Madison's Peculiar Adventure

Written by

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Madison's Peculiar Adventure
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To M,
From your aunt, Bilguun



1

Madam Eve

"The van will be here any minute!" The sharpness of Mrs Walter's voice cut through the air as she shouted from the kitchen on the first floor. Madison let out a sigh, her shoulders slumping in defeat. Mrs Walter was her grandpa's bosom friend, whom he had known ever since they were not much older than she was now.

When her grandpa took sick a week before Christmas Eve, it was Mrs Walter who called for an ambulance and stayed with her. Madison spent the first of several Christmas Eves with the old woman, who was a widow and had no children.

She waited until the first day of Christmas to ask Mrs Walter about her husband, and the weight of the question lingered in the air. The question had been nagging at her ever since she read about a lonely widow in one of her favourite fables. Mrs Walter's voice was strained as she told her it was a long story and that she was too young to hear it.

Madison shook off the rather bleak thoughts that had been lingering in her mind and focused on cramming everything on the bed into her backpack. She bid farewell to her bedroom slowly, taking one last deep breath of the familiar scent.

Mrs Walter was going to put the dilapidated house on sale and deposit the proceeds into her account so that she would never be short of cash when she became an adult.

With her backpack zipped up, she scanned the room one last time before bolting out of the grating door and rushing to catch the taxi.

The sweeping staircase loomed ahead of her as a metallic clatter in the direction of her grandpa's chilly bedroom cut her short. The key to his bedroom had dropped out of the rusty keyhole and hit the floorboards.

Upon returning to the draughty hallway, she scowled. Mrs Walter had looked for the key since yesterday, but she

never found it. It wasn't inside the box where her grandpa usually kept the keys. How did it end up here?

The door flung open with the force of a bolt of lightning just as she picked up the key. Mrs Walter had missed closing the window, she belatedly noted. But that wasn't what arrested her. She frowned.

Something was under the four-poster bed.

Madison got down on her spindly legs and drew the item towards her. It was a cobalt blue biscuit tin she had never seen before. She twisted and turned the tin in her delicate hands, then shook it on purpose to get an idea of what was inside of it. She glanced at the doorway for a second to make sure Mrs Walter was not on her way up the stairs.

There was a neatly folded note inside, which smelled worse than it looked. The pungent stink made her grimace, but she was too curious for her own good, so she unfolded one-third of the note when someone ascended the stairs at full tilt.

Madison slid the tin under her grandpa's bed and tucked the note into her pocket just as Mrs Walter showed up at the doorframe.

"What's taking so long, poppet?"

"I think I'll miss my room, that's all."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Come here…"

The elderly lady embraced her as if she would never let go. It hurt at some point. She smells of cinnamon and apples, Madison thought as she wriggled like a worm to break free.

The sweet scent took her by surprise. Whenever she hugged her late grandpa, she would breathe in the nutty odour of buckwheat pancakes. He always had a bag of buckwheat flour in his pantry.

She scampered downstairs as soon as Mrs Walter let her go and got in the taxi, which was waiting at the side of the single-lane road. It was still too early in the morning so no one roamed about in the streets, save for a few cars which were in a hurry to get somewhere.

A half-hearted smile crept across her face as Mrs Walter waved goodbye beyond the car window. She chewed on her lower lip, and for the briefest of moments, she wished Mrs Walter would stop the vehicle from driving off. But the elderly lady was too old to bring up a child.

o o o

Having grown up in the country, the blinding lights at every turn gave her the impression that she was in a gripping circus within a magical realm where witchcraft was real – as were monsters. Well, that was how it felt, at the very least. It sure is spectacular, she thought to herself and drew a deep breath, if only Grandpa was here too.

The vehicle came to a stop as the sun was barely visible through the overcast sky. She gaped at the tattered steel gate with finials, which led to a towering mansion as black as a skillet.

A peculiar woman, whom she reasoned was the directress of the orphanage, waited for her to disembark in front of the steel gate. Madison couldn't help but notice that the miss was dressed as if she were from another century. She seemed away with the fairies and as pretty as a picture, like someone who didn't belong in this earthly world.

She mustered up the courage to get out of the taxi and gave the directress a sheepish smile.

Madison studied the walled garden as the strange miss asked the chauffeur how much they owed. The massive walls cast a menacing shade over the vicinity. It looks like a prison, she thought to herself, a prison for kids without parents.

An uncanny feeling washed over her as her glassy eyes landed on the Victorian mansion through the steel gate. It made her blood run cold. The arched lattice windows looked like a thousand prying eyes, the wooden double doors looked like a gaping mouth and the conical roof made the entire building look like something out of a Gothic novel.

Madison gulped and shifted her attention back to the directress, who unlocked the gate and ushered her in through the massive garden.

"What's your name, then?" the directress asked as they followed the path leading to the pillared porch.

"It's Madison, miss."

"That's what your grandfather used to call you?"

"No, he… he used to call me Maddy, miss. He enjoyed calling me that for some reason."

The directress stared at her out of the corner of her eye.

"But why do you keep calling me that?"

"What exactly, miss—"

"See, you just said it again."

Madison blinked.

The directress came to a standstill halfway through the massive garden and turned around. Madison was caught off guard and almost stumbled into her.

"That miss," she responded. "I don't like being called that. It's Madam Eve."

"Madam Eve…?"

"Everyone calls me that here, so you should, too."

"That's… I don't think I've ever heard such a name before," Madison confessed.

The directress eyed her up and down. It looked like she was debating something in her head, something that had to do with the carpets of brilliantly coloured flowers on either side of the narrow path.

"Say, are you fond of flowers?"

"Flowers—?" Madison followed the odd directress' gaze and studied the colourful flowers on her right. But before she could grasp what was going on, Madam Eve turned her back to her and advanced to the porch.

She dashed to catch up with the young woman, but she was as fast as greased lightning. She gasped for air by the time she closed in on the directress, who was waiting for her in front of the main entrance.

"Want to hear a secret?"

Madison gulped. "What kind of secret, miss—I mean, Madam Eve?"

"You've never been let in on a secret, have you?"

"I…" She knew not where to begin. It felt like Madam Eve knew all about her. "My grandpa homeschooled me, so I never had the opportunity."

"But can you keep a secret? That's the question."

"I- I think I can, I hope I can!"

Madam Eve broke into a peal of laughter. But it didn't last too long. Her hearty smile faded away as soon as it appeared.

Madison's heart raced as their eyes met, and she quickly glanced away. But instead of revealing what went through her mind, Madam Eve cracked a telling smile and changed the subject.

"Well then, let's go, shall we?"

The peculiar woman unlocked the double doors and let her into the lovely mansion, which looked nothing like its exterior.

There was a massive, twisting staircase in the centre of the narrow hallway, and it led to several glazed doors on either side. The flock wallpaper was peeling in places and looked as old as the hills. But the colour and pattern were agreeable and well-tended.

Madam Eve toured her through the entire first floor in no time and they were ascending the staircase when the directress suddenly turned around.

"Oh dear me, I forgot all about the misfits!"

Madison stuck to the directress as she went down the twisting stairs to the dim-lit basement. Her eyes became wide open as the directress unlocked a secured trapdoor to the left of the stairs.

Three heads poked out, and Madam Eve gestured for her to help pull the children out of the yawning hole.

The children looked as if they hadn't eaten in days, their ribs visible through their shirts.

Madison, unwittingly, bore her eyes into the directress, who noticed her stare and beamed uncannily. This was the first time she had seen someone smile yet see nothing but a wicked grin instead.