

The Broken Latch

An old man named Ruan
lived in a crooked little cottage
at the edge of the forest.

He was blind,
so he knew the world
by other means than sight —
by the rough grain of the table
he had sanded smooth,
by the cinnamon warmth of drying herbs,
by the slow weather of sounds.

His house had a flaw:
the front door latch was broken.

He meant to fix it, truly.
But something else always came first —
the kindling to split,
the kettle to mind,
the paths to relearn
after every storm.

So the door stayed slightly ajar.
Not open, not closed.
Just... slightly able to move.

Neighbors worried for him.
“Aren’t you afraid?” they asked.
“Of thieves? Of wild animals?
Of wandering strangers?”

“I am less afraid of what might enter,”
Ruan would answer,
“than of shutting out what should!”

Some evenings he would sit by the doorway
and listen to the light thinning in the trees —
the last bees stitching the air,
the hush gathering like a shawl about the house.

The broken latch made a soft noise
whenever the breeze changed,
as if the door itself were practicing
how to welcome.

One evening,
as the kettle sang its small, steady note,
he felt a different stillness at the threshold.

No footfall.
No knock.
Only a presence,
like a hand cupped around a candle.

“Hello?” he said,
not turning his head.

A young girl’s voice answered —
bright but gentle,
as though careful not to spill
whatever she was carrying.

“May I come in?”

“You already have,” he said,
and smiled.
“The latch told me.”

She stepped closer.
He heard the faint clatter of buttons in a pocket,
the breath of someone who had been running
and was trying not to show it.

He poured a second cup,
then found her hands by their warmth
and set the tea there.

“Have we met?” he asked.

“No,” she said.
“But you left your door open.”

They sat without hurry,
the kettle cooling between them,
the forest leaning close to listen.

And though Ruan could not see her face,
he knew —
by the way the room felt larger —
that something long expected had arrived.

They talked long into the night,
sipping their tea.

— *William Zeitler*
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