

[...]

## **DEPARTURE**

The station clock was old.

It had probably been hanging up there for centuries its hands relentlessly turning, second after second, minute after minute, hour after hour.

It would not have bothered Monty and Nell if the hands had stopped and time had just stood still. Then the train would never have arrived in the station and the siblings would never have to get on the train and travel to the seaside.

Not that they wouldn't have liked to go to the seaside.

In the summer holidays last year they had travelled to Italy, where everything had been wonderful. But where they were going this time there was no beach or pizza and probably no sunshine either. Because their train was taking them to Land's End, and there was nothing but empty fields and high cliffs. As the name suggested, it was where land ended...

"Montgomery Jones!" Monty heard his mother say. It was never a good sign when she called him by his full name.

She had probably called him several times before and he hadn't responded. That happened sometimes when he was deep in thought.

"Erm, yeah?" He smiled at his mum as they stood together on the platform. She looked a bit down. But she and dad just hadn't got any holiday this year. And so that at least the children could enjoy a holiday, she had reached for the phone without hesitation...

"Do we really have to go, Mum?" Nell asked. Monty's twin sister may have entered the world two minutes before him, which is why she sometimes wanted to be in charge – but he was half a head taller! They both had freckles and fiery red hair unlike anybody else in the family. Monty's hair was tousled and messy, Nell's was adorned with a hair band she had sewn herself.

"Oh, please don't make it so difficult for me", their mum urged them. She was wearing her light rain mac and had her nice perfume on. She had tied her hair in a bun because she was on her way into the office. "You'll see, it'll be fun at Aunt Alysandra's!"

Monty rolled his eyes. Aunt Alysandra! Even the name was a bit much. Who, for goodness sake, had a name like that? Apart from that the last time they had seen her was when they were two years old, and neither of them could remember it anymore. They didn't really know her at all, apart from the presents she sent them for birthdays and Christmas. Last year Monty got binoculars and Nell, who liked animals, a ferret – a little rodent with light brown fur, a bushy tail and little white ears. She had named him Puck and he went everywhere with her – right now he was perching on her shoulder nibbling a chunk of cucumber.

"Does it have to be for three weeks?" Nell moaned. "That's a really long time!"

“But Aunt Alysandra is so looking forward to seeing you both”, Mum argued. “Couldn’t you at least act like you were a little bit excited? After all, you’re going to a real farm!”

“Where there aren’t any animals!” Nell argued – Aunt Alysandra was an artist, and she only lived in the countryside because she liked the peace and quiet.

“But there’s fresh air”, mum argued. “And nature.”

“No wonder”, Monty grumbled. “It’s the ar...I mean, at the end of the earth”, he quickly corrected himself.

“Just because it’s called Land’s End, it doesn’t mean it’s at the end of the earth”, mum set him right. “And it can be really fun there, you’ll see. Alysandra said that she wants do something exciting with you every day.”

“I can hardly wait”, Nell said, although she meant the exact opposite. She was really called Petronella – her parents had a thing for weird old names.

“Please take care on platform 13”, blared a voice out of a loudspeaker.

“Arriving at platform 13: The 13 13 from London to Land’s End, stopping at...”

Monty and Nell weren’t listening anymore. Their hearts were pounding and the blood was rushing in their ears.

There was no going back now.

Hissing, train 13 13 clattered loudly under the station’s vaulted glass roof. It was an old engine. It wheezed and chugged and white steam poured out of the chimney. It was painted a grass-green colour and looked as if it had rolled straight out of a museum.

“That’s just great”, grumbled Monty. “That thing’s not just going nowhere, it’s going back in time too!”

“So, my darlings”, said mum ignoring the objection. “There are juice cartons and sandwiches in your rucksacks and cucumber chunks for Puck. As well as a box of chocolates for Aunt Alysandra, not for you. Is that clear, Monty?”

“Alright.” Monty nodded reluctantly.

“There’s clothes for all weathers in your suitcases. As well as fresh underwear for every day. Please don’t forget to regularly ch...”

“Mum!” hissed Nell and looked around furtively, to check whether anyone on the platform had perhaps heard. “People can hear, you know?”

“Of course.” Their mum smiled and looked from one to the other. “I sometimes forget how big you are. So then, what are we waiting for?” They went to a carriage door and got on. Just like the engine, the carriages were quite old-fashioned too. Monty and Nell found an empty compartment and sat down on the seats that were covered in stripy material, while their mum stowed the suitcases away.

“And don’t forget: don’t get off until the final stop”, she reminded them.

“Don’t worry”, Nell reassured her, “I’ll take care of it. I’m the oldest, after all.”

“And I’m the tallest”, Monty argued.

Their mother hugged them and kissed them so hard that they both smelt of perfume afterwards. “Take care, you two – and have a nice holiday”, she said and got off the train just as a loud whistle sounded on the platform.

The doors creaked shut and with a hoarse hiss, the engine started up. It let out so much steam from its chimney that it looked like mum was standing in fog out on the platform. Nell and Monty waved goodbye.

At first the engine chugged really slowly, then it gathered speed. The platform scurried past and mum disappeared from view. Houses flew past the window, really big ones to start with, then they got smaller and fewer; and finally only green hills, fields and trees were to be seen.

“Booring”, whined Monty. “And it’s all your fault!”

“My fault?” Nell looked wide-eyed. “How do you figure that?”

“If you hadn’t moaned about having to stay at home for the holidays, mum wouldn’t have called Aunt Alysandra.”

“You weren’t exactly thrilled about staying at home either”, Nell countered.

“But I didn’t moan”, Monty sulked.

“No, you just didn’t leave your room for two days.”

“I had stuff to do. And, anyway, I came out to eat.”

“Great.”

Both of them had folded their arms across their chests and were glaring at each other from opposite ends of the compartment. But actually something completely different was bothering them.

“I don’t want to go”, grumbled Monty.

“You think I do?” Nell shook her head.

“What were mum and dad even thinking?”

“It’s going to be awful”, Monty was convinced.

“Dad said that Aunt Alysandra’s a bit weird”, said Nell. She got a chunk of cucumber out of her rucksack and fed Puck, who nibbled it eagerly.

“I can imagine. I’m sure she’s got eyes like this and always makes a face like this.” He pulled a truly terrifying face. But Nell had to laugh.

“Definitely”, she agreed. “And she probably chain smokes. Her whole house will stink of it, yuck!” She pinched her nose.

“And she really likes children – especially for breakfast”, Monty added.

They both laughed, but they weren’t really in the mood for it. The train clattered unstopably towards the coast.

To Land’s End.

[...]

## **PANCAKES**

Despite the unfamiliar surroundings they slept deeply and soundly. Even though Monty had been adamant that he wouldn't sleep a wink in this old ruin.

When he woke up, an immediately recognisable sweet smell hit his nostrils. Pancakes! Had he dreamt it all after all? Was he really at home and his dad was cooking his famous pancakes? Monty opened his eyes. No... He was still in the attic. It was already light, and dappled light fell through the window.

And a strange creature was sitting on one of the posts at the foot of his bed.

It was only about half a metre tall, had big eyes and green skin with a wide mouth. It kind of reminded Monty of a frog, only it was wearing a suit jacket and a bowtie.

His mouth dropped open in astonishment. Was he still dreaming after all?

Just then the creature turned its head and looked straight at him. "Hello", it said.

Monty let out a loud scream.

The creature screamed too.

Nell woke up with a start, as did Puck, who had been curled up at the foot of the bed.

"For heaven's sake!" cried Nell. "What's the matter?"

"There-there", stuttered Monty and pointed to the bed post.

"What's there?" Nell asked, a bit annoyed.

Monty had woken her from a wonderful dream: about clouds made of candy floss and a sea of chocolate with marshmallow gulls circling over it.

"There-there", Monty stammered again – and hesitated.

The creature wasn't there anymore! "There-it can't be! It was there, I swear!"

"What was there?"

"A thing!"

"A thing", Nell repeated and looked at him sceptically.

"It looked like a big frog, but it had a suit on. With a bow-tie! And it looked at me like this." Monty widened his eyes and tried to imitate the creature's facial expression. It obviously didn't work, because Nell laughed out loud. Even Puck let out a cackle.

"You weirdo, you just dreamt it!" said Nell.

"Definitely not", insisted Monty. "It was there!"

"Just like the figure that chased you on the train?" Nell threw back the covers and stood up. "You could think up something original. I'm not falling for your old tales anymore."

"They're not tales! I saw..." Monty went quiet. It seemed strange to him now too. Had he perhaps been half asleep after all?

He leapt out of bed too and went over to Nell, who was looking out of the window.

Now that it was light they could see the grey sea reaching to the horizon, the green hills and the steep cliffs. And there was even a beach!

"We could go down there later", Nell suggested.

“Fine by me”, said Monty.

They washed their faces, brushed their teeth and got dressed. Then they went downstairs. The smell of pancakes got sweeter and more appetising with every step. Monty was quite hungry and would have preferred to head straight for the kitchen. But Nell was looking in awe at the paintings hanging on the wall.

You could still see all kinds of landscapes on them. But now all sorts of strange creatures were running around in them! Nell recognised some, but not others. There was a phoenix with a long fiery tail and flying horses. A giant snail and a seahorse big enough to ride. A snake with multiple heads, a sphinx and a unicorn. As well as an ambush of sabre-toothed tigers and a mammoth. And a big green dragon with its wings out-stretched fighting a knight in gleaming armour.

“You know”, said Nell deep in thought, “I could have sworn that none of these animals were here yesterday.”

“Apart from the unicorn”, Monty responded. But he couldn’t explain where the other animals had been the night before either.

“Who knows?” Nell shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe it was too dark yesterday to see them.”

“Could be”, Monty agreed. “Maybe it’s just a stupid trick. There are those pictures that change when the light hits them. Or when the temperature changes.”

“I’ll just ask Aunt Ally”, said Nell.

Monty was curious to know what was going on with the pictures too. If it really was a trick, it was very well done. But he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of asking about them. He didn’t need her making a fool of him. They got to the foot of the stairs and followed the sweet aroma into the kitchen, where there really was a stack of huge pancakes on a heavy wooden table. And Aunt Ally was making even more pancakes in a big cast-iron pan at an old-fashioned range.

She had tied up her dread locks, and instead of her dress she was wearing green overalls. They had dozens of pockets and had been patched and mended countless times.

“Good morning, you two!” she greeted her guests. “Did you sleep well?”

“Very well, thank you”, Nell replied politely.

Monty just yawned.

“Do you want some pancakes?” asked Aunt Ally. “Your mum told me that they’re your favourite for breakfast.”

“That’s true.” Nell smiled.

“Then help yourselves”, their aunt told them as she lifted the plan with a jolt as if she were a tennis player. The pancake made a perfect somersault and landed perfectly back in the pan.

“Bravo”, said Nell.

## Dragon Farm / Burnt to a Cinder!

by Michael Peinkofer

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“Thanks very much! Just don’t ask how many attempts it took me to learn how to do it!” She pointed to the ceiling and there were bits of pancake that had accidentally got stuck to it.

Nell had to giggle. For Monty, it was more proof that their aunt wasn’t just a little bit weird like their dad had said, but quite a lot weird.

But she did know how to make pancakes. As well as being absolutely enormous and fluffy, they tasted wonderfully sweet. At least they wouldn’t starve.

“So, Aunt Ally”, Nell started.

“We’re probably mistaken, but when we arrived yesterday, the pictures in the entrance hall looked different somehow...”

“No”, Aunt Ally said simply.

“No what?”

“You aren’t mistaken”, she reassured them as she launched another pancake into the air.

Nell and Monty exchanged looks. “So you really couldn’t see any of the animals yesterday?” Nell probed.

“Of course not, they were asleep”, their aunt explained as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And apart from that – would you want to stand around for no reason in the pitch black when nobody was looking at the pictures?”

“Errr...no”, Nell had to admit.

How her aunt explained it, it seemed completely logical – but wasn’t it totally crazy? Nell looked at Monty and it was obvious what he thought: their lovely aunt had a screw loose. She really did!

“*Allez hopp!*” said Aunt Ally then – flipping a pancake in the air again. But instead of landing back in the pan, it went off-course and landed on Aunt Ally’s head.

Her red dreadlocks, as well as her face disappeared completely under the pancake.

“Oops!” she said. “Who turned the lights off?”

Nell burst out laughing.

Monty rolled his eyes.

This was going to be fun.