenville Swan is investigating.'

The usually cheery radio host of Radio Borders, Kenny McGroin, sounded unusually sad—his voice as lifeless as lukewarm, lumpy custard. There was an uncomfortably long pause as he fumbled for the next record. His changeovers were usually exceptionally smooth. More than a few eyebrows raised in the Borders and many more crinkled

when the saddest violin music in the world started playing. Lucy's eyes and nostrils welled up at the sound and Byron began to yowl.

The front door banged. It was Mr McClafferty coming in from work.

CHAPTER 2

Angus Quany Sorley Britches and Grandma's Secret



Mr McClafferty stamped his boots and shook the snow off his coat. Then he took off his large woollen hat that came down over his ears, making Mr McClafferty look like a cross between a Basset Hound and an Irish Setter.

'It's blowing a hooley out there!' he said, and it was true—the snow had been blowing sideways into his teeth.

He came into the kitchen to warm his hands and feet by the fire and hung his hat up to dry. It dripped in long melancholy splooshes that puddled on the floor.

Mrs McClafferty felt his nose.

'Rael, you're absolutely freezing!' she said.

'You've got to ask that horrible Mr Britches to put on the heating. You'll freeze to death in there!'

Karma McClafferty always tried to find the good in people, but it was almost impossible in the case of Angus Quany Sorley Britches. Angus Quany Sorley Britches was

Mr McClafferty's employer, and you couldn't find another man in seventeen counties who acted quite so much like he didn't care about anyone or anything, except making oodles and oodles of money.

Only once had Mr McClafferty seen Mr Britches looking tender. It was the time his boss was leant over one of the trays of baby button mushrooms he grew in a large tent, his shiny bald head glistening like a mushroom cap. Mr Britches was whispering encouraging words and very gently stroking their soft skin. When he saw Mr McClafferty looking at him, he scowled, jumped up and zipped shut the dark green flap of the tent.

Angus Quany Sorley Britches sold handkerchiefs out of an old warehouse in the tiny village of Stow. Even on the coldest winter nights when icicles hung from Mr McClafferty's nose, he refused to turn on the heating and Mr McClafferty would go home shivering like a wobbly three storey lemon jelly.

Today was one of those days. Mr McClafferty took off his wet socks and wiggled his toes in front of the fire. Then he eased back into his armchair and sighed.

'AAAWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!'

The hairy thing howled outside the kitchen window again.

This time everyone jumped and baby Rowan wailed once more.

‘AAAWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!’

‘It’s the fairies!’ yelped Uncle Patrick through the cloud of burnt sausage smoke.

‘Nonsense!’ snapped Mr McClafferty, ‘it’s just a bad wind blowing from the North Pole.’

‘Shushhh,’ hushed Mrs McClafferty. ‘You’ll wake the baby.’

Baby Rowan had only just fallen asleep and Mrs McClafferty was more frazzled than the pan of burnt sausages.

‘It’s the Old Man of Smoo!’ Grandma hooted.

Mr McClafferty dropped his cup. Mrs McClafferty whelped. Everyone stared at Grandma. Grandma rarely spoke these days and when she did it was usually in a whisper.

‘Something’s up with the Old Man of Smoo!’ Grandma shrilled.

Lucy almost let out a giggle, but it vanished as soon as it left her mouth.

‘You see! Lucy, you’re trying to laugh, but you can’t!’ Grandma croaked,

‘None of us can. Think back. When’s the last time anyone laughed?’

Grandma was shaking.

Everyone was shocked. Ben wondered if Grandma had finally gone mad.

‘No one’s laughed for months!’ Grandma continued.

Lucy stopped to think about it, and realised Grandma was right. No one had laughed since the summer. In a house which was usually full of giggling and chortling, something creepy was going on. A shiver ran down Lucy’s spine.

‘Something has happened to the old man of Smoo,’ Grandma insisted.

‘That’s why the hounds are howling too.’

‘Who’s the old man of Smoo?’ asked Ben, who relished awkward conversations as much as he delighted in peeling plastic off new devices.

‘Ukk! Ukk! Ukk!’ Mrs McClafferty coughed and started dusting under everyone’s feet.

‘It’s just an old wives’ tale,’ muttered Mr McClafferty.

Grandma humphed.

‘I’m just an old wife, am I? Listen… I’ll tell you all about him.’

She leant forward, creaking slightly, letting off wafts of Dunsyre cheese.

Ben and Lucy leant forward to hear her. Byron the cat leant so far forward she fell right off her chair. Ben suspected Byron’s falling was the effect of the Dunsyre cheese.

They were about to laugh… nothing… no sound. The room was as silent as a bowl of Aunt Agatha’s cabbage soup.

Things were serious—far too serious.

Everyone turned to look at Grandma. She looked bigger than usual and her eyes were glowing.

Grandma lowered her voice to a storyteller's whisper.

'His secret name is Gabel Lylhu.'

The electric hum of suspense in the room squealed to a halt.

'Gabel Lylhu?!' exclaimed Ben. 'What kind of name is that?'

'It's an anagram,' Grandma replied.

'What's an a-na-gram?' asked Ben, rolling the word around his mouth as if it was a marble.

'An anagram is when you jumble up the letters of a word and it makes another one. Gabel Lylhu jumbled up spells Belly Laugh,' Grandma paused, before delivering the punchline. 'Belly Laugh is the name of one of the ticklers of the world!'

Brains boggled. Mugs of tea spluttered. Somewhere on the horizon, chaos did a Highland fling.

Ben and Lucy had never heard of tickling the world. Mrs McClafferty began talking about the weather to try and change the subject. Uncle Patrick leapt up to say something, knocked his head off the mantelpiece and sat back down again.

'What do you mean, one of the ticklers of the world?' said Lucy, who always wanted to know how things worked.

‘How can you tickle the world?’

‘Why not?’ said Grandma.

‘The world is a living thing. It breathes, it sings, it sighs. If you tickle it, it laughs, just like you or me.’

‘But how can you tickle it?’ asked Lucy again.

‘Ah, that’s the secret,’ said Grandma, with a gleam in her eye.

As if on cue, the cuckoo shot out of the cuckoo clock and honked ten times, a sad, low honk.

‘Ten o’clock. Time for bed,’ said Mrs McClafferty.

‘But…’ Lucy began to protest.

‘Butts in bed!’ barked Mrs McClafferty, and she herded Lucy and Ben upstairs towards their bedroom.

Lucy and Ben flopped onto their beds and wriggled into their pyjamas.

‘There’s no way I’m sleeping,’ whispered Lucy, ‘Not until we find out more about the old man of Smoo, but we’ll have to wait until Mum and Dad go to bed.’

Lucy and Ben lay in the dark, their soft ears keen to every creak and drip and their velvety green eyes stretched wide open. The chestnut trees were groaning in the wind, and a deep har settled over the farmhouse, hiding the stars from view.