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The Map of Marvels

By

David Calcutt

One: The Map

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Connor was trying to draw a map.

On the dining table in front of him lay a large sheet of white paper. Next to the paper a pencil, freshly sharpened. A neat pile of curled shavings close by. Above the paper, a row of coloured pencils. He was all set and ready to go.

He stared at the paper. The paper stared back at him.

He was finding it difficult to get started.

“Come on,” he said. And then louder, again. “Come on.”

Without taking his eyes from the paper, he picked up the pencil with his left hand and held it gripped between his thumb and forefinger. Then he lowered the pencil until its point was just above the clean, smooth, white surface of the paper.

“Right,” he said. “Here goes.”

But the pencil stayed there just above the paper. His hand and didn't move it any closer. He couldn't. He couldn't even make a single mark. He lifted the pencil away and stared again at the paper, and the paper again stared back at him. Blank and empty. Just like his mind. Blank and empty. He let out a sigh of frustration and let the pencil fall onto the table and looked up and stared out of the window.

It was raining. It had been raining when he'd got up that morning. His mom had told him it would be raining all day. A steady, heavy, slanting rain that rattled against the glass of the window and spattered on the path and drummed and sploshed on the lawn on either side of the path. Just the day for getting on with jobs, his mom had said. So she was upstairs now gutting his room, and his dad was off at the tip because he was gutting the garage, and even his sister Alice was gutting her playbox, taking out all her toys and books one by one laying them around her on the rug in the middle of the room. But Connor didn't have anything to clear out, or tidy up, or empty. He had this map to draw.

"You'll have all day to think of ideas," his mother had said, before she'd gone upstairs.

But so far he hadn't had any ideas at all. His brain felt as wet and soggy and waterlogged as the garden outside. As grey and dark and heavy as the clouds from which all this rain was falling.

Perhaps the problem was that drawing the map wasn't his idea. He had to do it for a project at school. His English group were studying stories of travel and adventure, and for homework they'd been set the task of creating an imaginary world. The idea was that they would draw a map of this world and then use it to write a story. Connor wasn't too keen on the writing part. He didn't really enjoy writing stories, nor reading them. Just a few minutes of writing or reading and his eyes watered and began to sting. But it wasn't like that with drawing. Drawing came easily to him. As soon as he put pencil to paper, it was as if someone

flicked a switch inside his brain, and his imagination began to work. Like some highly-charged power flowing from some secret source down his arm and through his fingers and the pencil they held and out onto the paper. Sometimes he could almost feel his fingertips crackling with energy. Drawing made him feel alive.

But today, as soon as he'd laid the paper on the table, that power source had been switched off. Or maybe it was switched on, but there was some kind of blockage not letting it through. That's what it felt like. A blockage. And the more he tried to unblock it, the more blocked it felt. It was a horrible feeling. All that energy humming away inside him, and unable to get out. It was making him irritable.

And the weather outside was growing worse. The rain falling harder now, bouncing off the path, the morning darker, a wind springing up, flinging the rain against window, tearing twigs and leaves off the large sycamore tree in next door's garden and hurling them onto the lawn. It looked like there was thunderstorm coming. Felt like it too. Connor's skin was starting to tingle, and there was a tightness winding itself round and round in the pit of his stomach.

He looked back at the paper. Still blank. Still no ideas. He picked up his pencil, held it lengthways between his fingers, then dropped it onto the table. It rattled. He picked it up and dropped it again. It rattled again. It was a good sound. He liked it. He did it again. And then again. Then he pushed the pencil so that it rolled across the table a little way then stopped.

"Connor."

It was Alice. He spoke to her without turning round, dropping and rolling the pencil again.

"What?"

"You're making a noise."

"I know. So what?"

"I don't like it."

"Tough."

"You're getting in the way. Stop it."

"Getting in the way of what?"

He picked up the pencil, dropped it.

"My story."

He picked up the pencil.

"What story?"

And dropped it again and turned round. Alice was sitting on the rug with her toys and books all around her in a heap of confusion. She'd made a small pile of some of them, toys and books together, and she was holding the pile steady with one hand while she placed another toy on top.

"I'm making a story," she said.

Connor watched her. Alice was always making stories, telling them to herself, and to anyone else she could get to listen to her. Sometime if Connor was in a good mood, he'd listen while she told one, but he could never keep it up for long. Her stories were long, rambling, strange affairs, with no real beginning or end, and most times not making any sense. Characters and events just seemed to jump in from nowhere, and then jump out again, making way for other characters and events which had no connection to those that had gone

before. Listening to one of Alice's crazy stories, you had the feeling that it had started long before you'd begun to listen, and would go on long after you'd got fed up and gone away. All her stories were like one single, continuous story, that just went on and on and on, like some kind of long, meandering river, and you didn't know where it had come from, nor where it was going. Once, Connor had asked why her stories didn't make any sense.

"They do," she'd said. "They make lots of sense to themselves."

Which in itself didn't make much sense.

Now he just said to her,

"Your stories are stupid."

She glared at him.

"No, they're not!" she said.

"Yes, they are. Stupid. Like you."

He was being mean and he knew it. He felt mean. Stretched and tight and twisted inside. It was that map and not being able to draw it. It made him want to be mean, and the only person in the room to be mean to was Alice. So he was.

"I'm not stupid!" said Alice. "And my stories aren't stupid!"

Her face was flushed and her eyes were bright with anger. She was easy to wind up. He carried on doing it.

"Yes they are," he said. "They don't make any sense. And you don't make any sense. You're both a waste of space."

Alice's eyes grew even brighter and wider. She wanted to say something horrible back to Connor but couldn't think of anything, so she squeezed her mouth tight shut and made a kind of grunting sound, and thumped the floor hard with her fists. The pile of toys and books she'd been building fell over. Connor laughed.

Then he stopped laughing.

A book fell out of the bookcase.

He didn't see it fall but he heard the thud as it hit the floor and looked up. Alice turned to look as well.

Light flashed in the room, and thunder boomed outside, and the wind flung the rain hard against the window-glass.

The bookcase stood against the wall opposite the window. His dad had bought it as a flatpack from a superstore and had spent a whole afternoon putting it together. There were six shelves and it reached almost to the ceiling and all the shelves were filled with books, hardbacks, paperbacks, old books, new books, all of different heights and sizes and thicknesses. His dad was always buying books, mostly from second-hand shops, and there were so many of them now that they were packed and pressed tightly against each other on the shelves.

But now one of those closely packed books had fallen onto the floor. Connor could see the space on the top shelf where it had stood. And there was the book itself, a big, old book, lying a foot or so away from the bottom of the bookcase. As if it had not just fallen but had been pushed out with some force.

How had that happened? It was impossible. Connor looked at the book. Then he looked at his sister.

"Did you do that?"

"Me?"

"When you thumped the floor."

Alice shook her head.

"I didn't hit it that hard."

Lightning flashed again, followed by another thunderclap. Connor jumped.

"It's only thunder," said Alice. "There's no need to be scared."

"I'm not scared," said Connor.

"You jumped," she said. Then, before Connor could say anything back to her, "Perhaps it was the thunder that made the book fall off."

"That's silly," said Connor. "Thunder couldn't do that."

"Neither could me hitting the floor."

Connor looked at the book again then stood and went across to where it lay and bent down and picked it up. As he did, he saw that one of the pages seemed to have come loose and was sticking out from the others. He opened the book to replace it and a piece of folded paper dropped out and fell onto the floor.

"What's that?" Alice was watching him.

"I don't know."

He put the book down again and picked up the piece of paper. It was yellowed with age and had a dry, faintly sour smell, and it crackled softly beneath his fingertips as he ran

them over its surface. His hands were trembling as he unfolded the paper to see what was on the inside.

It was some kind of drawing. Or a number of drawings. The lines faint and smudged in places and the paper itself creased and cracked and wrinkled, so that it was hard to tell what was a crease or wrinkle in the paper and what was a drawn line. Once, he'd looked at the palm of his father's hand and traced out the criss-cross patterns in the skin. What he was looking at now was a bit like that. Just a confused pattern of random shapes that seemed to be scattered anyhow across the paper. He turned the paper round, this way and that, trying to find some shape that he could recognise and make sense of.

"Connor."

It was Alice. He ignored her.

"This book's interesting."

He glanced down. She'd taken the book that had fallen from the shelf and was sitting with it on the rug, turning over its pages.

"It's got stories in it. I think. And pictures."

Connor didn't speak to her. If he did he'd just tell her to shut up. He didn't care about the book or any stories and pictures it might have in it. He wanted to work out what these faded drawings were. It was important. He looked at the paper again, and turned the paper one way and his head another. He squinted and drew the paper close to his face, then held it out at arm's length and opened his eyes wide and stared at it hard. He stared until his eyes hurt.

No good.

Too many creases and wrinkles. The lines too faint and faded. He began to get that twisted up feeling inside again, that tangled knot of tightness somewhere in the pit of his stomach. Just the same as when he'd been trying to start his own drawing of a map. He made ready to screw the paper up and fling it in a temper across the room.

And then it came to him. Suddenly he saw it. He knew what those smudged and faded shapes were. He knew what it was that was drawn on this wrinkled, yellowed piece of paper. And now that he knew it, he felt that he'd really known it all along, right from the moment he'd first seen it.

He laughed, and spoke aloud.

"It's a map."