

Auntie Isabel

By C. Jade Wyton

A lot of things in Becky Bloom's life have been changing. Mostly for the better! She's learning to reach out to people, and is reconnecting with her father and their extended family in ways she never dreamed possible. So, though it takes a lot of bravery, she calls her grandfather on her mother's side and finds herself speaking with her aunt, Isabel. Isabel isn't perfect, and through her Becky learns the exact reason that she was never allowed to meet the family before....

Contains mentions of abuse, family drama, and racism.

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Becky couldn't stop pacing.

*Pacing, pacing, pacing.*

Pacing, and watching the cuckoo clock as it tick-tick-ticked on her bedroom wall. Its intricate little features carved lovingly into the solid wood. The tiny hand that clicked around and around in tune to each second, beating like a tiny little heart.

It was beautiful.

Absolutely faultless.

An absolutely amazing gift that she hadn't expected from her family in Germany after she'd reached out....

*She couldn't read analogue.*

Becky flopped into bed, fondling her phone.

*It was getting late. She should make her decision quickly.*

Should she call her grandfather?

No—

Yes!

No.

Yes?

She looked to the clock again and let out a heavy sigh.

Contacting her father's side of the family had gone so well and been so easy— And they were on the other side of the world! Why was reaching out to her mother's side so terrifying? So heart-stopping?

*She knew why.*

It was different, to send a letter to family that didn't know you existed in hopes of creating a bond.

It was another thing entirely to call family that only lived an hour away —family that knew about you, and could have reached out to you themselves— to try and mend what was broken by someone else a long time ago.

'Deep breath, Beck,' Becky let out an exhale— And smiled weakly as Mimi let out a chirp. 'I'm alright, girl. Don't worry....'

'Mrrp!' Mimi gave another chirp and wiggled out from the pile of pillows it

had been hiding in. It settled down at Becky's side and gave her hand a lick. 'Trrr!' 'Thanks, Mimi,' Becky giggled, running her hand down the mimic's back. 'You're too good.'

Mimi let out a loud purr and closed its eyes— Then, lifted its head as a tapping sounded at Becky's window.

*Don had climbed the tree again.*

Becky wasn't sure how the little guy did it. He barely seemed able to function most of the time. But then he'd somehow managed to find his way onto the sills of the second-floor windows.... Even the ones without trees or vines to climb up. And then he'd tap and tap and tap, until he was either let in or told to go away....

*Tap, tap, tap!* from Don as it balanced awkwardly on the edge of the windowsill.

*Trill, chirp, purr!* from Mimi as it bounded off the bed and ran back and forth between Becky and the window.

'Okay, okay,' Becky laughed, pushing herself to her feet and following Mimi to the window. 'Come on in, Don.... But you have to behave, okay?'

Don gave an excited little dance as the window was opened, then leapt into the room. It landed clumsily on its side and was immediately bombarded by licks and nuzzles from Mimi.

The two mimics greeted each other warmly before Don opened its mouth and dropped a very wet, half-eaten sponge on the carpet.

'Aw, Don,' Becky sighed, watching the animal as it gave a happy snuffle and began to pant. 'Did you get that for Mimi? That's....'

Mimi grabbed the sponge and dragged it under Becky's bed, into its hidden nest of trinkets. Then it bolted out again at top speed and the two mimics began to tear playfully around the room together.

Becky smiled as she watched them, and fondled her phone again.

*She should call her grandfather, shouldn't she?*

She should.

A deep breath, and she dialled the number she'd managed to dig up online....

It was the only number she'd managed to find for *any* of her mother's family. So... it was worth at least *trying*—

'Hello?' an old, croaky voice answered the phone on the fourth ring. 'Who is this?'

'Uh— H-Hi,' Becky managed to stammer out. 'I'm— I'm B—'

'What?' the man interrupted. '*Who* are you? Stop mumbling!'

'Uh— I'm Becky,' Becky said, trying to steady her voice. 'Rebecca? Bloom. Rebecca Bloom?'

'*Rebecca Bloom?*' the man said, slowly. 'Rebecca.... Bloom....'

'Y-Yes. Rebecca Bloom.'

'I don't know a Rebecca,' the man grumbled, and Becky felt her heart sink as his voice pulled away from the phone. 'Isabel! ISABEL! GIRL! Do we know a Bloom? Rebecca? We don't, do we—'

There was a loud crash from the other side of the phone, like a plate had been dropped and shattered— Followed by mostly-inaudible arguing and yelling.

'*Give me the phone!*' another, more feminine, voice exclaimed. '*Dad— Dad give me the— Give it to me!*' the sound of the arguing grew muffled behind the

scraping and scratching of the phone being wrestled out of the old man's hands, before the woman's voice spoke clearly. 'Hello?! Hello? Rebecca? Rebecca, is that you?'

'Uh— Y-Yeah!' Becky answered, instinctively sitting up straighter as she was addressed. 'I-I'm Rebecca.'

Her heart was beating so hard in her chest she thought it might burst out....

*Who was this?*

'Oh my god, it's really you! You— You sound *just* like your mother!' the voice gave a high-pitch squeal of excitement. 'Oh, I can't believe it! It's— I'm— I'm Isabel! Have you— You haven't heard of me, have you?'

'N... no,' Becky admitted. 'S-Sorry.'

'No, no— Don't be sorry! Don't be—' Isabel let out a disbelieving laugh, and it was clear from the sound of the old man's voice fading that she had begun to pace. 'I'm— I'm your aunt! Barbra's sister? Auntie Isabel? I-I-I'm not surprised she didn't tell you about me, we weren't... we weren't on speaking terms when you were.... Oh my god, though! It's *you*! I can't *believe* it!'

'You... you're excited to talk to me?' Becky was beside herself. This was *not* the reaction she had expected— She was excited about it, but she hadn't *expected* it!

'Of *course* I'm excited to talk to you!' Isabel exclaimed. 'I— I've been wondering about you for so long, but— Well. Mother said that we weren't supposed to talk to Barbra anymore— That she'd made her choice, marrying your father.... And then things just kind of spiralled from there and, just, well— Oh, I wish I hadn't been such a coward at the time! If I'd stood up for her maybe she wouldn't have turned me away after she got pregnant— I *did* reach out, you know, but she wasn't having any of it! Not that I blame her, of course. We never really got along and if she didn't want me talking to her or you or your father, I was going to respect that.... Oh, my god! I'm so sorry! I'm rambling! Ah, I'm just so *excited* to hear from you! What— Why did you call? Do you need anything? Tell me— Tell me, love! What is it?'

'I, uh...' Becky was too overwhelmed to respond, at first, and she needed a moment to recover. 'I was just... calling. Because... I wanted to... talk to you.'

The sound Isabel made was one that Becky had made a hundred times before— Though it was very strange to hear it coming from someone else.

'You have *no* idea how happy I am to hear that!' she blurted. 'Oh, I've been so *curious* about you! I kept thinking to myself, "Perhaps I should call? Maybe I should see if Ken would let me meet you?" But, well...' Isabel's voice dropped, then, becoming very *very* low and sad. 'I uh. I figured if he didn't let us come to the funeral, he probably didn't want me contacting him out of the blue....'

'Dad didn't *let* you come to Mum's funeral?' Becky asked, stunned.

'No, he didn't,' Isabel said. 'I-I mean, it was a good call! He didn't want our mother to cause a scene, you see. And she would have! She *always* causes a scene. Her and Sharon *both* always do. And your mother always *hated* it. It was a good thing your father lied about the day it was all happening, because they would have found a way to ruin it. Imagine. Ruining a *funeral*!'

Becky couldn't believe her ears.... She'd had *no* idea her father had done that! She'd just thought they hadn't shown up because... well.... She'd never actually thought about why they hadn't shown up, before.

‘So! So, so— Your birthday’s soon, isn’t it?’ Isabel asked. ‘Near Christmas, right? I remember that, because Sharon joked it was like you were going to be Barbra’s gift that year! Ah, how old are you turning again? Twenty-one? Twenty-two?’

‘Just twenty,’ Becky answered, feeling herself grin as Mimi let out a chirp and crawled into her lap for a pat— Don quickly joining them both.

‘I was close!’ Isabel cheered. ‘I’d call that a win for me! I’ve never been good at math. I’m rubbish at it, really. What about you? Are you still in school? How are your grades?’

‘Um, yeah. Still in school. My last year, actually,’ Becky answered. ‘And my grades are... not the *best*...’

‘Ah, well, school isn’t everything!’ Isabel reassured. ‘I mean, I was held back twice before I dropped out! You’re in your *last year* though? That’s so impressive! Grade twelve, wow!’

‘Actually, year thirteen,’ Becky corrected.

‘Thirteen?!’ Isabel exclaimed. ‘They have *thirteen* grades now? Wow. I didn’t even finish grade ten!’

‘Yeah, it’s supposed to be optional, though,’ Becky explained. ‘To help transition to like, college and stuff? Though uh— I don’t really want to go to college.... I don’t know what I want to do, actually.’

‘*Don’t* model,’ Isabel warned, very quickly. ‘It’s not worth the abuse! No matter what anyone says, just— *Don’t* do it.’

‘You sound like Dad,’ Becky chuckled. ‘He’s really firm about me not getting a job in fashion, too.’

‘He *should* be,’ Isabel said. ‘It’s a terrible industry. It chews you up and makes you mean and bitter, and ruins everything you love.’

‘Yeah, I’ve heard that from Dad,’ Becky gave a weak chuckle. ‘Almost, like, word-for-word.’

‘Ah! How *is* your father?’ Isabel asked.

‘He’s good!’ Becky chirped. ‘Really good. Things were... kinda rough for a while. But it’s gotten a lot easier now.’

‘Oh, I’m so glad to hear that!’ Isabel said. ‘About the better stuff, not the rough stuff.’

‘Yeah, I figured,’ Becky laughed.

‘Ah! And what about that uh... that drow maid your mother hired? Does she still work for you?’

‘Oh, you mean Isa?’

‘Yes! That’s the one! Firm woman, isn’t she?’ Isabel said with humour. ‘Got Sharon to back off, after the funeral debacle. Brought her to tears! Real tears, not fake ones for the drama. I’d never seen anyone but our mother do that to her, before! Does Isa still work for you? How is she doing?’

‘Uh, she... kind of?’ Becky bit her lip, trying to think of a way to explain it— Would Isabel... be okay with her father dating again? Or would she be offended? Becky’s mother had been her sister, after all.... ‘Her and Dad are like... together now.’

‘Together? You mean they’re an *item*?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Aw, good for them!’ Isabel chirped.

Becky let out a long, relieved breath as she did. ‘Yeah. It’s the happiest I’ve seen Dad in a long time.’

‘That’s so nice— And what about you?’

‘Me?’

‘Yes! Do you have a boyfriend?’

‘Uh—’

‘Or girlfriend! Girlfriend is fine, too,’ Isabel reassured. ‘I’m not going to judge— I’m rather progressive, you know.’

Becky thought that was probably the most *conservative* way to put it, but swallowed down her doubt and answered; ‘I uh. I have a boyfriend. His name’s Jareth Slader.’

‘Jareth Slader,’ Isabel echoed, slowly, and Becky felt the hair on her arms stand up.

*The tone of her voice was more than a red flag....*

‘Slader.... Slader...’ Isabel’s voice dropped to a whisper. ‘*That’s an orc name, isn’t it?*’

Becky felt her heart sink. ‘Y... Yes,’ she answered. ‘Is that a... problem?’

‘Uh...’ Isabel clicked her tongue, sounding nervous. ‘Maybe don’t mention it to anyone else in the family. They’re all rather... *old-fashioned* about these things.... That was part of the drama with your father, you see? Even an elf wasn’t good enough for them.... But— But oh! Don’t worry about me! I don’t think it’s a bad thing at all! I think it’s sweet that you’re dating an orc! It’s very charitable of you.’

*There it was....*

Becky closed her eyes, and couldn’t hold back her disappointed sigh.

*Charitable.*

It was *charitable* to date an orc....

At the sound of Becky’s sigh, Isabel cut off and hesitated.

‘I, uh... oh, dear. I said something wrong, didn’t I?’ she mumbled. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry I just— I didn’t mean to be— Oh, I’ve really messed up, haven’t I?’

‘Yeah,’ Becky answered, flatly. ‘Um... I’m sorry. Maybe I should go—’

‘NO! Please! Don’t hang up!’ Isabel gasped. ‘No, I-I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to— I get things wrong, sometimes. I know. I don’t mean to. Please, I-I’m trying to be a good person, and be politically correct and all that! I promise I’m trying. Please just— Correct me when I make mistakes. Please? I don’t want to lose you, too! Not again!’

Becky felt her heart twist. ‘I... uh....’

‘Does he make you happy? Does he treat you right?’ Isabel asked, sounding half-panicked. ‘That’s what I should have asked, isn’t it? Because that’s what really matters. Not that he’s an orc. His race shouldn’t change anything, should it? I’m so sorry! I’ll do better just— Please don’t hang up on me!’

‘I— I won’t,’ Becky promised. ‘I won’t. It’s uh... it’s okay. It was a... mistake, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, i-it was. I-I promise it was,’ Isabel stammered. ‘What is— What is he like? I-Is he nice to you? Does he make you happy?’

‘Y-Yeah. He does,’ Becky answered. ‘He’s really sweet. He looks after me.’

‘That’s— That’s really good,’ Isabel said, starting to calm down. ‘You want a

man that looks after you, don't you? You don't want someone who's going to bring you down, do you?

'Yeah, exactly,' Becky answered, feeling her anxiety ebb and her chest untighten. 'He's the best.'

'I'd love to meet him,' Isabel said, her voice growing soft and melancholy. '*And I'd love to meet you....*'

'Uh. Maybe?' Becky bit her lip, and ran her hand over her mimics' backs. 'You're in Warm Waters, aren't you? I uh. I go up there, sometimes. Maybe we could see about... meeting up sometime?'

'R-Really?!' Isabel's excitement was clear as her voice rose to a high, happy pitch. 'Oh, I would *love* that! It would be so nice. Could we? When? Soon? Please say soon.'

'Um... I don't know,' Becky answered, honestly. 'This is... it's kinda a lot. You know? And it like... might be best to go slow, you know? Especially if it could like. Upset Dad and stuff? Don't uh— Maybe don't tell him we're talking?'

'Oh, yes, of course. Of course,' Isabel mumbled. 'I wouldn't want to upset him. That's the *last* thing I want.... Hmm. Maybe... you could... call me back? In a day or two? And we could talk again. Would that be alright?'

'Yeah, that'd— I think I'd like that,' Becky felt herself grin. 'I'd like that a lot.'

'Perfect! Perfect. And I, uh... I'll try not to slip up again,' Isabel promised. 'But if I do, just tell me, yes? Please tell me.'

'I will,' Becky promised back. Then, her mimics both perked up, and she strained her ears to hear what they had heard. 'I uh.... Um. I think Isa's calling me for dinner. I gotta go but— I'll call you back sometime, okay?'

'Yes— Okay!' Isabel chirped. 'Thank you so much for calling! You have *no* idea how much this all means to me! Call me anytime, okay? Anytime at all! I'm almost always home looking after Dad, so I can answer the phone whenever you need.'

'I'll remember that,' Becky chuckled. 'Uh... thank you for talking. Goodbye... *Auntie.*'

Isabel made another happy squeal, sounding *very* close to tears, but was cut off as Becky hung up the phone.

She could hear Isa coming up the stairs and, after hearing about the drama between her father and her mother's family, she wasn't sure she was ready for anyone to find out who she'd just been talking to.

Maybe she'd tell them later....

*If everything went well.*

—END—

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