

If It Looks Like a Phoenix...

Eva stopped walking and put her backpack down beside a grassy tussock. She took a deep breath of mountain air and looked at the hillside she had already traversed.

“Wow!” she said to herself; until now she’d not realised quite how far she’d come.

She could make out some rocky scree and tree roots, places that had been difficult to cross. But here she was with the blue sky above and a glorious view of the valley below.

Eva sat down and opened the backpack. She reached around for her flask. It contained the special liquid that had kept her going for so long. It felt light in her hands and she started to become anxious. Everybody said that once the liquid had run out you were pretty washed up. The thought made her breathing uneven and heat prickled from the center of her chest, up her neck to her face. This was what running out of the liquid meant.

She shuddered and tilted the flask, but it was no good, the sound of liquid sloshing about had gone. Instead there was a noise as if something had congealed at the bottom. She shoved the flask back into her bag. She really didn’t want to think about it.

As she got up she noticed the next section of the path had jagged rocks and scraggy trees bent over as if blown by fierce winds. They looked grotesque, like talons waiting to grab her. Beyond, the sky in the distance had become dark and foreboding. The peaks were high and black as if she might simply disappear when she got there. Eva turned, she wanted to go back, find some more precious liquid. But already she knew this wasn’t a possibility. All the gates she had passed on the way up locked behind her; once you were through them you couldn’t return.

With slower steps she carried on, apprehensive about what lay ahead.

A bit further down the path she was relieved to see a dwelling. It was pretty, with a thatched roof and a white wicket fence, just like a cottage in a fairy tale. A sign said Welcome All Women. Eva smiled maybe somebody here would help her.

The door creaked open into a large room. It was rather dark, but perfume filled the air. Across the other side a woman was standing behind a counter. “Come in, Come in,” she cooed. In the gloom Eva thought she looked rather beautiful, with black hair piled on her head in an elaborate style, and her waist pinched in so her figure looked wasp like.

As Eva stepped forward a spotlight beamed down over her and she saw that the room was lined with mirrors. As she moved she could see herself reflected from every angle. Every wrinkle, every slack piece of skin was emphasised. Her hair looked greyer than she remembered. And with each step she seemed to be gaining weight. So by the time she reached the counter she felt fat and unattractive.

“Well,” the woman said. “You’ve come to the right place!” Confirming Eva’s doubts. “Here we can stop time.”

“Really?” asked Eva, “That would be wonderful.”

“Let me show you.” And the woman swept her arm and doors began to open behind her to reveal a glass atrium. The light was radiant and Eva could see that the room looked out over the valley. A party was in full swing. Eva could hear laughter and chatter. It sounded like fun.

“Now who would you like to be?” the woman asked, placing several glossy images in front of Eva for her to look at.

“What do you mean?”

“Which one would you like to be?”

“They all look rather young?” Eva finally replied, thinking that the images must have been air-brushed.

“That’s the whole point isn’t it? We don’t want to get...” the woman paused and leant across the counter, “...old,” she whispered. The woman’s mouth had puckered in disapproval as she spoke, as if it was a dirty word.

“Now. Tell me who you want to be?” Her voice seemed angry. Close up Eva could see the woman wasn’t as beautiful as she’d first thought. The make-up was so thick and her features mask-like so that any individuality had been erased. The sweet perfume in the room was starting to smell tainted as if air freshener had been used to disguise something rotting. Eva was also aware that the voices from the party didn’t sound right at all. She peered through the door; and realized the background panorama was just a screen. The people were speaking words at random, everybody talking and nobody listening.

The woman had crossed her arms and was staring at Eva still waiting for an answer. “I think...” Eva hesitated, knowing her response might sound silly; “...I think I just want to be me.”

The woman started to laugh. The sound crackled around the room. A loud tick, tock, tick, tock, added to the racket, making Eva’s head ache. She covered her ears as she ran from the cottage slamming the door behind her.

She was crying. Ahead the sky was even darker almost black. Eva didn’t know what to do. She sat down and took the flask out. Definitely empty. But the sludgy lump was still flopping about when she shook it. She decided to look inside and removed the lid. And recoiled. At the bottom of the flask, reflected by the silvered surface, was a grub. Fat and pinkish and wriggling around. “Uugh” she said out loud and replaced the cap quickly, screwing it down and then pushing it into the back pack.

It made her feel sick. The sensation of nausea reminded her of the morning sickness she had suffered many years ago. But she'd got through that because at the end of nine months she'd had a beautiful baby to hold. Now there was nothing to look forward to.

"Hey!" A voice called. "Are you alright?"

A woman in purple lycra was jogging towards her. The woman was a similar age to Eva and had a reassuring smile. Eva blurted out, "Not really. I'm running out of special liquid and I'm feeling dreadful."

"Look, have some of this."

Eva grabbed the bottle, and slurped greedily. But it was just water. Cool and refreshing but just water.

"What am I going to do? I can't go up there without it." Eva pointed upwards to the dark crags and clouds ahead.

"Yes, you can. The liquid isn't everything," said the runner. "Didn't carrying the full flask make you tired? And it was sometimes so inconvenient. To be honest I'm quite glad to be free of it. Yes, things are different but that's alright?"

"But I feel so fat," Eva said.

"Well if you're anything like me, you've spent your whole life on a diet, and nobody really gives a damn."

Eva had to admit that was true. It was only then Eva observed the runner's outfit did nothing to conceal the bulge of stomach and chunky thighs.

The jogger said, "Maybe you just need to go a bit further to where the path turns. I'll come with you."

So Eva followed the woman, clambering over a fall of rocks and then wading through a stream. She kept her gaze downwards so she didn't lose her footing.

"Look now!" The woman said.

Eva raised her eyes, the cloud had lifted. A beam of sunlight struck snow on the highest peaks making them sparkle. Ahead was a green slope with many paths crisscrossing the mountainside.

"You'll be fine now," said the runner. "It's not always easy but remember, not everybody gets to see this view. Not everybody is that fortunate."

The jogger turned and ran onwards. Eva had to admire the strong legs as they strode out. She wished she could feel that confident.

Taking a deep breath, Eva looked around. The pathways were all different; some routes looked more challenging than others. One sign-post read, 'Gardens. Don't forget to smell the roses.' Eva smiled, that was something she remembered her Grandma saying. Her grandmother had been a wonderful woman; determined but always with a twinkle in her eye.

Feeling better, Eva picked up her pace.

When she got to the rose garden she sat on a bench and closed her eyes, appreciating the fragrance around her. She started to wonder about the flask again and that horrible thing inside. She took it out of her bag. It felt different. Under her fingertips she could feel it gently vibrating. She would have to have another look. Very, very slowly she unscrewed the lid. Then waited. Eva jumped as something started to emerge over the rim. But it wasn't horrible. It was a very beautiful creature. She thought it might be a butterfly, as it had wings which were brightly coloured like the reds and golds of an autumn forest. But it didn't have an insect's body. It was more bird-like.

Suddenly, with a flap of its wings, it lifted into the air, and landed on a rose. Eva felt sad that it was going away. She got up to continue her journey but left the backpack; she no longer wanted that baggage. As she was leaving the garden the bird-butterfly joined her again and flew a little way in front of her. She realised that it was going to stay with her. This amazing thing had always been there, at the centre of her being, waiting to emerge.

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