

A Normal Birthday, For a Normal Girl

By C. Jade Wyton

It is Becky Bloom's tenth birthday. It is the first birthday she has been excited about in a long, long time. Her parents are home, even if they won't tell her the reason for it, and she spends the day out with her mother.... However, after waking up from a nightmare later that night, she overhears some devastating news.

Contains mentions of ableism / mentions of terminal and chronic illness.

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Becky couldn't believe that her parents had been home for almost six months. Or mostly home, anyway.

They were sleeping at home, again. Which was different. Even though they spent most of their time out together, and wouldn't tell Becky where they were going; they still came home almost every night and slept in their own bed.

Becky liked it when they were home. Even if now they smelt like Jezzibeth's aunt Penelope; sour and sterile and like the cleaning liquid under the sink that Becky was never allowed to touch.

'A hospital smell,' Jezzibeth had whispered to her, making her promise not to tell anyone she'd told her.

*A hospital smell....*

Becky missed her mother's old smell.

And she missed when her parents would laugh. Now they just seemed tired and sad all the time.

But nobody would tell Becky why.

Isa had refused, telling her gently to drop the subject. That she was too young to hear the reason, and that she would be told when she was older.

Obviously not satisfied, Becky had tried other adults for the answer.

Mrs Courtland, Jezzibeth's mother, had baulked and retreated out of the room; muttering a prayer under her breath.

And Mrs Slader, Jareth and Benny's mother, had seemed almost *panicked* when Becky had cornered her while visiting the boys.

*Why is Mum so tired? Why is Dad so sad?*

That was all she wanted to know.

Then Katie had said she'd overheard her parents saying that Becky's mother was sick. And not just a normal kind of sick. She was *sick sick*. A big kind of sick. A really awful kind of sick that made all of the other adults really sad and worried whenever they talked about her....

It scared Becky, because unlike most other things Katie told her, she thought that it might be *true*.

After all, her parents had been home a long time. All of Summer since they first came back, and then all of Autumn— And now into Winter, only a few days

after Christmas, and they were *still* home.

They'd told Becky they were staying for her birthday this year and Becky hadn't believed them. Not at first. But now that it was the twenty-seventh, and her birthday was tomorrow, and her parents didn't have plane tickets to another country— Becky found herself hoping it was really true.

It would be the first birthday they'd be at home for since she was three, Isa had said.

Becky couldn't remember her third birthday very well. But she remembered her forth— That was the first birthday her parents had missed, and they'd gotten her Mimi to make up for it.

Becky was actually excited for *this* birthday. This year she was going to be *ten*. That was every finger on both hands, including the thumbs! And that was very exciting, even if she had decided she didn't like having birthdays anymore, and only had them because it was a normal thing for girls her age to do.

She hadn't had fun at her own birthday since she was seven; she'd gotten crayons and sketchbooks, that year. But then she'd decided before she turned eight that she wasn't going to make art anymore because she'd found her parents had thrown out some of her drawings.

That was when she realised that her parents were *liars*, and they lied to her— And then, when Becky had gotten in that fight with Wendy, she'd learnt that her parents lied to *everyone*.

Becky had never really gotten the hang of lying, herself. She didn't understand it. And she didn't like it. But her mother made her lie. A lot.

It was for her own safety, of course. She had to tell everyone she was a normal girl. Who did normal girl things. So that people didn't hurt her. And so she didn't accidentally hurt others— Because if she hurt others, they'd hurt her back.

'They're always looking for a witch-hunt!' she'd overheard her mother say a few times. 'If we're not careful with Becky, they're going to target us just like they did the Frankensteins!'

She had no idea who the Frankensteins were or what had happened to them. And even though her father had always reassured her mother that it was okay, and nothing was going to happen (he promised it *firmly*, which was something he rarely did), it really seemed to scare her. So much so that Becky wasn't allowed to go to sleepovers at Jezzibeth's house anymore. *Just in case Penelope showed up*.

So, Becky did her best to behave. Both to calm her mother down, and because she agreed that Penelope *was* pretty scary and she didn't want to make her mad.

And she made herself tell lies.

A special kind of lie that her father said was okay.

She had to say that she *liked* sitting still, even when she wanted to flap her arms and dance and scream.

And she had to say she was happy when she wasn't, because grown-ups thought unhappy children weren't normal.

It was called "*manners*," her father had told her.

She recalled the lesson with a frown. Her father had taken her aside one day, after she'd gotten a very confused look from an older woman at the strip mall.

'When someone asks you how you're doing, they don't actually want to know,' he'd told her. 'They only ask because it's polite to ask. But they don't want a real

answer, in case it makes them feel bad. They want you to tell them you feel good, and happy, so that they can keep feeling good and happy themselves.... It's, frankly, very strange. I don't understand it.'

Becky hadn't understood it, either. But she had been glad she wasn't alone.... And with some reassurance from her father, she'd known that she never had to lie to *him*.

If she felt bad, she could tell him she felt bad. Just like she could tell Isa when she felt bad.

*It was harder to tell her mother these things....*

Becky opened her eyes and let out a deep breath.

It was late.

Well past her bedtime.

But she'd had another nightmare.

She always had nightmares and talked in her sleep. Ever since she could remember.

She wasn't sure why. She had a good life, didn't she? Nothing to have nightmares about, at least....

Maybe she just thought too much.

Becky wished she could stop thinking all the time.

She'd been practicing, and was getting better at it. Getting better at making her brain completely empty so the thoughts didn't make her overwhelmed and upset.

Her classmates said that made her stupid, but she thought that was okay. She'd rather be stupid than have too much going on in her head all at once.

Besides; she was already stupid, wasn't she? She always overheard adults saying she was *slow*....

Becky heard her bedroom door creak open and pulled her blankets up to her neck; pretending to be asleep.

It was her father's footsteps that came in.

Lighter than her mother's, but clumsier than Isa's. Off-balance and unsure; like he was so tall and thin that he was constantly scared a gust of wind was going to knock him over.

Mimi gave a chirp as Ken approached the bed, and Becky felt the mimic shift as it accepted something from him and began chewing, and chewing, and chewing; completely distracted from the man as he quietly placed something on Becky's bedside table and crept out of the room again.

After waiting a moment to make sure he was really gone, Becky rolled over to see what he'd left with her.

It was a box wrapped with a bow. Small and rectangle. And it had a card next to it.

Something about getting a gift from her parents —from them in person, not given to Isa to give her on the day— made her skin prickle with joy, and Becky had to resist the urge to rip it open then and there.

If her parents had wanted her to have it before tomorrow, then they would have woken her to give it to her. This was obviously meant to surprise her in the morning.... So she was going to be good and polite, and wait until Isa came in and woke her up.

Then she would open it, and her parents would be proud of her for waiting!  
Yes. That was what she'd do.

Becky rolled over, closing her eyes and emptying her head, and tried her best to get back to sleep.

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Flip, click.

Flip, click.

Flip, click.

Becky couldn't stop flipping her new phone open and closed, over and over and over.

It was pink with silver buttons and a little screen on the top half that her father had set to display a photo of Mimi.

It was from the box that he'd put by her bed— Which, she discovered, he'd done because her mother hadn't actually wanted him to give it to her. So he'd snuck it to her that night, behind her mother's back....

It had been the cause of quite a bit of fussing, that morning.

Not an *argument*.... Becky wouldn't call it that. But a very hushed disagreement between her parents that turned from whispers to normal inside voices after Becky had asked her mother if she wanted her to give it back or throw it away.

She'd said no. Becky had it now and she might as well keep it; it wasn't fair to punish her for what her father had done.

Honestly, though, as much as her mother was going on and on and on about it, Becky thought she didn't seem all that angry. Not really.

Just annoyed.

Especially now, as Ken was staring at his breakfast; lips pursed and cheeks red with embarrassment as he received the end of his *third* lecture that morning.

'And I still just don't agree that she's old enough for her own phone,' Barbra finished, accepting her breakfast from Isa with a gentle nod. 'Thank you, Isa.'

'It's just a flip phone,' Ken reassured. He waved a dismissive hand, but his tone betrayed how embarrassed he felt. 'I think that's age-appropriate. It's better than the smartphones that man kept trying to sell me. Apps.... Now I wouldn't trust her with *those* just yet....'

'Mm...' Barbra gave a tentative hum, before gently placing a hand on Becky's own to get her attention. 'Honey? We don't use our phones at the table, it's bad manners.'

'I'm not using it, I promise,' Becky reassured. 'I just like the sound it makes— Here! Listen!'

Flip, click.

Flip, click.

The side of Barbra's mouth twitched, and Becky thought she caught the beginnings of a twinkle in her mother's eyes.

'Well...' Barbra let out a breath before giving a weak smile and turning back to Ken. 'It is a relief, to know she can call us if she gets lost in the woods again....'

'I've never gotten *lost* in the woods!' Becky defended, closing her phone one

last time and placing it beside her cereal. 'I always know *exactly* where I am! And— And! I haven't run away to play outside alone for... um....'

'*Four months*,' Isa whispered as she passed by the girl on her way to the lounge.

'Four months!' Becky repeated loudly. 'Not since you had that big talk with me about why I'm only allowed outside with an adult!'

'And I'm *very* proud of you for that,' Barbra told her. 'You've been doing so well.'

Becky smiled, tapping her hands happily on the table, before reaching over and picking up her phone again. She examined it closely, before holding it out to her parents.

'What's this bit?' she asked.

'The antenna,' Barbra answered. 'It's what sends out the phone calls.'

'Like the TV?'

'Yeah, just like the TV.'

'And— What's this?'

'A camera,' said Ken. 'So you can take photos of things you like.'

'Wow!' Becky exclaimed. 'And this hole? It looks like the one on my MP3 player! Can I put headphones in this?'

'Yes,' Barbra answered. 'To make it easier when making long phone calls... which hopefully you won't ever need to do....'

'And— And what's this bit?' Becky asked.

'That's a charm loop,' Ken said. 'So you can hang little charms on it.'

'Like a bracelet!' Becky exclaimed, looking over the phone again. 'That's awesome! I really like it, Dad. Thank you!'

Ken straightened up, smiling proudly at his daughter, before looking to his wife and beaming, 'She likes it!'

It got a laugh from Barbra; which made the entire room seem to light up.

The excitement of seeing her mother laughing made Becky's heart jump, and she couldn't help but flap her arms— But then she accidentally caught Isa's elbow as the drow was passing by her again, and she knocked the handful of dishes out of her hands and onto the floor. The sound of it all made one of the nearby potted plants jump in fear, and it transformed into a mug before sprouting long spider legs and rushing into the kitchen to hide.

'Becky!' Isa grunted.

'Rebecca!' Barbra scolded.

'Sorry! Sorry,' Becky gasped, pulling her arms close to herself so she didn't accidentally hit anyone else. 'I didn't see you!'

'*This* is why I tell you not to do that,' Barbra sighed, slipping out of her seat to help Isa gather up everything she'd dropped.

'Oh, Barbra— No, I can handle it,' Isa reassured. 'Please, don't trouble yourself—'

'Becky, come help pick everything up,' Barbra ordered, ignoring Isa's attempts to get her back in her chair. 'Come on! You knock it down, you pick it up.'

'*Mmmkay!*'

Becky put her phone on the table and slid off her chair to join her mother and Isa on the floor as they picked up the dishes. She hurriedly retrieved the cutlery,

placing all of it sharp-way down into a cup, before standing up and following Isa into the kitchen to deposit it by the sink.

'This is a lot of dishes,' Becky pointed out, picking up the living mug off the floor and petting it gently. 'Where did they all come from?'

'Your father's study,' Isa told her. 'I've been bugging him to bring them out for a month, now. But he keeps forgetting.'

'So you went in and got them all yourself?' Becky asked, placing the mug on her shoulder and giving it a moment so it could turn into a scarf and wrap around her neck. '*Good girl, Mimi.*'

'Yes, exactly,' Isa confirmed, giving a grin as she began to fill the sink. 'He's a very forgetful person, isn't he? Just like you are!'

'Yeah,' Becky agreed, scratching Mimi under the seam she knew was its mouth as it began to purr. 'Mum says I get my forgetfulness from him.'

Isa giggled and retrieved a pair of gloves and bottle of dishwashing liquid from under the sink.

And it was then that Becky noticed her mother had stayed behind; giving an exhausted sigh as Ken helped her back into her chair.

She looked so, so tired, and it made Becky feel guilty. Was it because of her doing things like knocking dishes onto the floor that her mother was so tired all the time?

If she behaved better, would her mother have gotten sick at all...?

'Becky, honey?' Isa brushed a lock of hair from Becky's eyes. 'What's wrong.'

'Mm,' Becky gave a nervous groan, shuffling in place before pulling on her hoodie's sleeves. 'Mum looks tired again.'

'Ah...' Isa's brow furrowed in worry as she craned her neck to look back into the other room. 'She... has been, hasn't she? She'll be alright, though.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah, no need to worry about her,' Isa said; in a very unsure way that made it clear she didn't believe it.

She was lying.

Becky wanted to point it out, but bit her tongue.

If Isa was trying to lie to her, there must have been a *very* good reason for it. Because Isa *never* lied to her.... It was probably why she was so bad at it, when she tried to do it....

'Mum's gonna get better, right?' Becky asked without thinking. 'Like... she's not gonna be tired forever, is she?'

'Of course she's going to get better,' Isa said, sounding much more sure of herself. 'She just needs to rest. So you—' Isa poked at Becky with a gloved finger, leaving a fuzz of soap bubbles on the tip of her nose. 'don't need to worry about it. All you need to worry about is your homework.... Anyway, I'm sure you don't want to stand here and watch me wash dishes! Go finish your breakfast.'

'But I *like* spending time with you!' defended Becky as she wiped her nose. 'You're one of my favourite people!'

'Go finish your breakfast,' Isa repeated. Then, when the girl didn't move, she crouched down to Becky's eye level and lowered her voice, speaking very soft and gentle. 'I think it's important you spend time with your mother, right now. Okay? She needs the company.'

‘Oh.... Okay.’

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It was a cold-but-sunny day and the park was surprisingly crowded for how cold it was. A lot of the younger kids, it looked like. Still playing with their Christmas gifts.

Becky didn’t really think much of that, though. After all, she was wearing the new dress her mother had given her. And the scrunchie from Isa. And the shoes she’d gotten from her father.

She was glad to have gotten mostly practical gifts for Christmas, like clothes, instead of boring ones like balls or books.

She’d only played the gaming console she’d gotten for about two days before getting distracted. It was fun, mostly, but she could never focus on things like that for long— Not without her friends there with her.

Becky made a running leap for the monkey bars, only *just* managing to get a hand on one of the high bars and keep her hold.

‘Mum! Did you see that?’ she shouted out. ‘I leapt up *twice* my height!’

She hadn’t really wanted to go to the park with her mother; she’d wanted Isa to take her. But after spending breakfast talking with her mother and seeing how much better it seemed to make her feel, Becky had asked her instead.

‘Good job, honey,’ Barbra replied from her place on a nearby bench.

Becky adjusted her grip on the bars, flipping herself over to hang by her legs. Then, she looked over at her mother again.

She’d been sitting on that same bench in that same spot since they got here over an hour ago. She seemed happier than she had the past few days, and Becky was glad she’d invited her.... But she still looked very tired.

She’d been quietly talking with some of the other parents earlier, though now she sat on her own and watched Becky as she hung upside-down.

And... even from the distance, Becky could see the dark circles that had formed under her eyes since breakfast....

Becky decided to go over and keep her company instead of continuing to play.

She flipped herself upright and landed heavily on the ground before running over and taking the seat next to her mother.

‘Hi, Mum,’ she said, settling down and resting her head on Barbra’s side.

‘Hey, sweetie,’ Barbra put an arm around her daughter. ‘Having fun?’

‘Yeah,’ Becky answered. ‘Are you?’

‘Yeah,’ Barbra echoed, before looking out across the park to all the other children. ‘Looks like lots of kids are enjoying their gifts from Santa, huh?’

‘Mum,’ Becky said simply. ‘Santa’s not real.’

‘What— No!’ Barbra gasped. ‘Who told you that?’

‘Nobody, I just figured it out,’ Becky said. ‘But Isa made me promise not to tell anyone, though. Especially younger kids.... Cos it ruins the fun for them. I don’t get it, but I promised. So I haven’t said anything to anyone. Not even Jareth.’

‘God, you’re such a smart girl,’ Barbra sighed, running her hand through Becky’s ponytail and lovingly twirling the end around her fingers. ‘Don’t you ever let anyone tell you otherwise.’

Becky just shrugged, and tapped her toes together. 'I really like this dress you got me. It's comfy.'

'Wh.... How did you know *I* got you that?' Barbra asked. 'It could have been from your father.'

'No,' Becky said simply. 'I know what gifts are from Dad, cos he always forgets to take the price tags off. And Isa always gets me things I tell her I want when we're at the shops, so it's easy to know if something's from her. But your gifts are always a surprise. Like the dress was!'

'Smart,' Barbra repeated, ruffling the girl's hair.

Becky giggled, before fixing her hair. 'Not really, though. This stuff's just easy.'

'No, you're smart,' Barbra corrected. 'You know everything about everyone. That's *very* smart. Not everyone can do that.'

'Like Dad?' Becky asked.

'Yeah, like your dad.'

'Cos he's dumb?'

'No!' Barbra gasped. 'He's not dumb! He's smart, too. Just in a different way to you, that's all. Everyone's smart in different ways.'

'Oh... okay,' Becky gave a nod. Then, her attention was caught by a shout on the other side of the park.

'Becky!' it was Katie, waving to her from across the playground and brandishing a very large stick.

'Oh! It's Katie!' Becky exclaimed, quickly standing up. 'I'll be right back, Mum! I gotta go say hi, but I'll be *really* quick!'

'Okay,' Barbra chuckled as Becky ran off to meet her friend.

'Hey! Hey! Katie!' Becky shouted, sprinting across the park and tackling her friend to the ground.

The pair wrestled for a moment before springing to their feet, mocking punches at each other.

'I'm gonna punch your *face*! Yeah! I'm gonna punch you in the *face*!' Katie exclaimed, circling around Becky before kicking out and tripping her over. 'HAH! Got you! You always forget to watch your feet!'

'Yeah, you got me,' Becky agreed, rolling back to her feet and brushing herself down.

'It's your birthday, isn't it?' Katie asked.

'Yeah, it is,' Becky confirmed.

'So why's your Mum still here? Doesn't she usually leave after Christmas?'

'Not this year,' Becky explained. 'She stayed this year, cos she was too tired to leave.'

'Ah, okay,' Katie gave a sniff. 'That's really weird.... Well, anyway. Happy Birthday. You wanna hang out?'

'Yes, but I can't,' Becky answered. 'I'm spending today with Mum.'

'Hm. Loser,' Katie chided, before giving a playful grin. 'Whatever. Next time?'

'Yeah! Next time!' Becky nodded. 'Bye Katie!'

'Smell you later, Becky!'

Becky made her way back to her mother and sat down with her.

'Oh, you *were* quick!' Barbra said, sounding impressed. 'Usually you talk to Katie for a lot longer than that!'



'I know, but I told her we were spending today together,' said Becky.

'Did you? That was *very* good communicating!'

'Thanks! I've been practicing!' Becky explained. 'Just like you told me to! It's still.... It can be hard with adults, though. They can be confusing and make me rush. That's why I like to talk to my friends the most. Cos they understand when I have trouble and help me remember the order that words go in when I can't.'

'Oh, I see,' Barbra gave a nod. 'Well, you have very good friends, don't you?'

'Uh-huh!' Becky agreed. 'The best!'

Barbra gave a chuckle, and then wrapped her arm back around Becky. 'You're the best, too, you know that?'

Becky felt her chest swell with pride at her mother's praise; and then buried herself into Barbra's side. '*I love you,*' she mumbled.

'I love you too, honey.' Barbra replied, pecking a kiss into Becky's hair. 'I love you too.'

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'Hey, Mum? Do you and Dad ever fight?'

The question escaped Becky before she knew what she was asking, and her mother froze mid-bite of her Yuantianese takeaway.

'Why... are you asking that?'

'Cos there's a girl at school, and she says her parents fight all the time,' Becky explained, poking at her own food and kicking at the footwell of the car her and her mother were sitting in. 'And you were mad at Dad today. Was that a fight? Is that what you do when you're married? Is it normal to fight all the time?'

For a long moment, Becky's mother was quiet. She seemed to be wracking her brain for the best answer— Then, she put down her spork and sighed.

'It's not normal to fight *all* the time,' Barbra answered carefully. 'But it *does* happen sometimes. It's a part of any relationship, really.'

'Do you and Dad ever fight?' Becky asked again.

'Yes...' Barbra replied, very slowly. 'But... I don't like it when we do.'

'Hm... what's the worst fight you've ever been in? With Dad, I mean.'

Barbra took a deep breath, and looked around like she was trying to find an escape to the conversation; which made Becky feel a little bit bad, but not bad enough to stop Barbra as she answered:

'Do you remember... that time when you were really little? And Mimi got out?'

Becky thought for a long moment. Then, she remembered. 'Dad left the door open.'

'Yeah...' Barbra said softly. 'Do you remember how I slept on the couch until we got her back?'

'Mhm,' Becky nodded. 'I do.'

'That was because I was *so* mad at him I didn't want to share a bed with him. The idea of even being in the same *room* as him made me so angry that I thought I was going to blow up! But then Mimi came back, and everything turned out okay.'

'Really?' Becky asked. 'So... what would have happened if Mimi never came back? Would you have stayed mad at Dad?'

‘Well... how would *you* have felt if she stayed missing?’

‘I would never have been happy ever again!’ Becky answered. ‘I would have been sad *forever*.’

‘Then I would never have been happy again, either,’ said Barbra. ‘And I would have been mad at your father for as long as you were sad.’

‘Hm.... Okay. But you’re not mad at him for it anymore, are you?’ Becky asked. ‘Cos you sleep in bed with him again.’

‘Yeah, I’m not mad anymore,’ Barbra confirmed. ‘Because everything turned out okay, and it was a long time ago. *And* he was very sorry and didn’t mean for it to happen.’

‘Dad seems to do a lot of things wrong,’ Becky observed. ‘Like giving me gifts you don’t want me to have— And forgetting his shoes when he goes outside.’

‘Your father’s... *quirky*,’ Barbra said gently.

‘And you like him like that?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Even when it makes you mad?’

‘Yeah. I mean, there are ups and downs in *any* relationship,’ Barbra explained. ‘Sometimes you just have to grin and bear the parts you don’t like about someone, so that you get to be with the parts you really *really* love them for.’

‘Oh, okay,’ Becky gave a nod, and scooped a spoonful of food into her mouth. ‘When I get a boyfriend, will there be things I don’t like about him?’

‘Well...’ Barbra hesitated again. ‘There might be. After all, nobody’s perfect.’

‘Except for you,’ Becky said, simply.

‘What?’

‘I heard Isa say it to Dad! She said that you’re always right, even when you’re not,’ Becky said. ‘But— Oh! I don’t think I was meant to tell you that! I don’t think I was meant to hear it at all.... Pretend I didn’t tell you, okay?’

Barbra let out a heavy, frustrated-sounding breath through her nose. ‘*That sounds like something she’d say....*’

‘Sorry,’ Becky tapped her knees nervously, then sighed. ‘Do you and Isa not like each other?’

‘No we— We like each other,’ Barbra reassured. ‘Actually I... I trust her more than I trust anyone else. Even if we argue a lot.’

‘Oh... like a best friend? Like me and Katie?’

‘Sort of,’ Barbra chuckled. ‘More like a sister. You love them, and you want to see them happy and healthy and doing the things they love... but also, you want to punch them.’

‘You want to punch Isa?’

‘Hah! Sometimes I think *she* wants to punch *me*,’ Barbra gave a humoured sniff, before shaking her head and finally continuing her meal. ‘It’s fine though,’ she said through a mouthful. ‘We just both have *very* strong opinions. Especially about what’s best for you. That’s all.’

‘Oh,’ Becky breathed, poking at her food.

She *thought* it made sense, but wasn’t completely sure.

Isa and her mother argued over... what was best for her?

She always thought that adults always just *knew* what was right, and it was

always the same thing— But if they argued, then someone had to be wrong, didn't they?

Did they actually *not* know what they were doing?

Becky thought of her father, then, and nodded to herself.

Yeah, adults *definitely* didn't always know what they were doing....

'Why don't I have any sisters?' Becky mindlessly blurted the thought as it came to her.

Barbra paused again, her mouth full as she let out a sigh.

'Mum?'

'We didn't think it would be fair on you,' Barbra admitted, dropping half her mouthful back into the container. 'Because if you had a brother or sister, we wouldn't have had as much time for you.... And with how little we got to be home, we wanted to spend all the time we could with *just* you.'

Becky thought about that for a moment before giving a confident nod. 'Good call. If I had to share you and Dad with someone else when you visited, I would *not* have been happy! I would have bitten them a lot! Maybe even buried them in the backyard so that nobody could find them and they grew into a tree instead of a person and had to live with squirrels in their hair!'

Becky declared her thought loudly, and then went back to eating; leaving Barbra staring at her with a furrowed brow and dropped jaw.

'You would... bury them in the backyard?' she asked, slowly.

'Yep!' Becky chirped, much to her mother's amusement.

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It was bed-time, but Becky was too buzzed from the day to sleep.

It was the first birthday she'd enjoyed in a long time— Even if she'd done things she didn't really want to do to try and cheer her mother up.

She also wasn't used to opening her birthday gifts with her parents around. It was strange, but she liked it more than her birthdays without them. She'd blown out her candles, and they'd shared the cake, and then she'd opened her gifts and given the wrapping paper to Mimi to play with.

They had been nice gifts, Becky thought. Dresses, and plush toys, and another video game.

The phone was still her favourite, though.

The clicking sound it made when she opened and closed it was just too good, and put it above everything else.

*Flip, click.*

*Flip, click.*

*Flip—*

'Becky, honey, put the phone away,' Barbra said gently, clearing a spot on Becky's bed as she did. 'Ugh, sweetheart— You need to stop pulling all your toys off the shelves like this. Your room is a mess!'

'I *like* it like this,' Becky defended, clambering into bed. She ignored the spot her mother had cleared for her and instead settled down in the middle of the mess; nestling herself between piles of plush toys and pillows and wiggling until she was half-hidden underneath the soft mass.

‘Honey—’ Barbra cut off with a sigh and, defeated, picked up the blanket off Becky’s floor and threw it over the girl. ‘You’re a little rascal, aren’t you?’

‘Yep!’ Becky said, happily.

Then, there was a *mrrp* and a chirp, and Mimi scabbled up the side of the bed to join Becky in the toy pile.

It shape-shifted as it settled down, turning from a little potted plant into a stuffed bear, before rolling onto its side and giving a long, sleepy huff.

‘*Hey Mimi,*’ Barbra mumbled to it softly. ‘*Here to keep Becky safe tonight, too, huh?*’

‘*Trrp.*’

‘*Good girl. Keep all those scary dreams away for her, hm?*’

‘Mum? Will you tell me a story?’ Becky asked, lifting her head to look to her mother. Though as she did she realised Barbra looked exhausted and quickly flopped her head back down. ‘If you’re not too tired, I mean. If you’re too tired you can go. I don’t mind.’

‘I’m not too tired to read to you,’ Barbra chuckled. ‘What book do you feel like?’

‘No, no! Not a book,’ Becky corrected. ‘Books are boring. I want to hear a *real* story! Like Isa tells me.’

‘Oh?’ Barbra paused, clearly trying (but failing) to hide the jealous twitch her lip gave. ‘What sort of real stories does Isa tell you?’

‘All different sorts!’ Becky explained. ‘Yesterday, I got her to tell me about the different types of potatoes. Did you know different potatoes cook differently? If you want to mash them really good, you gotta use a different type then if you wanna make them in a stew!’

‘I... see,’ Barbra replied, obviously confused. Then she sniffed, and sat down on the bed next to Becky. ‘Well, I don’t know a lot about potatoes, but I do know quite a few other things. Did you know silk comes from bugs?’

Becky let out a gasp, and sat upright. ‘No way!’

‘Yeah,’ Barbra confirmed. ‘Uh... anyway.... You want a story?’

‘Yep,’ Becky nodded. ‘But not about bugs, please.... Tell me about.... Um.... Oh! I know! Tell me how how was I born, cos Isa doesn’t know that one and last time I asked Dad he didn’t tell me.’

‘How you were... born?’ Barbra took in a sharp breath.

‘Uh-huh! How did you and Dad make me? Start from the start! And give me *all* the details!’

‘Uh... well... you’re a little... young... hm— How about I tell you about when we bought Mimi for you?’

‘YES!’ Becky exclaimed loudly, causing the mimic beside her to jump. ‘Oh, sorry, Mimi. I didn’t mean to scare you.’

‘Well, it was the first time we weren’t able to make it home for your birthday and Christmas—’

‘Cos of your work!’ Becky interrupted.

‘Yeah, cos of work,’ Barbra confirmed, patiently. ‘And we knew because we missed your birthday, we were going to have to get you something *really* good to make up for it.’

‘Mimi is really good!’ Becky declared, earning a happy chirp from the mimic

as it snuggled into her lap. 'She's the best gift I have ever gotten, *ever!* What made you pick her?'

'Pick her as in, pick a mimic for a gift at all, or pick her out from her siblings?'

'Both.'

'Okay. So, your father and I talked a lot, and decided to get you a pet to keep you company while we were away,' Barbra explained. 'And, from what we were told, her breed was supposed to be nice and quiet. A small, low-energy animal that was easy to look after.... But... well....'

'She gets the zoomies a lot,' Becky finished.

'Yes, exactly,' Barbra chuckled, then frowned. 'And Mimi wasn't meant to get as big as she is, either. She was supposed to be a much smaller breed. When we got her, they said that she was a year old and fully grown.'

'But that was a lie,' Becky replied. 'Cos she lost her baby teeth, which happens when they turn one. And she got twice as big as she used to be!'

'Three times, I'd say,' Barbra corrected, shaking her head and smiling as she reached over to pet Mimi. 'But we can't give her back now, can we?'

'Nope! She's family!' Becky confirmed, pulling Mimi close and flopping over to finally lay down again. 'How did you pick out Mimi, and not another mimic?'

'Well, when we went in to go look at her and all of her siblings, she was the friendliest,' Barbra explained. 'The others all stayed with their mother and hid with her. But Mimi came right up to us. She climbed up your dad's leg, and wrapped around his neck, and licked inside his ear. And we knew that was the sort of friend that would be perfect for you.'

'Wait, you mean— *She chose us?*' Becky asked, feeling her chest swell with excitement as she hugged Mimi tight. 'Not the other way around?'

'Yeah, I suppose you could say that,' Barbra gave a chuckle as she pulled up the blanket to cover her daughter again. Then, she leant over and pecked a kiss on both her daughter and the mimic. 'Okay, now. I know that wasn't a lot, but I'm getting tired. Do you want me to send Isa in?'

'*Hmm....* No. It's fine,' Becky decided. 'Your story wasn't really a story, but I liked talking to you. You should tuck me in more. And practice how to tell stories.'

'I... will have to do that,' Barbra chuckled, pushing herself up. 'Alright. You get some sleep. If you need anything, I'll be downstairs, okay?'

'Okay!' Becky chirped. 'Goodnight, Mum!'

'Goodnight, honey.'

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Becky woke up with a jolt. Every hair on her body stood on end as she let out a short, sharp cry and flung herself up; scattering toys and pillows across her bed and floor.

'I'm sorry!' she cried. 'Please don't— I— I....'

Becky panted as she looked around, slowly regaining her bearings, and realised from the pink sticker-covered walls that she was safely in her room.

It was just another nightmare....

'*Mmmrrp?*' Mimi gave a nervous chirp, and crept out from its hiding place

under Becky's pillow. *'Mrip? Trp.'*

'I'm okay,' Becky panted, petting the animal to comfort it. 'I'm okay. Just another bad dream. A bad dream....'

That made three this week.

Becky wiped her forehead and realised she was soaked. Beads of sweat dripped from her face and arms. Too much to wipe away with her hands, so she used the foot-end of her blanket before discarding it to the side and slipping out of bed.

She dreamt she'd bitten someone.

In play, like she always did.

But it had all gone wrong.

She drew blood; something she had never done before. And when she looked down at her reflection in a puddle she wasn't herself. She was an animal— Something with long fur and big teeth and blood on her lips.

And people screamed, and ran, and then the police came and shot at her with guns, and she had to run away into the woods.

Trapped in the body of a beast, she ran through the woods as everyone in town chased her, hunting her down with bright torches and guns.

The wild animals she passed had been screaming at her. And she had understood them.

Run! Run! Run!

Hide! Hide! Hide!

Before they get you!

She'd tried. She'd run, and run, but the people were always close behind her and she couldn't seem to run fast enough to shake them.

The trees tried to keep her safe, unfolding their branches after she had passed them to block her pursuers. The entire woods moved itself to try and protect her; but the people cut them down.

Following and chasing and never leaving her alone.

And then a loud *BANG* had sounded, and she'd woken up.

The townsfolk had hunted her down and killed her like an animal....

'*I'm not an animal,*' Becky whispered to herself, pushing down the fuzzy, bubbly feeling in her chest. Down, and down, until it was all the way past her stomach and in her feet. '*I'm a girl. I don't bite. Or snarl. Or growl. Or howl. Those are animal things, and I am a girl. I am a girl....*'

She repeated the scoldings from her mother under her breath.

She was a girl.

Her mother had said so. Many many times.

She was a girl. Not an animal.

A very normal girl.

And people didn't hunt down normal girls like her.

People didn't hurt normal girls. And she was a normal girl. She was a normal, normal girl....

Becky let out a long, shaky breath and swallowed, checking her clock.

It was late.

Close to midnight, but still not quite. Eleven thirty-eight.

She should go back to sleep....

But her bed was soaked.

She sniffed at it.

Only sweat, thank gods.

Only sweat....

Becky let out another breath, long and shaky, and stumbled out of her bedroom; Mimi at her feet.

She didn't know how to make the bed on her own, so she checked Isa's room... but the drow wasn't there.

It wasn't too unusual for Isa to be up at this hour. Drow were supposed to be awake at night and not during the day, Isa had told her once. So sometimes she would have trouble sleeping and would stay up late.... And lately, as Becky's parents had been home to watch her, Isa had started taking late-night walks.

It was okay that Isa wasn't in her room, though. Becky could ask someone else for help.

She tugged on her shirt to unstick the heavy, wet fabric from her skin. Then she made her way to her father's study, but Ken wasn't there. And he wasn't in his room, either.... And neither was Barbra. And the spare room was empty.

Becky sighed. Nobody was upstairs besides her and Mimi.

Hmm....

She remembered, then, that her mother had said she would be downstairs if Becky needed her.

That seemed like the best place to try, next.

Becky made for the stairs, careful not to tread on Mimi as it weaved around her feet, and slowly, hand on the railing like Isa taught her to do, started her way down.

Becky thought her mother was probably laying down on the couch watching TV. And it was most likely a show Becky wasn't allowed to watch; with a lot of kissing and swearing and violence. She would change it to something else, if Becky sat down with her. She always did.

Even when Becky felt like she was bothering her, and would offer to leave so she could keep watching what she wanted. When Becky did that, her mother would grab her around her middle and pull her into her lap, and say spending time with her was more important than the TV. That she could watch TV when she was away, but could only spend time with Becky when she was at home....

Mimi gave a chirp, and Becky watched as it sprinted down the stairs. Then up the stairs again. Then back down. Then Mimi was back up the stairs to meet Becky, weaving around her feet before quietly matching pace at her side.

'Good girl,' Becky mumbled, reaching over to give the mimic a quick pat before making her way down the rest of the stairs.

She was only two steps from the bottom when she heard talking.

Talking, and....

Crying?

Becky could hear her mother *crying*....

Slowly, Becky crept down the hall; pausing just before the arch that led to the lounge. She ignored Mimi as it began to chew on her pants leg, and instead leant forward to listen to the adults' conversation.

'It's alright,' she heard her father whispering. *'It's going to be okay.'*

Everything's going to be alright.'

'It's not!' Barbra sobbed. 'It's not going to be alright!'

'Give yourself some more time,' Isa comforted. 'It's only been six months. You're going to get better.'

'I'm not!' Barbra sobbed. 'I'm *not* getting better! And what about— What about Becky?!

Becky flinched at her mother's exclamation; suddenly feeling very, very small.

What about her?

She leant forward to get a better look at her family; not daring to step out from the cover of the hall, but moving just enough that she could watch their shadows on the wall.

'Oh!' Ken gave his own distressed cry, then, and Becky saw his shadow cover its mouth and double over. 'Oh, non. Non! *Non....*'

Isa let out an audible sigh, her hands reaching her own face as she rubbed her eyes and sniffed. 'Have you told her, yet?' she asked.

'No, how can I?' Barbra replied, rubbing Ken's back in a gentle, comforting motion. 'How could I *possibly* tell her?!

'You're going to have to,' Isa said, softly. 'She knows you're sick. She's been asking about it— I think it would be best if she heard it from you.'

Barbra let out a long, exhausted sigh. 'It's just so hard.... I don't know where to start....'

'I know,' Isa replied, leaning onto Barbra's shoulder and wrapping her arms around her. 'But she needs to know.'

Barbra sniffed, obviously trying to hold herself together, before speaking with a weak, shaky voice, '*How do you tell your daughter that you're dying?*'

Becky's heart clenched as she heard her father began to sob.

'You're not dying,' Isa comforted. 'Don't say that—'

'I am!' Barbra cried, breaking down into a mess of wet sobs. 'I am! God, I'm rotting away in this awful body! This awful, sick, *useless* body!'

Becky felt the thin hairs on her arms tingle as her mother began to cry, and she stepped back from the door with tears welling in her own eyes. But then, before she could retreat upstairs, Mimi gave a loud chirp and scuttled into the lounge.

'Mimi?!' Barbra exclaimed. 'Oh— Girl, no— Stop— Don't— Please—'

'Mimi, come here,' Isa's coo was followed by a series of worried gurgles from the mimic. 'Come on, leave her alone. Leave her.'

'*Gods. Becky's coming downstairs, isn't she?*' Ken muttered with a sniff and a heavy sigh. '*Mimi wouldn't have come in unless she was....*'

Oh, no— No!

They were going to catch her eavesdropping again!

Becky felt her heart begin to race as she turned and hurried towards the stairs— But she wasn't fast enough. She felt a hand close around her wrist and pull her back.

'Becky!' Isa exclaimed, turning the girl to look at her— Then, her expression changed. It softened, and suddenly Becky found herself being pulled into a very firm hug. 'Oh, no— Becky, come here. Come here. It's okay. You're okay. *Shh....*'

Becky took in a laboured breath, feeling herself struggling to breathe as her

tears escaped her eyes and she sniffed and hiccuped and sobbed.

'*Shh,*' Isa comforted again. '*Shh, shh....* It's going to be alright. It's alright— Oh, god, you're so pale.... Why are you up? It's so late!'

'I had— A— A bad dream!' Becky managed, clutching Isa tightly as her parents stepped into the hall. 'I needed— Help— To change— M-M-My b-bed— My bed—'

'She's so pale!' Ken exclaimed, rushing to his daughter and brushing the hair from her face. 'No, non, look at me— Why are you so pale, oh! Come here. Come here....'

Becky felt her father wrap his arms tight around her, pressing her firmly between him and Isa for a long moment.

The pressure of the two adults against her slowed her heart and she sniffed, swallowing back her tears and finally feeling herself begin to calm down.

'*Okay, you're okay,*' Isa breathed. 'You had a bad dream? Do you want to talk about it?'

'No,' Becky squeaked.

'Okay,' Isa pecked a kiss on Becky's head before casting a glance up at Barbra.

Becky followed Isa's gaze, and saw the worry in her mother's face as they met eyes.

'Becky? How much... did you hear?' Barbra asked softly, not moving from her place by the lounge room door.

Becky felt like if there was ever a time to lie, it was now. Lie and let her mother think she knew nothing. Let her keep pretending she was just tired and not sick.

But... she couldn't.

Becky couldn't lie.

Not to her mother.

Not about this.

So, as her father brushed the hair from her face and Isa kissed her cheek, Becky looked her mother in the eye and felt her lip begin to tremble.

'You're dying.'

—END—

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