



Finding Winter

Celeste Mb

Fable, Magic

Before the first summer, before the seas had melted and our Earth had become blue and green, earth was frozen. Covered in great plains of frost, bare valleys of screaming wind and sharpened cliff edges of glinting ice. Frozen, like a sleeping giant, spinning through space. Cold from the outside in. Waiting to wake up.

On one of earth's rotations, something new happens. A flicker, a bright light, something falling, falling to land on the tip of a mountain. A flurry of snow rising like white smoke, only to be whipped away by biting wind. The sound of ice breaking, like glass shattering. A heavy silence, where for a moment the planet itself seems to pause and hold its breath. Everything would be still for a minute. For two. And just before it all goes back to normal, before this empty world goes back to its orbit, a tiny sound comes from the fallen object. Barely a word, a whispered secret that is carried away by the wind, for no one but the whole world to hear.

“/Lost”/.

This object uncurls, sits up shakily in a crater of broken ice and melted, watery snow. Suddenly, its not an object anymore-its something alien. Unfamiliar. Wrapped in ragged red and gold cloth. Something with a blushing nose and small hands and and bright, sparkling eyes. Something that seems to defy every single thing about the world it has fallen into, something warm from the inside out. Something that looks remarkably like one of us. Small, shivering, alone. A girl.

Beneath a sky white and emotionless, above a ground long frosted over, this little girl stands, eyes narrowed, nose wrinkled against floating flecks of powdery snow, and despite the cold, hands tightly holding onto the slick, melting ice, as though she might fall. She turns her face towards the sky, the ground, the horizon, eyes shimmering, searching for something, anything. But there is nothing to see but an endless expanse of white,

grey and blue. Her shoulders drop, a sudden heavy weight seeming to fall upon them, and with no one but an empty world and empty sky to turn to, shining tears fall from her eyes. They freeze before they hit the ground.

There is no way to count the days, minutes or hours that pass on this planet. This girl-no more than a child really, spends what feels like forever crawling down the mountain she fell on, sliding over shifting snow, gritting their teeth against the wind, biting at her ankles like wild wolves. By the time she reaches the bottom her fingertips are pale, teeth gritted tightly, and she collapses on their back. She is tired, so tired, and feels hot tears spring to her eyes, causing the sky to swim and shimmer as though it is nothing but a bad dream. She wants to stop, to leave, to give up and fly far, far away. There's nothing for her on this desolate world. She doesn't want to see this land ever again. She feels darkness seep into her vision, clouding her mind. Before she closes her eyes, she thinks she sees something glowing through the clouds. Something in her chest pulls, lifting her upwards, and even as she drifts off she feels a fierce warmth flooding her body.

She wakes covered in water. Droplets hang from her lashes, catching the light like tiny stars. She stares in wonder, and then suddenly remembers where she is. Her gaze falls, and for a moment she has to steel herself so that she doesn't cry again. Then, slowly, she pushes herself up to sit. Cold water runs in streams off her back and she turns from side to side to see the source of the damp. Surrounding her are walls, blue, clear and shining with water. Ice, melting.

She tilts her head in confusion, and looks down at her fingers, which have curled in concentration. They have not dug into crunching snow, but something soft, grainy. To her, it looks like black snow, and smells like something she can't name. Rich, musty, earthy. Her hands dig deeper and she feels small chunks of rock, minerals. Something that makes her gasp a little and her eyes widen, although she can't say exactly why. She pulls it out, sending dark chunks flying across the fast melting ice. It's round, hard, and covered in tiny grooves that cross its brown, mottled surface. She stares at it, nestled in the palm of her hand. From it she feels something. It is so different to anything she's ever seen on this planet but somehow she can tell-it belongs here.

It is painful, gruelling, getting out of the hole she has melted. Her fingers slide over the ice, her toes scrape and bang against hard chunks of snow, and with the round object clutched tightly in one hand, it doesn't get any easier. But she doesn't want to let this go. It's the first thing she's seen that isn't white, frozen, or cold, and it

acts like a compass, keeping to a path, the end of which she cannot see.

By the time she sees the edge of the hole, her teeth are chattering again and her arms and legs ache, as though the frost has sunk deep into them. Each gust of breeze stings her throat, cheeks and eyes, and she barely drags herself over the edge before she sits on the ice with a thump and just breathes, eyes watering against the sudden blinding white and screaming wind. Her closed hand is stiff and she can almost hear her muscles cracking as she slowly unfurls it to stare at the round object. Even as she wheezes in exhaustion she turns to face away from the wind, keeping it sheltered. She clutches it close to her chest and crouches tightly against the wind, feeling the frost begin to seep in all over her body-but she doesn't feel the cold.

Maybe it's hours later, even days, but she has created a small mound of snow, using the half melted slush from the hole. It offers her some protection from the wind and feels good to have something of her own, even if she knows one day it will fall apart. She spends a lot of her time inspecting the small sphere, rolling it in her palm, watching how the surface catches the light.

Some of her time is spent watching the sky. She doesn't want to get her hopes up, because by now she is all too familiar with how painful it is when they fall through. However, she sometimes steals quick glances, telling herself she is not looking for anything in particular. Although from within, something sticks in her head that she can't ignore-something glowing, far above, before the world goes dark.

When she sleeps, stretches, stares at the sky, she holds the brown orb close to her heart. She feels if she lost it, her world would fall apart. She knows its silly, to think it holds the answer to all her problems, but something always stops her from just dropping it in the snow. Like now, she gazes at the clouds and snow swirling above, keeping it loosely pressed to her chest. A cloud is tugged one way. A flurry of snow rises and falls. Something golden, just for a second, shimmers softly between them. She hurriedly stands, eyes widening, her snow mound crunching like broken glass beneath her feet. Before she can open her mouth, to scream, to yell, it is gone. And so is her round object.

Fingers scrabble at the snow, as she falls to her knees and throws herself onto the ice, eyes already clouding with tears. Her head rings with pain, with something heavy and dark and sobs fall from her mouth. The wind seems to grow louder, howling in her ears as her glimmering eyes frantically sweep over the pale ice.

Something brown, small in the corner of her vision makes her turn so fast she topples over, and looks up just in time to see it disappear, replaced by that white, blue and grey snow and ice. It's gone. She is alone, again.

She finds her voice, screaming, sobbing, choking on her own despair and grief. To have everything good this empty world could offer-and then to lose it all. Even her mound of snow is gone, scattered to pieces, like she knew it always would. She kneels, eyes empty, her hands holding her head. She looks around at the world, at the emptiness, frost, harsh cold and for the first time truly feels she doesn't belong here and never will. She is far away from anything she could ever love. Her tears fall freely. Her throat stings from crying. Defeated, by the world around her and by her own hopes, she falls back against the snow, feeling cold deep inside her.

Somewhere, a small round brown object falls, falls deep down, making metallic pings and echoes as it ricochets off walls of ice. Into a hole made so long ago, but never really closed up, light fills the chamber made by a young girl. It hits the ground-soft, damp, rich and feels light from above. Something inside it unfurls. It belongs here. So it begins.

Days, weeks, months past. Beneath the snow, things shift-some like normal, some unusual. Above, mountains are still towering, still carved giants of ice, but shimmer in the light, almost as if they are dripping with water,

as if they are melting. And the sky is still white, but more and more often there is empty spaces, moments where a shaft of yellow light or deep satin blue weaves between the clouds, and then is gone. The girl doesn't see this though. As the planet wakes up, she is asleep.

Something tickles her nose. She wrinkles it, almost turns over, to go back to curling in the snow, but something pulls at her from within. She opens her eyes and almost screams. In front of her face, a mass of spindly brown and fluttering green. She bolts upright and stares. Something is alive, and there's more than that. Water trickles in streams off the top of mountains, the ground is covered in patches of brown and green and above...above she see flickering gold light. Her eyes sparkle, and she breathes in air that tastes sweeter, warmer somehow. She carefully brushes snow off some of the lower leaves of the thing growing in front of her. For the first time since falling to this odd, unforgiving, lifeless planet, she smiles.

Weeks, months, years. She spends most of her time tending to the growing plants, carefully pushing soft, slushy snow around so they don't drown. She collects water running from the mountains, and always, always turns to stare up at the sky, catching not just glimpses of glowing gold but sometimes an entire horizon full of warmth, or dark, almost black blue with tiny white pinpricks. She feels, both in the world outside and inside her, there is a balance. Some days there is more snow than others, some days the warm light feels warmer than ever. But she is happiest when the sky is dark, and tiny glowing points come out. Staring at them, she feels, she /knows/ they are truly like her. Warm from the inside out. She stares at the sky, and is happy, because she knows there will always be somewhere she belongs.

Winter has come once again. Families skate over ice, huddling together in quilts and jackets against the wind, make snow forts and hold warm mugs and hands of people they love. They eagerly await summer's warmth, but still, the whites, blues and greys of winter make people feel peaceful, and they take comfort in knowing this is somewhere they belong. At night, they might watch the sun set and stars come out, and if you listen closely, amid the brightest stars and darkest night, before it is whipped away by the wind, you hear a whispered secret, spoken for the whole world to hear.

“Found.”

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