

Zofia Stanecka, *The Memory of Speckles*

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Bolete vanished. Sylvan Speckles were used to the fact that he was late for their usual evening meetings, but this time he didn't show up at all. Nor did he show up the following evening. When he failed to show up under an oak tree at the Meadow of Memories for the fourth time in a row, Bolete's parents, his younger sister Blueberry, his cousins and the cousins of his cousins, and, above all, Grandma began to worry.

The Speckles had been living in the forest since times immemorial. Some claimed that

Grandma remembered the time when the first seed fell onto the ground. It was Grandma who had looked after the forest when it began to grow, and she named her children and the children of her children after the plants or animals they were supposed to be individually responsible for. Each day, tiny Speckles monitored the fungi growing, checked whether raspberry shrubs managed to survive the winter, and cared for the trees. They also looked after the residents of the forest—whenever a need arose, they would dig up roots from underneath the snow to feed roe deers, they would stuff hedgehogs with food to protect them against autumnal chill, or they would help hares find better hideouts. They all resided in a huge oak tree, the oldest one of all the trees in the forest. In the evenings, they would all gather at the Meadow to recount on what had happened to them in the course of a given day. Grandma remembered all that was said. She herself liked to spin tales from the olden days. Bolete and Blueberry liked the evening gatherings a lot. They waited for Grandma’s stories about dragons flying over the forest and they dreamt of something extraordinary happening in their lives.

“Nothing is going on at the moment,” Bolete moaned. “It’s fungi and berries, berries and fungi over and over again. How boring!”

“Stop complaining about being bored. You’re provoking the fate. Remember: sometimes, an ordinary, quiet life is the most precious treasure,” Grandma scolded him.

And yet, Bolete kept looking for adventures. He would venture north to search for trolls, he would peep into beavers’ dens, he would climb the tallest pine trees to look for dragons flying in the sky. Nobody knew where he had ventured this time round.

Blueberry felt her big brother’s absence with every inch of her body—from her bare feet to the very tips of her hair which stuck out in all directions. The adults conferred in whispers, sending squirrels and birds to search for Bolete, and they did not pay much attention to Blueberry. To be sure, the parents did talk to her, for they knew it was a difficult time for the entire family, including her. Blueberry did know, however, that all their thoughts were with

her missing brother at the moment. It was the same for her, anyway.

“Where did he go? What for?” she kept playing these questions out in her head over and over again. “Why hasn’t he come back yet?”

Days had passed and there was still no sign of Bolete. The squirrels returned empty-handed. The birds spread the message but it seemed nobody had seen a little sylvan Speckle about to embark on an adventure. One of the orioles brought the news that new tenants had settled at the western periphery of the woods and that something rather strange was going on there, but she was very young and her message was obliterated by the chirping of other birds. The Speckles, ridden by worry about their missing cousin, simply did not pay attention to it. Soon, Blueberry’s parents were overcome by resignation, and Grandma walked around frowning. Her eyes were filled to the brim with anxiety.

Meanwhile, Blueberry could barely sleep. At nights, she kept tossing and turning in her bed made of a piece of a tree bark, thinking of the happy times spent with her brother in the forest. Sometimes, she could spot the silhouettes of her parents lit up by the moonlight, dozing restlessly. One night, in the wee hours, she saw something more—a grey shadow blocking the entrance to their tree hollow.

“Is that the home of Blueberry?” an unfamiliar voice roared. “Is that a dragon?” The Speckle trembled with fear, and yet she did look out. An Owl was sitting on an oak branch. The parents were not too fond of the Owl. They used to say she ate too many mice and was ruthless towards other living creatures. And yet, Bolete was friends with her. Is that possible that she was now bringing news of the missing Speckle?

“I don’t know for sure where your brother is,” the Owl hooted, as if replying to the question that had not been uttered. “I have an idea, however, and I would like to show you something.”

Blueberry didn’t ask what it was exactly and why the Owl approached her rather than

anybody else. Last time the Owl appeared in front of Grandma, the old lady told her to fly away to the other side of the moon and not to show her beak ever again in the proximity of Speckles. Even though Grandma was tiny, nobody in the forest would have dared to ignore her orders. The Owl had to have a good enough reason to be turning to Blueberry now. The Speckle looked back at the cosy interior of her hollow and then climbed the bird's back.

"Are you ready?" the Owl asked, and—without waiting for an answer—she dived downwards without making a sound.

Blueberry held the Owl tight with her tiny hands. She didn't want to fall down, not now. The bird dived again, and then soared up towards the tops of the trees. The Speckle often climbed that high, but she never flew like that in between the branches. The wind was blowing in her hair but she did not feel cold for the Owl was oozing warmth. They flew in almost complete silence. At times, it seemed to Blueberry that the bird had forgotten all about her and it would accidently drop her along the way, but the Owl flew cautiously, trying not to make any abrupt moves. At one point, she hooted quietly:

"We're almost there." The Speckle looked ahead.

At the western periphery of the forest, at a precise spot reported earlier by the little oriole, there was a clearing. Trees had been cut down, the shrubs and grass burnt down with fire. In-between the fallen trunks some creatures were moving around—smaller than trolls and less angular, but just as noisy. They held rods with glittering tips in their hands, struck the trees with them, and the trees fell with a groan and a crash. The birds, stripped of their nests, circled above the clearing, screaming.

"These are human beings," the Owl explained. "They came here to take over the forest." Blueberry looked down with a pang. Each blow of the shiny rods was like a punch in the stomach.

"Why are they destroying the forest? Couldn't they just settle here, just like us?" she asked.

The Owl sighed. “I don’t know, Speckle, what drives humans to do what they do. I’m just repeating what I’ve heard.”

“I brought you here,” she continued, “cause the mice I had caught claimed to have seen one of you lot among the humans. That is why I set her free. I hope it was worth it.”

The bird circled around the clearing, flying right above the humans’ heads. Blueberry looked intensely into their faces, yet she couldn’t find the answer to why they were destroying the forest.

At the edge of the clearing, in the shade of young birch trees, there were tents, with fires burning in between them. Suddenly, the Owl trembled.

“Look over there,” she roared.

The Speckle looked intensely. Behind the tents, she noticed a wooden cage covered with a dirty piece of cloth. The Owl landed. Blueberry noticed that the bird was squinting, too—the dawn was approaching beyond the meadow. The bird pushed Blueberry towards the cage with her beak. The Speckle took a step forward. Thump, thump. Her heart was beating so fast that she was afraid it would draw the humans’ attention. As she was pulling up the cloth hanging from the cage, she could hardly breathe.

“You found me,” she heard a whisper.

It was Bolete. Haggard and dirty, he pressed his face against the wooden cage. Blueberry felt as if she was about to faint—partly due to relief, partly due to fear. Her brother looked terribly weak, and she didn’t know how to take him out of his prison. For the time being, she just grabbed his hand sticking out from the cage.

“They captured me as I was watching them from a distance,” Bolete spoke with effort. “I couldn’t send a message because they covered the cage straight away. If it wasn’t for the mouse...”

“She performed her task well,” the Owl spoke. “From now on, I shall not eat anyone from her species. Let us not waste any more time, though. The sun is about to rise any minute now.”

The Speckles understood what it meant. Once the sun rises, the bird will become drowsy and will not be able to help them. Blueberry checked the bars, but she couldn’t find anything that could help her open the cage. If only she were bigger, stronger...

“They want to cut down the forest,” Bolete whispered, “and build a road cutting through its middle. They want to capture us all and keep us under lock and key. They say... that we are worse than them, that our time has passed.” Tears welled up in the Speckle’s eyes.

Blueberry tried to remain calm. After all, they had a task to fulfil. Only what could she do, so small and so weak? The first ray of sunshine shone on the horizon. The Owl sprang up. Was she planning to abandon them? Blueberry sat by the cage. Since she was unable to free her brother, she at least wanted to be near him. She was sorry now for not waking up the parents. Perhaps together they could do more. Perhaps... Her train of thoughts was interrupted by the sound of little feet thumping coming from the meadow. The Speckle turned her head and saw a pack of mice emerging from the grass. The Owl was soaring above them. The mice ran up to the cage and quickly bit through the wooden bars.

“Run away now!” they squeaked and disappeared in the grass as quickly as they had appeared.

Bolete stepped out from the cage. He was so weak that Blueberry had to help him climb the Owl’s back. The bird spread her wings. Suddenly, a human turned up by the cage. It was a girl. She seemed small in comparison to other humans, but huge when compared to the Speckles. She was much bigger than the Owl, too. The girl opened her mouth, as if she were going to scream. Blueberry froze with horror. So much effort only to be captured again! And yet, no sound came out from the girl’s mouth. The Owl took off into the sky, and the girl just stood there watching them fly away. The Speckle thought she was looking straight at her.

Afterwards, there was only the rush of air, the familiar chill of the forest, shadow under the pine trees and, finally, landing at the Meadow of Memories, where all the Speckles had already gathered, alarmed by Blueberry's disappearance. Bolete could barely stand on his feet, but he refused to rest. As soon as they landed, he hugged his parents and approached Grandma. He wanted to tell them all as quickly as possible about what he had seen and what fate awaited their beloved forest.

When he finished, the silence fell on the Meadow. Blueberry wanted to break it and shout:

“We will not give up without a fight! We will defend our home until the very end!” She didn't do it; instead, Bolete spoke again.

“There's one thing I've learnt in captivity,” he whispered and looked Grandma straight in the eye. “Sometimes, an ordinary, quiet life is the most precious treasure.”

Grandma nodded and looked at the Owl. She thanked the bird with a nod of her head, then looked at Blueberry and, as if she were able to read her mind, added:

“We, the Speckles, are not fit for a fight. Our job is to look after the forest and preserve the memories of the past events. We cannot stop this from happening. Whether we want it or not, the humans will come here with their tools and hot fire. They will seek means for a living. They will find the means, but not the living. The life will move elsewhere.”

Blueberry noticed a tear coming down Grandma's cheek. It looked like a stream moistening the ground dried up by the heat.

“We will find a new home,” Grandma continued. “It won't be easy, but we will come to love it and will help make it beautiful.”

“How will we get there?” cousin hare asked. “Our feet are so small and the world is so huge.”

“On the wings of the dragons!” the Owl roared and spread her big silvery wings.

“On the feet of the giants,” somebody else thundered, and the Bear appeared from behind the shadow of a tree, his family in tow.

Blueberry laughed quietly. She did not want to leave the Meadow, the oak and many other familiar places in the forest behind. Wouldn't it be possible to have a new home in another forest though? The one with no threat of a cold axe and hot fire...

The next day the Speckles set off. Carried on their friends' wings and backs, they travelled towards their new home. On the way, they kept telling the stories of what had happened to them to one another, to animals and trees—so that the memory of these stories would live on after they had been long gone. A week later, humans arrived at the Speckles' Meadow. They stood under the old oak, axes in their hands, ready to cut it down. And then the Oak rustled. Whether it was down to the tales enchanted in its branches or to the tranquility of the place, but none of the humans dared to raise an axe against the humming tree. The humans stood in its shade for a while, and then simply walked away, bidding farewell to the rustling of memories. Only a little girl stayed in the Meadow. She went up to the oak and pressed her ear against its bark. The oak told her all about the Speckles and about the times when there were no humans in the forest and dragons flew above it. The girl stood there listening for a long time. When the story was over, she decided that when she grew up she would plant new trees in the place of the ones her lot had cut down, and she would look after them like a big human Speckle.

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