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The Song of Thetis

by

Christopher J. Tuthill

I was playing on the beach with my children, Christian and Ella, when Christian ran off ahead of us, as he often did. He disappeared over a dune as Ella and I were inspecting a hermit crab.

“Christian!” I yelled. “Wait up! What did I say about going off on your own?”

He didn’t respond, but five year olds never do, particularly if they’re on the beach and have found something interesting to look at.

I took Ella by the hand and we ran up the dune and back down it, but among the beachgrass there was only a lone gull, no Christian. In the depression at the bottom of the dune we found ourselves standing in small, trickling creek that ran down to the sea. I saw two sets of footprints in the muddy creek bed, one small, one beside it that was larger. But no Christian.

I panicked, and began to run upstream, yelling at Ella to follow. We ran for ten minutes or so, she skipping along happily through the water, stomping here and there, yelping when she got herself wet, oblivious to the terror I felt. My heart pounded in my chest as I imagined my son’s abductor.

But no matter how far we ran, there was

still no sign of Christian. On both sides of us the dunes now seemed impossibly high and steep. The sun was starting to set, casting a long shadow across the bank of the stream bed we found ourselves in. Here the footprints in the mud vanished beneath the water.

We went forward. The creek became deeper and swifter and we now walked along its edges.

“Daddy, I think maybe we should go back to the house and get mommy,” Ella said.

There’s nothing like sage advice from your six year old to give you confidence.

“We’ll go back in a little while,” I said.

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“But where’s Christian?”

“We’ll find him soon. He’s probably just hiding from us. Playing a little game.”

We went around a little bend in the stream, and there was a large oak on a green hill. The stream flowed out from beneath it. On the grass, beneath the tree, lay my son, curled on his side. His eyes were closed, and for a moment I was terrified that he was hurt, but I could just see in the dim twilight that his chest moved up and down as he lay there. He must have fallen asleep.

Then from behind the tree came a young

woman. Her hair was silver, and white and yellow and purple flowers were arranged in it here and there. She wore a thin, white dress that seemed to shimmer in the dusk.

“Simon,” she said.

“Yes?” I said. I could hear the terror in my voice.

“Come up here with your daughter and sit with me awhile.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Come up here with me. Your children are safe. Only talk with me awhile.”

“Why did you take my son with you?”

“He followed me. I don’t take anyone against their will.”

Ella was climbing up the side of the embankment, and now I saw her beside the girl. She went to her brother, curled up beside him on the grass, and was soon asleep.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“I am Thetis,” she said.

I climbed the embankment. A chill passed through me as an evening breeze came from the ocean. When I was up on the hill beside the tree, I looked out toward the sea, but could only see the creek running downhill. Soon even that would be cloaked in the dark.

“Look, miss,” I said. “I got separated from my son, he just ran up the beach and I couldn’t find him. And now here he is, but it’s getting dark and we’re going to have a hard time finding our way back to the cottage.”

Thetis walked up to me, put her hands on my shoulders, and drew her face close to mine. Her eyes were silver, like her hair, and she smelled of apples. She slid one of her hands down to mine. It was cold, but something more than that. Old.

I was afraid, but I didn’t move. Her eyes pierced through me. She was cold as marble to the touch, and as she took my hands in hers, I felt as if she knew my every thought, my every hope and dream and wish. She embraced me, and her cold red lips brushed

against my cheek.

I became very tired, all of a sudden, and I sat down beside my children. I wanted to pick them up and carry them back to our cottage, but became so drowsy that it became too much of an effort to even keep my eyes open. Though I tried to stay awake for Christian and Ella, I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness.

I had a strange dream. Thetis led me to the water as if I were a child. The water was cool and dark, and as I swam I felt as if I were a traveler in a strange land. My limbs felt leaden as I tried to stay afloat in the water, and I was sure I would drown. But Thetis swam alongside me and spoke to me, though I couldn’t understand her words. The sea grew rough, and the waves threatened to drown me, and I worked furiously to stay afloat. It was dark, but the moon shone brightly and I could make out the shore, far in the distance. I yelled out for help, but my voice was carried off by the wind.

I kicked furiously toward the shore, and tried to swim to safety, but my arms felt like sticks ready to break off in the tempest. Then I felt Thetis’ steady grip on my shoulders. She pulled me down beneath the waves, and I tried to cry out but my throat filled with water as I sank.

I woke to the wind howling in my hair. A light mist was coming down. It was dark, but I could see by moonlight the gnarled branches of the oak above me. I stood and shook sand from my pants. My hair was damp and I had somehow lost my glasses.

I looked down and saw Ella, but not Christian.

I picked her up in my arms.

“Sweetheart,” I said. “Ella. Where’s your brother?”

She whimpered and clung to me, but said nothing. I set her back down and ran frantically around the tree. There was no sign

of Christian anywhere.

And the strange girl, Thetis, was nowhere to be seen either.

I called out Christian's name for some time. I cried out in fury and in fear, but heard no reply except the waves in the distance.

"Daddy, can we go home?" Ella asked. Her voice was plaintive. She shivered against the chill night air and I picked her up and we began our walk back in the dark, down the creek bed.

* * * *

We got back to the vacation cottage, where my wife Kara had been holding a vigil for us. A police car was in the driveway beside our station wagon. I opened the door to the kitchen and Kara ran to greet us, overjoyed.

"You've been gone for hours, Simon! Where were you guys? I was so worried I called the police! The neighbors were helping me look for you!" she hugged me tight and kissed me and took Ella into her arms.

I could see the relief on her face change back to worry. "Where's Christian?" she said.

"Did he come back here?" I asked. "We went looking for him. He ran off."

"Ran off where?"

"Ella and I, we ran after Christian. He ran away from us, down the beach—I kept going after his footprints, but I didn't find him. Or, we did find him, under this great big oak tree down the beach a ways. But then I lost him again."

"You lost him? Where is he?"

There was desperation in Kara's voice, and tears in her eyes.

Ella said, "There was a lady with him there, by the tree."

I was suddenly aware of a police officer, a young man in his twenties, eyeing me from the side of the kitchen as I stood in the

doorway.

"Are you saying someone took him?" he said.

"No," I said. "No—there was a woman, but she was just there, with him. She—I... I don't know what she was doing there."

"We fell asleep," Ella volunteered.

Kara sat down at the table and cried as Ella clung to her.

The police officer said, "When did you last see your son?"

"It was just around dark," I said. "What time is it now?"

"It's almost two in the morning, sir."

"That can't be. We were only gone a little while."

Kara was up now, over her initial shock and putting on a sweater. "I'm going to find Christian," she said.

The four of us, the cop, Kara, and I, with Ella in my arms, went back out. The cop gave us flashlights and we walked along the beach, retracing my steps. "He just ran up over that dune," I said, gesturing with the beam from my flashlight. "I followed him up the creek to this enormous old oak tree, and that's where I last saw him, with a young woman. She said her name was Thetis. But he isn't there now, and neither is she."

We walked over the dune together. There was no creek.

The cop said, "Sir, maybe you mean some other dune. But I don't know where. I've lived here all my life, and I don't know of any creek in this area at all."

"It was here," I said. "Maybe not a creek, I don't know. Maybe some runoff. But it was flowing into the sea, and Ella and I followed it along to that tree, and we found Christian sleeping there under the tree."

Before we left the house, the cop had radioed his partner, who now came jogging toward us from up the beach.

"Did you find my son?" Kara asked the

officer. Her voice was shaking and it pained me to hear her so upset.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am," the officer said. "But it looks like you found your husband?"

"My son is missing," she said.

"Listen," I said. "This is crazy. I know he has to be around here somewhere. If we can just find that girl again, Thetis, maybe she's seen him. Maybe she knows where he is."

The cop, shone her light at me. I squinted and felt self-conscious all of a sudden.

"Tell me about this girl," she said.

I shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "She was just there under the tree, and then she wasn't."

"When we woke up, she was gone," Ella agreed. "She told us to lay down."

The officer asked me, "Have you ever seen her around here before?"

"Well, we're here on vacation. We've only been here a few nights," I said. "But no."

"You said you found your son near a tree?"

"Yes, that's what I told the other officer," I said. "I must have gotten turned around, because we can't find the creek or the tree now."

"Sir, have you been drinking at all this evening, or using any drugs?"

"I don't ever drink or use drugs," I said. "I just, I lost my son..." I trailed off.

I knew how it looked from their point of view. I felt numb, as if I were someone else looking in on a tragedy.

We walked around the dunes for some time, shining lights here and there. But we could not find the creek bed, nor the tree, nor Christian.

* * * *

The next few days and weeks were hell. Kara talked very little to me, and if she blamed me for Christian, I understood,

because I blamed myself too.

I went back across the coastline many times during daylight hours, but each time I could see that there was no creek, and no tree anywhere near our cottage. There was a river about five miles up the coast, but Ella and I had walked to the tree within fifteen or twenty minutes.

Kara made and posted hundreds of fliers with Christian's photo on them. He was smiling in the picture, with a little gleam in his eye that meant he was up to mischief. We put up fliers everywhere in the little seaside village. We visited all the neighbors to ask if they had seen him, or Thetis, but no one knew anything about her and none of them had seen our boy.

I was interviewed by the police many times, but nothing I said could shed any light on Christian's whereabouts. The police were polite, but I could see that there were things about my story that they weren't sure about.

One night, about two weeks after Christian disappeared, I was reading Ella a book on the couch before bedtime. It was *The Hobbit*. It had been a long day of posting fliers and walking door to door. Kara sat on the other side of the room, counting out more flyers that she would place around town tomorrow. She was also preparing to go on a local television station, which she had already done twice, to tell our story and try to get the word out again.

I finished up a chapter where Bilbo got the better of some spiders, and told Ella it was time for bed.

"The spiders caught Bilbo in their web," she said. "Just like Thetis caught us. But we can escape, just like he did. She put a spell on you, just like the spiders, but we can shake it."

"Put a spell on you?" Kara said from across the room. She looked up from her notes.

“She kissed daddy,” Ella said. “It put him to sleep, but he woke up, and I bet he can find Christian if he tries.”

“What do you mean, she kissed daddy?” Kara said.

“She kissed him and put him to sleep, but he woke up,” Ella said. She stretched and yawned. Kara looked at me coldly. I had never seen such anger in her eyes.

I got Ella to bed and Kara was waiting for me in the kitchen.

“What was she talking about, Simon?” Kara said. “What did she mean, this woman was kissing you?” Her face was red with anger.

“She’s got an active imagination,” I said. “We’ve been reading Tolkien, so I guess she’s just making things up.”

“Is she?” Kara said. “Then how do you explain that night? You just fell asleep under a tree? Come on! I mean, what is going on here, Simon? It never made sense from the beginning.”

“Look, Kara,” I started. But she was out the door before I could finish. I heard the tires on the gravel driveway as she sped off.

* * * *

We did not find Christian despite weeks and months of looking. The weather got colder, and the seaside cottage no longer seemed like the great idea it had been during the summer. I was able to extend my vacation time, and work remotely with my laptop, but we were burning through our savings. The owner of the cottage was renting the place to us cheaply, because the summer was over and she was a very kind woman who felt badly for us.

By Thanksgiving Kara had found an apartment in town from which she intended to keep looking for Christian. Ella was going to live there with her.

Kara made it clear I wasn’t going with them. I was to come over on weekends to visit Ella, but not before checking with Kara. It wasn’t a divorce, but it may as well have been.

I think the police suspected me of something, but they never charged me with a crime. I must have spoken to everyone in the little town at least twice, but there was no sign of Christian, and no one could tell us anything more than we already knew.

I was determined to stay at the cottage, and I didn’t feel I had much choice. With Christian missing, I couldn’t bring myself to leave, even if it ruined us financially. My salary wasn’t very high, and though the landlady gave us a good off-season rate, we would also have to pay rent on the apartment and keep both households going. Our house was an eight hour drive away, and my brother was checking in there every week, but we were behind on the mortgage there too.

Through all this, I dreamed of Thetis.

I could feel she was nearby, and now that I was alone in the cottage, it was like she was everywhere, calling to me from around the corner of the bookcase, from the fireplace, from the dark corners of the attic. She called from the basement and the yard and the rustling of the leaves outside, and most of all from the endless crashing of the waves on the shore. I knew if I could only find her, it would lead to Christian.

* * * *

On Christmas Day, I went to Kara’s apartment. My wife had aged in the three months since Christian’s disappearance. Her dark hair had streaks of grey in it now that I hadn’t noticed before, and there were lines on her face and beneath her eyes that spoke of many sleepless, grieving nights.

When I arrived, Ella leapt into my arms as always.

“Santa came!” She yelled. She held up a My Little Pony toy that she’d been asking for, and I immediately regretted buying her a hand carved doll from a local toymaker. It was a unique gift, but probably not what she wanted. I was always making mistakes like that with people I cared about.

“Merry Christmas, Simon,” Kara said, without getting up from the couch. They had decorated a small potted pine tree that stood in the center of the living room of their apartment.

“I wish you guys would come back to the cottage,” I said.

“Oh, can we, momma?” Ella said.

Kara ignored the question. “Did you pick up the coffee?” she said. “I’m dying for a cup.”

Of course, I’d forgotten it. “No” I said sheepishly. “I’ll run out and be back in a few minutes.”

Kara said, “Everything’s closed. It’s Christmas.”

“I’ll find a place,” I said.

“Can I go too?” Ella said.

We walked out into the brisk wind of Christmas morning. Snowflakes were coming down through the salt tinged air. In the distance a foghorn blew. Ella snuggled up against me as we walked toward the center of town.

A local Dunkin’ Donuts was open. We went inside and I got some donuts and ordered one of those big coffee boxes. I was overcompensating, as usual. I figured both Kara and I could drink a cup, and maybe later she could reheat some until she could get to the grocery store tomorrow.

Ella and I sat at a small table by the window, and she ate a glazed donut and we talked of all the little, precious things that Ella always liked sharing with me. She told me her

ponies were beautiful, and they were all going to have a tea party later, to which I was invited. For a moment, I imagined that we were still a family, that nothing had changed, that we hadn’t experienced a catastrophe.

Ella looked out the window and her eyes grew suddenly wide. She shouted, “DADDY! IT’S CHRISTIAN!”

I looked and there he was, walking toward us on the sidewalk, laughing and smiling, as happy as he’d always been.

I rushed out the door.

Two figures walked up a rise in the otherwise deserted road. It was Christian, dressed in jeans and winter coat and hat, and beside him was a girl with silver hair, and a glimmering, pale face. She held my son by the hand. It was Thetis.

Christian looked different somehow. Paler, almost sheer, as if I could see through his delicate frame as he walked toward me.

My heart pounded, and I shouted--I couldn’t make any words out, I just yelled incoherently as I ran toward them.

But my cries were lost in the suddenly ferocious, driving wind. I could barely move against the gale force. The snow blew into my eyes, and I could see nothing for a moment. The icy gale stung my eyes as tears rolled down my face.

When I was able to look up again, they were gone.

I stayed in the street and called his name for a long time. I looked for his footprints in the snow, but there were none.

Ella joined me in the street, and we called out his name again and again: Christian! Christian! Christian!

When I asked him, the guy behind the counter said he had seen no one outside but Ella and me. The street was empty and the wind drove the snow against the windows as I stood there shivering, with Ella’s hand in mine.