

THE
NIGHT
FOREST



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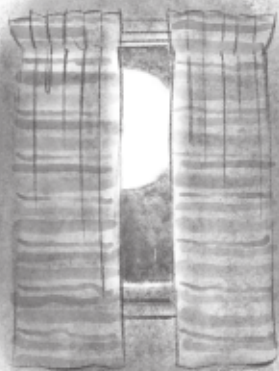
*This one is for all the readers who have visited
their own Night Forest.*



Chapter 1



The night that Ziggy found they couldn't fall asleep, there was a full moon. They could see its glow peeking through their curtains, illuminating the yellow, pink and blue stripes of the fabric.



Ziggy's bedroom wall had been painted with a mural – a large drawing of tree shapes, leaves and grasses that their mum had painted when she was pregnant.

Ziggy had seen photos of Mum from then. Her long, red hair was tied up in a big, messy bun so you could see the pink paint smudged across her cheeks. There was a dash of green paint, like a lightning strike, across the old shirt she was wearing. It was stretched tightly over the huge dome of her belly and, inside that shirt, inside that large tummy, was Ziggy.

Their dad must have been the one to take the photograph; Mum looked so happy painting.

As they lay there in the darkness of their bedroom that night, Ziggy thought Mum always looked happy when she was painting. Her face would get a kind of contented glow about it and her body relaxed, as slumpy as their old cat Ratbag when he stretched out on the sofa for a sleep.

Mum hadn't looked happy this evening though. She'd sat stiffly on her chair, her back straight and upright. Ziggy noticed how she pinched her fingers together against the material of her baggy dungarees, as though she was checking she was still there.

Dad hadn't been much better. His mouth stretched across his face in a downward line, his eyes glassy and red behind his thick-framed spectacles.

They'd waited to tell Ziggy until after they'd eaten. It had been their favourite dinner – noodles, a tiny bit of soy sauce, with peas and cheese – and they felt the meal rolling around their stomach as their parents spoke to them. Ziggy thought they might never want to eat that for dinner again.

The exact words their parents used were a blur, but they'd definitely said they loved

Ziggy and that that was the most important thing. But Dad was going to move out and Ziggy wouldn't see him every day, and some days they'd just see Dad and not Mum at all. It was going to be different, and it was sad, but Ziggy's mum and dad kept telling Ziggy how much they loved them and how that would never change.

But Ziggy had to ask the question to make sure they had understood.

'Are you splitting up?' Ziggy asked.

Their parents rushed to answer them. As they spoke, Ziggy had the sensation that, although they knew they were sitting on a chair at the table, they were actually floating away, drifting towards the ceiling, out of their body completely.

Fragments of their words reached Ziggy with the answer to their question: yes, their

parents were separating.

'Ziggy? Are you OK?' Mum asked, reaching forward for their hand.

Ziggy had nodded, back in their body, where they could feel Mum's fingers gripping onto theirs. Dad had reached for their other hand. 'Are you sure, Zig?' Dad said.

Ziggy had nodded again. Not because they felt OK, but because they suddenly had no idea what to say or do.

They stayed like that for a moment; Ziggy in the middle, Mum on one side and Dad on the other.



holding hands, in front of the empty bowls of noodles.

Then, it was bedtime. They went through their normal routine. It was Dad's turn because Mum and Dad would take turns each day to get Ziggy ready for bed. Shower, toothbrushing, pyjamas with comets on, which were getting a bit too small, warm from the radiator.

Dad read the next chapter of Ziggy's book to them when they were tucked up in bed. Usually Ziggy would read a bit to Dad too, but they didn't feel like it this evening. They just lay back, listening to the words and not really following the story. The story was about a boy who found himself transforming into different creatures, out of his control.

'This is getting a bit out of hand, isn't

it Zig?’ Dad said when they finished the chapter. He ran a hand through his black hair, curly just like Ziggy’s. It was getting a bit long; he needed a haircut. ‘Imagine turning into a rhinoceros on a school trip.’

‘Hmm,’ Ziggy said.

‘Are you sure you’re OK ... after what Mum and I talked to you about? It’s OK if you’re not, you know. You can feel any way you want to about it.’

Dad stroked Ziggy’s hair and Ziggy closed their eyes. They had the same feeling as they’d had before at the table, of floating away and not being able to speak.

‘Alright, Zigster, goodnight, sleep tight, don’t let the ... rhinoceroses bite. Do you want Mum to tuck you in too?’

Suddenly, something became clear to

Ziggy: they wanted to be alone.

'I'm OK,' Ziggy replied in a small voice.
'Goodnight.'

Dad shut the door, and Ziggy watched the last rays of warm light from the landing slide away, leaving them in darkness. Ziggy always slept like that: no nightlight, no lamp, no door open to the landing. They usually just closed their eyes, turned to the side and let sleep take over.

Not tonight.

Ziggy lay there, listening to their breath and the small sounds that drifted up from downstairs. They heard the click of the kettle going on, the muted conversation coming from a television programme, and then they heard their parents speaking to each other. It was usually the most comforting sound, listening to the distant hum of them talking

downstairs, but not tonight.

Ziggy struggled to listen to what they were actually saying, but could not make out any of the words. It didn't sound like they were arguing or anything like that. But, there must have been arguments that Ziggy had not heard; there must be a reason why they didn't want to live with each other anymore,

They turned onto their side and closed their eyes but, a moment later, they were tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable. They tried laying on their front, their back, up close to the wall and just by the edge of the bed. Ziggy turned their pillow over, pulled the duvet a little more tightly around them, and tried again to drift off.

The room was too dark, Ziggy decided.

It had never been before, but suddenly they were filled with shadowy thoughts about what could be lying in wait in the dark. They sat bolt upright, realizing then that there was some light; there was the soft glow of the moonshine that was creeping through the curtains. The moon was full, a white circle in the sky ... but it wasn't enough.

Trembling slightly, Ziggy reached a foot down onto their bedroom floor. They didn't know why they suddenly felt so afraid of being in their room, the only room they had slept in since they were a baby. Even as their toes touched the familiar feel of the carpet, Ziggy found themselves dashing, running, towards the door, to swing it open



as wide as it would go.

The landing light had been switched off and so there was no comforting glow, but the light from the living room crept up the stairs.

‘Mum? Dad?’ Ziggy called out. They called out softly, but their parents appeared quickly – almost as though they were expecting Ziggy not to fall asleep immediately.

‘Are you OK, darling?’ Mum asked.

At the same time Dad said, ‘What’s up honey?’

Ziggy looked at each of their parents’ faces in turn.

‘I ... I ... can’t fall asleep ... I’m afraid of the dark.’

It was only as they spoke that they realised how true it was.