



Lions and Tigers and Bears

(a fairy tale for my children: Jason, April and Brandy)

by Larry Edwards

It was night time. Even though the moon was full, heavy clouds blocked the dim light. A slight breeze whispered through the leaves sounding as if elves were laughing.

A lone path cut through the forest, winding its way through the dense brush between the giant trees. On the path, holding hands and peering into the darkness, were two little girls. The oldest, her blonde hair now visible in the impish moonlight, stifled a cry and squeezed her sister's hand a little tighter.

Her sister returned the pressure, then asked, "Are we close now, April?"

April nodded her head but didn't answer. There was something about the forest this night which stilled her. There was something . . . she didn't know what. She shivered.

"How much farther, April?"

April looked at the path, then around her. She didn't know. She didn't want to admit it, but she was lost. How could she tell her sister that they weren't on the right path, that they had somehow taken a wrong turn somewhere?

Instead of answering her sister's question, she said, "We'll rest here for a few minutes. Then we'll go on. Eat your sandwich."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't have it anymore."

April peered at her in the darkness, trying to see her face, but all she could see was a dim outline. "Why don't you have your sandwich?"

Her sister shuffled her feet, then answered, "Because I tore it into little pieces and dropped it along the way."

"Why?"

"Because I was scared."

"Why?"

"I was afraid we'd get lost."

"Lost?"

April shivered again, then asked her sister why she thought they'd get lost, but her sister only scuffed her shoes in the dirt. April looked back the way they had come, then ahead of her.

Turning back to her sister, she asked, "Brandy, why did you think we'd get lost?"

Brandy scratched her head, then answered, "Because this isn't the right path. We took the wrong path. That's why."

April sucked in her breath. That's why she hadn't been able to recognize anything. She should have known it. She should have.

"April, can we go home now?"

"You still didn't answer my question. Why did you throw your sandwich away?"

Brandy looked about her, then answered, "Because that's what they do when they're lost. They throw bread crumbs on the ground so that they don't get lost and eaten by the witch."

April felt goosebumps on her arms and she laughed, a bit nervously, then said, "You know that's stupid. There isn't any such things as witches. You just lost your sandwich for no reason at all."

Nevertheless, April couldn't help glancing around her again. What was that? Nothing. Just a bird.

Brandy whispered, "There are so witches."

"No there aren't."

"Yes there are."

"Where?"

"I saw them on television. And I read about them too."

April sighed, wishing that her sister would stop saying the word witch. "That's only make believe. It's not true."

"There are no witches?"

"No."

Brandy thought for a second, then whispered, "There's goblins."

"No! There aren't any witches and there aren't any goblins!"

"Werewolves?"

"NOOOO!"

"I bet there's some vampires in this woods."

"Brandy! None of those things are real! Now will you stop talking about them."

Brandy's face puckered and she started to cry. April hugged her, then said, "I'm sorry for yelling at you, but those things just aren't real. They're only in books, and on television. They aren't real."

Brandy stopped crying, then asked, "Was George Washington real?"

Confused, April said, "Yes."

"Was Abr'm Lincoln?"

"Yes."

"Was Cristo..Cristo...Was Columbus real?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Why are you asking me about them for?"

"I read about them in a book too."

April opened her mouth but said nothing. How could she explain to a six year old the difference between real and make believe. April, at eight years old, knew the difference, but was at a loss as how to explain it to her sister.

"What was that?"

April turned, but could see nothing.

"Where?"

"Over there. In front of us. No, it's moved. Now it's beside us."

April whirled. She could still see nothing. Nothing but the outline of the trees.

The trees! They seemed to be reaching out for her with long, snake-like fingers! And they were coming closer!

Without a word she grabbed Brandy's hand and began running. She didn't know in which direction she was going, and she didn't care. Why had Brandy mentioned witches? And werewolves? And vampires?

In front of her one of the trees moved and planted itself before her. Something gleamed in the moonlight. April screamed but was unable to stop herself. She bounced off the tree and fell to the ground, dragging Brandy with her.

"Please, Mr. Tree, don't hurt us. Please!"

Instead of the woody fingers tearing at her body she heard a soft, deep chuckle. Opening her eyes, she saw the form bending over her. In the dim light she saw that the tree was huge, almost as big as a house, and it had eyes that gleamed.

Brandy, looking over her sister's shoulder, asked, "Are you going to eat us, Mr. Tree?"

The chuckling deepened into a booming laugh which echoed through the forest, then the tree leaned over and April saw the vague outline of a head and shoulders, and two arms reaching down to her. And the gleaming thing she had seen was tied or strapped over his shoulders.

The voice, deep and soft at the same time, spoke, "Don't worry, little girls, I won't eat you. I've already eaten tonight."

April felt herself being lifted from the ground as if she didn't weigh anything at all. Then Brandy was beside her and the tree-voice was brushing them both off, its hands gentle.

"You aren't going to eat us?"

"No little girl, I'm not going to eat you."

That laugh again. There was something reassuring about it, yet April felt the hairs at the back of her neck rise. She wished she could see the thing's face.

Almost as if the moon had heard her unspoken wish, light flooded the forest and she saw a large (though not as large as a house) man standing before her. He had long, curly hair which hung past his shoulders, and a great beard which covered half his face. He was dressed in rough work clothes, and over his shoulder was slung a huge, two-headed axe. That was what had gleamed so brightly!

Brandy, her eyes large as dishes, asked timidly, "Are you a werewolf?"

The man laughed again, shaking his head, "Do I look like a werewolf to you?"

Brandy nodded and the man laughed even louder, "No. I'm not a werewolf."

But tell me, little ones, what are you doing in this forest so late and all by yourselves?"

Brandy looked at April who frowned, then said, "We're going to our grandmother's house. She lives on the other side."

"But why so late, little ones?"

April's frown deepened, "But it wasn't late when we left. It was only noon or just a little after. But it seems that as soon as we got into the forest it got dark all of a sudden."

The man said, "Strange things happen in the forest. Here, time has no meaning. Only those who live in it."

April felt her skin tingle and she wanted to leave, but she didn't know where to go. The man, as if sensing her fears, asked if she'd like him to take them to their grandmother's house. April nodded.

He took her small hand in his, completely covering it, and April felt her fear vanish. It was strange. All of a sudden she wasn't afraid anymore.

He took Brandy's hand in his other, then began to lead them down the path. As they walked Brandy asked the man questions, most of which evoked a deep laugh.

"Have you ever seen a werewolf before?"

Before the man could answer, April spoke, "Brandy, I told you there weren't any such things."

The man looked down at her, his eyes twinkling, "Are you so sure of yourself that you can say such a thing?"

April snorted, "Everyone knows there aren't any. And I've never seen any."

The man laughed and squeezed her hand, not painfully, and said, "So, Little One, if you have not seen it, then it does not exist? Listen. Do you hear?"

April listened, and heard the chattering of a bird somewhere in the forest. "It's a bird. So what?"

"Can you see the bird?"

"No."

"But it is there."

"But I can hear it, so that doesn't make any difference."

The man sighed, then chuckled, "Little One, do not say things aren't just because you have never seen them. I have never seen the air I breathe, but I know that it is there. I have never seen that which makes things fall to the ground, but I know that it is there. I have never seen what gives life to myself, and to the creatures of the forest, but I know that it is there. So why do you doubt something just because you have never seen it?"

"It's because . . . because . . . Oh, it's impossible. They don't exist."

They walked along in silence. As they did, the clouds began to disperse and the light from the moon flooded along the path, causing the trees and brush to stand out. It also caused deep shadows to appear between the trees.

"What was that?"

April peered around the man toward where Brandy was pointing. She could see nothing. She said so.

"It looked like a horse, but it had a horn. Right here in the middle of its head. And it was all silver."

April snorted, "A horse with horns."

"But I did see it! I did!"

The man remained silent, but his eyes narrowed. The trio moved along, and soon they came to a small creek over which a wooden bridge had been built.

April gasped, "I don't remember a bridge in this woods. Or a creek for that matter. Just where are you taking us?"

The man said, "To your grandmother's. Besides, the bridge is there. You

can see it. Now you can feel it. So it must be here in these woods."

April didn't know what to think. She knew that these woods were the only ones near and the man couldn't have led them into another one. But she couldn't remember a creek or a bridge.

Crossing over the bridge, they followed the path. April couldn't resist a look back, just to see if the bridge was still there.

No, it couldn't be. Three goats were standing on the bridge, and from under it a voice had called, "Who's walking on my bridge?"

She turned to the man and Brandy but they didn't look back. Hadn't they heard the voice? She asked them if they had heard anything, but they answered "No."

Did she really see something? Taking a quick look over her shoulder, she saw that the bridge was empty. There was nothing on it! It must have been the moonlight.

They walked along for a while, Brandy and the man talking about the forest, April trying to explain to herself what was happening. There had to be an explanation for all this, she just hadn't thought of it yet.

Looking behind her, she saw a little girl with a red, hooded jacket following them. She was carrying a large basket.

April stopped. They would have to see the girl! She pointed behind her and cried, "Look. See the girl?"

But when they turned, all that was behind them was a little red fox sitting in the path. At their movement it sprang into the bushes.

The man said, "What is it you want us to see, Little One?"

April didn't answer for a while. She had seen something. Or had she? Was the little girl like the goats?

April was even more confused than before. She withdrew her hand from the tall man and walked a few steps behind them. It was funny, but the man and Brandy seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, like they were encased in silver moonbeams. Their forms seemed to just float down the path.

April shivered again. A twig snapped behind her and she scurried after her sister and the man.

Taking his hand, April once more felt her fear leaving her, and she felt that strange tingle pass through her body. She glanced at Brandy, but her sister didn't seem to notice anything.

Brandy asked the man if he lived in the forest and he said, "Yes, the forest is my home, as are a lot of places."

"What kind of places?"

"Oh, secret places made of gold and silver, where the rivers and ponds are untouched by man. The water is sweet to the taste. And the creatures are not afraid of man. Why, you can even go up to a tiger and pull his whiskers if you want to. He won't mind. Not in my forest. He'll just purr and lick your hand."

April shook her head in disgust. She had to stop this strange man from lying like that to her sister.

She said, "There aren't any tigers in this forest."

The man winked at Brandy, then said, "Oh, yes there are. There are tigers and lions and bears all through the forest. And other wonderful animals too."

April said, "No there aren't."

Brandy smiled and said, "Yes there are. If he says so there are."

April snorted again, but didn't say anything. From behind her she heard voices saying, "Lions, and tigers, and bears. Oh my."

She spun, quickly but there was nothing behind her. She turned to Brandy and the man. They were both watching her, and their faces were smiling.

"You did hear it, didn't you? You did."

Brandy smiled her biggest smile and said, "Heard what?"

April didn't reply. She felt her lips begin to tremble, and her eyes stung. Why were they doing this to her? Her own sister! It was that man. It had to be him. They had to get away from him.

April took Brandy's hand from the strange man and said, "We want to go home. Now!"

The man smiled and said, "You are home."

"What do you mean?"

Instead of answering, the man just nodded his head to his right. April turned and her mouth fell open. Not ten feet away was her grandmother's back yard! And it was daylight in the yard!

The strange man gave the girls a gentle push and said, "I told you I'd take you home. There it is. You'd better go now. Your grandmother's probably worried about you."

"But how. . . I mean, why is it. . .?"

He laughed, then winked at Brandy and said, "Do not ask how. Just enjoy the what."

April saw her grandmother walk around the corner of her house, so she pulled on Brandy's hand, urging her from the forest. At its edge, she stopped and turned back to the man, "I don't even know your name."

The man spoke, softly, "Jason. It's Jason."

April frowned, "I used to have a brother named Jason. Daddy said he went away a long time ago."

"I know, Little One. I know."

"But how could you?"

The man didn't answer. Instead he pointed towards the girls' grandmother, then turned back toward the forest. Before he had taken three steps, April was at his side, tugging on his hand. He bent and she kissed his cheek, then turned and fled after Brandy.

When she reached her sister's side she stopped and looked back toward the forest, but the forest was gone. Or rather, the forest was still there, but it wasn't the one she and Brandy had just come from. The one she was looking at now was narrow, barely one hundred feet across. She could see her house through the trees, and the highway beyond that. She looked at Brandy, but her sister was already running towards their grandmother.

Nearing her grandmother, April heard her saying, "Why lands-sakes, but you made good time. I just called your mama and she said you left but ten minutes ago."

Ten minutes! But they had been in the forest for hours! Hadn't they?

With one last look at the forest, April turned and followed Brandy and their grandmother toward the house. As they walked, she heard Brandy humming a song under her breath. Listening hard, she heard her sing, "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my."

