

The Girl and the Orange Crayon

Summer Hill (2023)

Needle-sharp pine tree leaves scraped against the mud-streaked Toyota as it traversed the dirt road. The trees loomed, broad trunks entwined with hairlike vines. Human-like shadows appeared eerily behind the trees. Suitcases and camping equipment thumped in the back of the car, and cold air ejected from the air conditioning vents, lessening the summer heat of the year 2000. As the car slowed, a sign with faded letters appeared, revealing their destination: Oldwyn National Park. Memories of Sophie's last summer returned as she recalled the sights and sounds of the wilderness.

Sophie was no ordinary eight-year-old. Her unassuming presence belied a fiery passion for art. Blonde waves cascaded down her shoulders, framing a face that sparkled with creativity and curiosity, and her brown eyes shone with warmth and intensity. Sophie possessed a rare gift—a keen eye for detail and a natural sense for colour—which allowed her to create vivid and imaginative artworks, often in crayon. Sophie's true treasure was her family. Her parents, Nicki and Jesse, showered her with love. In their embrace, Sophie was secure and happy.

That night, as Sophie laid her head on her pillow, she sighed with relief. It had been a gruelling day, setting up camping equipment and preparing baked beans, freshly caught trout, and toasted bread. Her stomach was full, but she was exhausted.

Her eyes searched the moonlit surroundings outside the open tent fly, absorbing the beauty of the wilderness. Despite the fatigue, Sophie felt content, surrounded by her family and nestled in the heart of nature.

The night air was alive. The trees creaked in the wind, which carried the scent of pine, earth, and wood smoke. As Sophie's eyes adjusted to the darkness, she noticed a figure crouched as still as a statue under an oak tree near the playground.

Its body was tense, arms wrapped tightly around its knees. Sophie wondered if it needed help. The figure shifted, revealing a girl around Sophie's age. She had long, tangled, grey hair that flew into bright orange eyes contrasting with dark-grey skin. The girl had an almost metallic sheen. Sophie wondered if the girl was from a different world entirely.

Sophie shook her mum to rouse her. Nicki opened her eyes and blinked groggily. Sophie's heart raced as she told her sceptical mother about the girl. Her words tumbled out, her voice high-pitched and trembling. Sophie looked toward the oak tree, her eyes darting frantically, searching for the girl. But the spot was now empty.

Nicki grabbed her flashlight. As they reached the tree, Nicki shone it around, searching. The light caught on gnarled roots and rough bark, but there was no trace of the girl. Nicki put a comforting arm around Sophie's shoulder. Sophie's mind raced. She couldn't shake the image of the girl, and she promised herself that she would draw the girl, determined to make sense of what she had seen.

In the morning, Sophie woke in a cold sweat, her heart racing from a nightmare. She searched the tent for her notebook. Her gaze fell on the table outside, where she had left it with her crayons.

At the table, Sophie flipped through her sketchbook. She found an unfamiliar drawing—her heart skipped a beat. A swing set, drawn in orange crayon. Sophie examined the careful strokes and wondered how they appeared in her book.

Peeking over her shoulder, her dad complimented her on the drawing, but Sophie's stomach churned. She tried to explain it wasn't hers, but Jesse just brushed it off, thinking she was being modest. Sophie looked around, searching for clues about the drawing—but everything looked normal.

That night, under her duvet, Sophie felt sadness wash over her because this was their last night at the campsite. After a day of swimming, hiking, fishing, and cooking, Sophie was extremely exhausted and eager to sleep. As Sophie nestled into her pillow, she peeked outside, searching for any sign of the girl with the orange eyes. After what felt like an eternity, Sophie acknowledged the girl was nowhere to be seen, and she drifted into slumber.

The next morning, the car was packed. Sophie sat comfortably in the backseat and flipped through her notebook ready to create a new piece of art. As she turned the pages one by one, she found the grotesque drawing of the swing. This time it was different, and not for the better. Beside the swing, lay a motionless girl, as if it had fallen off. Sophie's heart pounded in her chest as she tried to make sense of it. She wondered who was drawing in her sketchbook and what these drawings are indicating. Eventually, she shut her book not wanting to look at the ghastly drawing anymore, and pretended like she didn't see anything. But the image haunted her for the rest of the journey.

20 years later...

Green leaves fluttered down from pine trees as the Toyota drove the road, now paved and smooth, rather than the dirt road it once was. Suitcases and camping equipment jostled in the back of the car, just like when Sophie came here when she was younger. She was excited to show her husband, Jack, and daughter, Ava, where she camped when she was young. Her childhood memories of this place were still vivid. She was impatient to share this with her family and more than ready to create new memories.

As they approached the end of the road, cars zoomed by on the right side, creating a clamour of noise. Sophie had been looking forward to this camping trip, and she expected to see the familiar sign of Oldwyn National Park that marked the entrance. Instead, her family was greeted with an abdicable sight of a large shopping complex. The once-quiet road was now bustling with motion with both cars and people rushing about.

Sophie's heart dropped as she noticed that the camping ground was now gone and now replaced by the gloomy walls of the mall. She couldn't imagine that the National Park that held so many memories had been destroyed for good. Deciding to make the best of a bad situation, Her family pulled into the large, busy car park out front of the mall. As Jack ran in to change the gas bottle, Sophie took a moment to look around. The mall was occupied, with hundreds of people rushing in and out of the shops per second. At this, Sophie couldn't help feeling a sense of loss.

While she glanced around the area, something uncalled for caught her eye. A well-remembered feature she could never forget—the old, chromatic playground that had been only stepping away from where she camped. It had been there for as long as Sophie could remember, and she was surprised to see that it was still standing, albeit in a state of disrepair. Sophie's heart lifted as she walked over to the playground. Memories flooded back to her, of playing on the swings and slides. She smiled as she watched her daughter, Ava, climb up onto the old metal structure, her face lit with joy.

As Sophie sat on the park bench, memories of her childhood flooded back. She remembered the eerie girl she had seen crouched underneath the oak tree with her grey skin and orange eyes. It was a sight that had haunted her since then. She remembered the sinister drawing in her sketchbook of the swing set, and the girl lying beside it.

As she sat there lost in thought about the sinister girl and the strange drawing, Sophie noticed Ava swinging higher and higher. Anxiousness rose as she saw Ava's hand slipping from the chain. Suddenly, a quick flashback of the drawings filled Sophie's mind, and she realized that it was a warning. Without hesitation, she dashed towards Ava, tears streaming down her face. Sophie caught Ava just as she came off the swing and they both fell to the ground with a thud. Sophie held Ava close to her chest, relieved that she was safe. Looking around, Sophie noticed an old, mouldy orange crayon laying in front of her, just like the one used for the drawings.