

she saw a tiny owl**an original yarn fiction by anj medhurst**(inspired by *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson)

Sophia peered through the ferns at the creature sitting on the fallen branch. The bough was from one of the sea-smoothed, sun-bleached pines that the family had dragged from the beach to its current resting place in the forest some summers ago and it gave off a pale, slightly eery glow in the shade of the trees that towered above it. The creature had skin the same colour as the warm honey Sophia had poured onto her porridge that morning and eyes like mossy pebbles. It was turning a small piece of carved wood over and over in its hands – but were they hands, or were they paws? Sophia just managed to stop herself wondering out loud.

She shifted slightly on her haunches. She'd been crouching as quietly as she could for a while now and she could feel her feet starting to tingle. She wished she had a cushion to kneel on and she badly wanted to rub her eyes, not just to make sure she wasn't imagining the sprite out of the dust motes that that danced in front of her in the rays of late afternoon sun. Grandmother did say she had a very vivid imagination, after all.

She'd left Grandmother asleep on the porch and father inside working and she'd wandered down to the beach to collect pine cones, feathers, and dried seaweed with the idea that she might make a collage on the deck to show Grandmother when she woke up. After all, Grandmother often presented her with an interesting selection of leaves, or a piece of carved wood when she arrived at the breakfast table. She'd be careful not to be too long, so as not to worry Grandmother when she woke up and disturb Father while he

worked inside. There was no need for clocks and watches on the island and Sophia had become very good at noticing the lengthening shadows and how they moved around a tree stump as she sat drawing a flower, or talking to Grandmother about the fishing boats that passed through the channel in front of the house.

She'd found a beautiful gull feather, tiny pearly mussel shells, and red seaweed that looked like lichen (Grandmother would know exactly what its proper plant name was) and her arms had become so full of treasure and her head so hot under the afternoon sun (she'd forgotten her hat, of course) that she'd placed her hoard carefully in a hollow at the back of the beach and crawled into the ferns to find shade, and maybe take a little nap.

That was when she'd heard the snuffling noises. Carefully parting the ferns she'd peered into the trees and there it was. A strange little creature, sitting on a branch passing a small carving from paw to paw – or was it from claw to claw? As her eyes became accustomed to the gloom she could see a circle of wooden shapes nestled into the mossy forest floor in front of the creature. She couldn't be sure but they looked like the little animals that her Grandmother had whittled from pieces of driftwood over the years, while the rest of the family had dragged all manner of dead tree trunks up from the beach. Coming across them as she walked through the forest with Grandmother was one of her favourite things but they were hard to spot and some of the older ones had become soft and worn from the spring rain and winter cold and just looked like funny shaped sticks now.

If she could just wriggle a little closer she'd be able to get better idea of what exactly the little furry (or was it feathery?) creature might be and she was going to have to move soon anyway because her ankles were stiff and her feet were really quite numb now! Sophia shuffled forward as quietly as she could trying to ignore the fierce pins and needles that were working their way from her toes up through her poor stiff ankles as she moved.

She was too little to remember when Grandmother had started carving the little animals but she'd heard that some of them were almost as old as Father and it was true that she rarely saw Grandmother without her little whittling knife close to hand; it was so useful for clearing a path through the pesky brambles, slicing up a ripe pear as they walked, or prising limpets from the rocks at the far end of the island. Its handle was worn smooth from years of being held in Grandmother's (really quite rough) hands and the blade was worn thin but Grandmother could still get a nice sharp edge in seconds with a whetstone.

As the pins and needles eased, Sophia moved slowly forward through the ferns until she was crouched right at the edge of the clearing. Contemplating the scene in front of her and wondering what to do next, she turned her head very slightly and as she did, the very end of a fern frond tickled the very end of her nose. Instinctively, Sophia brushed it aside but as she did she felt a familiar twitch and before she could do anything to stop it, she sneezed!

The soft "choo" (Grandmother said Sophia sneezed just like a cat) echoed through the clearing and as Sophia opened her eyes (because of course it is impossible to sneeze without closing one's eyes) and her fuzzy vision cleared and the shadows settled in front of her, she caught just the barest glimpse of the creature in the shimmering light, as it lowered its head, spread open soft, tawny, feathered limbs and gracefully set sail from the branch, circling the fallen branch and disappearing into the forest.

Sophia sat still for a few seconds more as her slightly discombobulated brain ran through the sequence of events, and then she carefully stood up (her feet were still a little numb and her legs felt awfully wobbly) and parting the ferns around her, stepped into the clearing. Arranged next to the branch, like the numbers around a clock face, were a dozen of her grandmother's little carved animals. Sophia was astounded. In all the times she'd

walked through this part of the forest with Grandmother they'd found just a handful of the carvings that had been hidden around the dead trees and in the mossy hollows over the years, and now here were twelve of them, all together. As Sophia picked them up one by one and felt the smooth wood under her fingers, tracing the grooves and ridges that her Grandmother's little knife had created, she realised that the clock face was missing a figure, and turning towards the fallen tree she spotted a tiny owl nestled into a groove in the sea-smoothed, sun-bleached old trunk. Sophia cradled the tiny owl carefully as she crawled back through the ferns and out onto the beach. Her feathers and shells, and seaweed treasures were just where she'd left them and she scooped them up and skipped back along the beach to the house, where she could see Grandmother sitting on the step and Father leaning on the door frame lighting his pipe. Sophia waved the tiny carved owl above her head and before she was even back in earshot, she was telling them all about the strange forest creature with wings – no not wings, sails – and paws, or was it claws?

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