

No In-Between

By Maddy Kleinman

I'd been going to my aunt and uncle's farmhouse every summer since I could remember. Both my parents worked for the same company, and every summer there was a week of training, or a company retreat. And if there wasn't, I still went to the farmhouse while they went on vacation.

My aunt and uncle lived in the middle of Nowhere, Missouri on forty acres. There were a few oaks that guarded the entrance to the long drive that rambled up to the whitewashed house. It wasn't old and broken down, like someone might expect from a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere - just well used and lived in.

When I was ten, my Uncle Rick introduced me to photography.

I spent the week traversing the property, going as far as my legs would carry me - which wasn't that far. I carried an old digital camera that Uncle Rick had handed me, capturing and focusing on moments that would have otherwise passed me by.

Granted, none of the pictures I took were any good, and the majority of them had a tanned blur in the corner where my finger had snuck in. My aunt would smile and nod, telling me that I had done a great job, and should continue to photograph my surroundings.

There was a spot about a sixth of a mile from the farmhouse where a group of trees grew. It was one of my favorite places to take pictures. Something about it seemed like hallowed ground, where the rays of sun and the shadows danced among the leaves. Had I believed in fairies, I might have thought they lived there. I never felt alone in this miniature forest.

The summer when I was eleven, nothing much happened. I took about a thousand pictures and consequently, almost ran out of space on my SD card, but it was nothing compared to the next summer, when I was twelve.

A nice Nikon had replaced the old digital camera, and it was my pride and joy. It was my second to last day there, and I'd brought a sandwich in a plastic bag so I could sit and eat lunch in what had become my afternoon hangout. The Nikon hung by my side as I ducked through the thick

tangle of vines, passing into my shaded escape from the afternoon heat. I laid on my stomach, fiddling with the ISO and the zoom, trying to capture the grace of the blades of grass that were rooted in front of me.

Different angles, a different lens.

Eventually I sat up and ate my sandwich, taking bites of it while looking up through the twisted branches above, imagining how it would look through the viewfinder.

A light breeze rustled past me, murmuring a polite ‘excuse me, sir’ as it brushed past my bare arms. My eyes left the treetops and found the intricate interweavings of bark that the pine across from me wore, like muddy overalls. My hands wrapped around the familiar grips of the camera, and I brought it up to my eye, scarcely breathing.

And then it happened.

It seemed like the shadows from all around me left their places, denying all laws of nature. And there they hovered in front of me, consolidating into a form.

It was a young girl, maybe about my age. Her skin looked like charred logs, ashy and burnt. Her hair fell past her waist, inky black. She wore the lightest gray, like a shadow on bright white paper. The camera slipped from my fingers, tugging at the strap around my neck as it banged against my breathless chest.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Ciara."

Ciara.

It was said with a lilt that belonged to a language that was long gone. A name that told of deep secrets that would be buried with their keeper. A name that had a haunting beauty around it, like an abandoned house on a cool spring night. It was a name that spoke of darkness, yet there was still light.

“Aren’t you afraid?” she questioned.

Afraid? Was that how I was supposed to feel in this moment?

I mutely shook my head.

A smile danced across her lips, but something... something broken-hearted passed over the golden irises. "Do you know who I am?"

Again, I shook my head, but then paused. "Ciara," I whispered.

"You are a brave boy."

And then she was gone, just as quickly as she had come, disappearing in a whirlwind of blackened mist and dust.

I went back the next day, anticipation and hope rolling around in me, with an excited and nervous buzz racing up and down my spine. But Ciara did not reveal herself to me, even after whispered pleadings. Still, I couldn't help see the shadows around me in a different way, and unfortunately, this newfound awareness of the dark and the light would fade.

Until the next year, when my parents dropped me off at the old farmhouse, and it all came back to me in a rush. As soon as I'd greeted my aunt and my uncle, thrown my duffle bag into the guest room, and stuck a fresh battery in my Nikon, I practically ran down the worn path. Virginia creepers were still wrapped around the trunks of trees that were older than I was. It was still a mysterious place on earth, a small paradise that was all mine.

It took only moments for Ciara to appear, smiling her small smile, a look of delight in her gold eyes.

I froze. I hadn't expected her to show up so quickly.

"Hi... Ciara," I said nervously.

She was real. Or... I hoped she was. Last time she'd shown up... it had all been a blur.

"You are still unafraid?" Curiosity mingled with the accent, light and airy.

I nodded, hesitantly.

"What is your name, Artist?"

"Peter."

There it was again, a faint smile. "Peter. A dreamer with your feet planted on the ground, yes?"

Another nod. "Artist?"

“Artist,” she affirmed. “A capturer of light and dark. A photographer.”

“How-?”

“Your camera.”

My hand went to the camera that hung at my hip. Right. A way to show the world what I saw, the way I saw it. I was rarely seen without it.

“Can I-?” my hand gripped the camera.

Her eyes flashed with uncertainty, and for a moment she went translucent, like she was about to disappear again.

“Why?” she asked.

It was a simple question.

Everything about her seemed of a different place, and I wanted to prove to myself that this was real. And the way the sun filtered through the branches overhead, dappling the ground around her and making her hair shine...

“Go ahead.”

I hadn't even answered, and didn't know why she'd changed her mind in the half-second that I'd been thinking. But the opportunity was there. And so I took it.

In half the photos she was transparent. Some there was just a puff of smoke, or a half-formed figure with a heavenly light shining through. And when I had my fill, she walked over, leaning over my shoulder and examining the images with a critical eye.

“Peter the Photographer,” she said. And then she was gone.

Disappointment crashed over me. Gone. Again.

But I learned that this was her way. Over the next week, she would show up, sometimes speaking in her quiet voice, sometimes traversing alongside me as I combed through the fields and not saying anything. I didn't know where she came from, or how she was able to do the things she did, but I was content to let her do as she liked.

And soon the week was over. My parents were going to arrive within the hour. Ciara materialized behind me while I was packing my duffle bag, and the only reason I knew she had was because of a soft wind that tickled the back of my neck.

“Ciara?” I asked. “How’d you get in here?”

“I can go wherever the darkness touches, and wherever there is light, there are shadows. You know this.”

I nodded.

“You’re leaving?”

A note of sadness was in her tone, and with a start, I realized that I would miss this. Not that I hadn’t missed coming to my aunt and uncle’s before, but I would miss the quiet friendship that Ciara and I shared.

I nodded. “I’ll be back next summer.”

“Peter...” she said slowly. “Thank you.”

“For what?” I asked, pausing as I put the Nikon in its special case.

“People like me...”

A soft knock sounded, and my Aunt came in to announce that my parents had come. Ciara was gone in the blink of an eye, before my aunt even had time to process that a shadowy girl had been standing next to me. I shouldered the duffle bag and the camera case.

Next summer.

I enjoyed the next summer and the summer after that, when I was fourteen and fifteen years old. My photography had greatly improved from those first pictures that I’d taken at ten with the old digital camera, and I’d taken classes and learned so much more. And when I made the ten hour trip to the farmhouse in Missouri at sixteen, I couldn’t wait to see Ciara again.

I still didn’t know if my aunt and uncle knew that she existed, or that she frequently haunted the shadows of their property. But considering she disappeared whenever they came around... it was likely that they’d never seen her. And that she didn’t want to be seen.

Which begged the question, why had she shown herself to me nearly six years ago?

I made my way out to the grove after unpacking. This year I was going to ask.

But Ciara did not appear at all that day, and it was only when - after a long day of tramping through pastures - I was about to fall asleep that I saw her. A barely audible knock sounded on the other side of the wooden door.

“Huh?” I asked.

It creaked open, and there she stood, barely visible in the darkness. She flipped on the light switch, and my eyes shut tight at the sudden flash. When I opened them again, she was still standing near the doorway.

“Peter, get up,” she begged. “Please I need your help.”

“What?” I mumbled, but I was already halfway out of bed. Bare feet hit wood floors, and I shivered. I rubbed my eyes, “What’s happening?”

“In the barn. Come with me.”

I followed her. She didn’t make a sound, darkness swirling around her ankles. We made our way down the creaky steps and out the screened back door. Bullfrogs sent up a deafening chorus from the nearby pond, and it seemed like there were more stars than sky. The moon was half-full, sending silver beams of light dancing across the backyard. A worn path led directly to a small dutch door, the top flung wide open and a warm light spilling through it.

Someone was in there.

Ciara went into the barn, her form disappearing almost completely as the soft, golden light hit it. I was right on her heels, but froze when I passed over the threshold.

There were more of them.

There were two girls, one with a hungry glint in her eye and short silver hair. She was small. The other girl had a light blue hue to her skin, and I could feel a biting chill rush towards me when she stepped towards me. Another boy stood with them, the tops of midnight blue feathered wings rising above his head, brown hair almost falling over his eyes.

And in the middle of the half-circle, was the source of light. A bird, smaller than a peacock, but larger than a raven laid in the middle. Flames danced over warm iridescent feathers that sometimes turned black. It's scaly toes were curled, legs extended away from its body.

It looked dead.

The winged boy spoke. "Ciara," he said harshly. His voice had the same lilt as her's, but it sounded more like rushing wind, like when the windows were open and you were driving down a dirt road.

Ciara reformed outside of the circle of light. An impassive glance was sent in his direction.

"You brought an Unremarkable," he told Ciara stonily.

The icy girl flinched. "Aither," she admonished quietly.

"That's what he is," Aither, the winged boy, said.

"He's the only one, outside of our group," Ciara interrupted quietly, like a whisper of a friend in the night. "That I trust."

Aither shook his head, hair shining in the dying flames of the bird on the ground. "You'd think that after what you've been through, Daughter of Darkness--"

Ciara visibly flinched.

"Enough, Aither," the girl, who reminded me of autumn frosts and cool spring nights, snapped. "We came here for Egan."

"Exactly," the other girl agreed. She had a wild grace about her, large bronze eyes that could hypnotize, a sharp contrast to her silvery hair.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked, aware of how delicate this situation was. Like a thin layer of ice over a rushing water.

"We need to keep him alive till sunrise, then he'll be okay." Ciara said grimly. "And you need to keep your aunt and uncle out of the barn."

I nodded, I could do that. Sunrise was in about six hours.

"What... happened?" I asked tentatively.

Aither turned on me suddenly, wings stretching outwards. “One of you *stupid* Unremarkables shot at him.”

“Go jump in a lake, Aither,” the silver-haired girl said. Aither huffed and left, but I could hear him pacing just outside the door. She turned towards me. “I’m Adolpha.”

“Nice to meet you.”

She tilted her head at me. “You’re not scared?”

I smiled slightly. “No.” Resolution ran through my veins. I was not afraid.

She grinned back at me, and I could see sharpened canines among the other pearly teeth. “That’s Olwen,” Adolpha pointed at the frosty girl.

I smiled gently at her.

Olwen knelt next to Egan, and from her fingertips came an icy frost, which she laid like a blanket over the bird.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Normally, he’s a small boy,” Ciara replied. “Right now, he’s a phoenix.”

Amazement touched my heart. These truly were a remarkable group of people. Which reminded me...

“Unremarkable?”

Adolpha shook her head. “People like us... are either seen as one or two things... subhuman or superhuman. Seen as angels and demons, worshipped like the gods of old or hated like the monsters of the abyss. And there is no in-between.”

I couldn’t think of a response.

“Thank you,” Ciara said, meeting my eyes. “For helping us.”

“Yes,” Olwen agreed. “You are the most remarkable Unremarkable I’ve met.”

The night passed slowly, or maybe it was quickly. Few words were spoken, and the three girls tended carefully to the young phoenix boy. Aither would enter to check on Egan, glare at me, and then leave again. Each time his gaze passed over the prone figure, a tender look passed over his face, and I realized that he was just trying to care for those who were in his charge.

Rumors of the oncoming sunrise were murmured through the cracks of the barn, and I could see that exhaustion was taking its toll on the three who'd sat by their younger brother through the night.

As the rays touched the phoenix, he lifted his head and let out a raspy whistle. A giant whoosh of flames shot up, and when the bright light faded, a young boy stood there. Adolpha rushed to his side as his knees gave out. She held him close, brushing light brown hair out of his eyes and whispering to him. He was tiny, maybe eight or nine.

Olwen and Ciara seemed to sag with relief.

Aither burst into the barn. When his eyes fell on the small boy and his sharp features softened. Then panic set in. "We have to go. The Hunters are coming."

Ciara's head flew up. "Is it safe to move him yet?"

Aither shook his head. "It's not going to be safe anywhere near here in about ten minutes."

Adolpha gently scooped up the boy, motioning for Olwen to follow her out. Aither took up the rear.

Ciara paused for a moment.

"You're leaving?" I asked.

She bit her lip, then nodded. A moment of indecision swept over her as she turned to leave. Then she rushed over to me and I found myself in her embrace. "I've wanted to tell you this for years. Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for showing me that there might be an in-between."

And then she disappeared in the way she always did, faster than the blink of an eye, leaving the faint smell of smoke around me. She was gone.

I hoped I would see her next summer.

The world is full of both the Remarkable and Unremarkable. Full of the light and the dark, the mysterious and known. Most Unremarkables live in ignorance of the wonder and terror that surround them at every waking moment. But every once in a while... There is one that is out of the ordinary, one that is unafraid in the face of the inexplicable and the supernatural. For the Remarkable are more than

the things of fairy tales. They are the daughters and sons of Darkness and Despair, the descendants of angels and the fae folk - yet they are still human, flawed in their otherworldliness.

The End