

It's True in the Story

by Francesca Ryan

The word 'however' is like an imp coiled beneath your chair. It induces ink to form words you have not yet seen, and lines to march across the page and overshoot the margin. There are no endings. If you think so you are deceived as to their nature.

They are all beginnings. Here is one.

It was Gordon who bestowed the title on Mary; "Mistress of The Hypothetical." He coined it an exasperated moment. She had an ability to make plans, then change them. And change them again later, according to the need of the moment. This bewildered Gordon. He needed certainty. The plan. Gordon and Mary were holed up in a large holiday house on the isle of Skye. They were among a group of friends who met up each May for a walking holiday. This tale is about what was supposed to happen that week, the plan. And then, about what really happened. This is a beginning to a story, certainly. Some of it would be true, most of it embellished. Most of it. Nearly all of it invented by the end.

However. We're leaving Gordon and Mary there, just for the time being. Because what's the use of stories that aren't even true?

We could disappear down a rabbit hole chasing an answer to that. You might choose not to follow me down there; too dry. It's an important question though, especially to a child. I used to read aloud to my niece, from the Green Fairy Book. She would ask, "Did it really happen, about the fairies? Is it true?"

"It's true in the story" was the answer I came up with. "It really happened, in the story. Did you like it? What if it happened to you?"

And that's another kind of rabbit hole, which she would navigate with the elastic imagination of four-year-old.

My niece Josie is a real person. I would like to tell you about a thing that really did happen. Nothing dramatic, if you were watching. What would you be watching? A summer afternoon in a garden, various family members eating plates of birthday cake; some sat in outdoor chairs, some standing to watch the birthday boy do a trick with his new magic set. My sister and I are by the patio doors that go into the house. Josie comes up to ask about the rabbit she's been promised for her fourth birthday. She must wait another six weeks from now. It's hard to wait for the celebratory limelight; tough to watch your brother enjoying his. We give her our attention.

“When the men came it was sad” she said, looking off into the distance.

“What men darling?”

The men with red coats on. Lots of men. It was so sad. The house burnt down. The men made the house burn down. We had a fire in the house already, but the men burnt it down. It was only a little, little house.

Her eyes are far away, watching something. Her face is very still. My sister and I are alert now. She’s folded into herself, in a way that neither of us have ever seen before.

“All the children. It was so sad.”

My sister prompts her very gently to tell us a bit more about the children. But she is looking into another place, and we can’t follow her there. She surfaces, and the moment closes over. She’s haring off now to claim another piece of cake, one with a few more smarties on it.

This story is going to jump from that summer’s day, leave that family birthday, and go back many generations. It will continue on the Isle of Raasay. If you’re going to come, wrap up. It’s a very beautiful place. But the Hebrides are cold.

And there will be a splinter of ice in the very heart of the story.