

## Introduction:

### The River in the Box

Somewhere towards the end of town, in a small cottage, surrounded by a spacious garden, lived the red haired Anne with her mother. Her father, who she used to visit from time to time in a far off town, had left a long time ago, and in fact it was so long ago that she couldn't remember. Actually, her real name was Anne Ravenhead, but to everyone she was simply 'Red'. That didn't bother her because somehow the name suited her down to the ground.

Anne was nine years old but tall, with a round, freckled face, a little snub nose and a fringe that kept flopping in her eyes. Even though she was a big girl by now, she still loved playing with toys, and there were heaps of them all over the house. I say 'heaps' because most of them were in bits and pieces piled all around. You see, Anne had a terrible temper. She wasn't an easy person to live with, especially for the toys, although they never complained. That's not to say that she didn't like them or didn't take care of them. On the contrary, Anne was a very considerate child, but sometimes... Well, there were times when she just flew into a rage, and then woe betide the toys! The sweet, kind-hearted girl seemed to vanish into thin air and was replaced by a nasty, menacing creature who prowled around looking for someone to pick on. Pity the poor toys she set eyes on then! For all that tended to be left of them was just broken parts and torn shreds. Mum would get extremely annoyed and threatened serious punishment if it ever happened again. But one way or another, either the threat wasn't enough or she simply forgot about it (she was a very busy woman indeed), so that after a day or two the storm had died down – much to the dismay of her poor toys, of course.

The story I'd like to tell you began precisely on one of those awful days. Actually, it was a lovely day – for everyone, that is, except Anne. It was the beginning of the summer holidays, the weather was warm enough to play outdoors all day long, but not so hot as to be unpleasant. Red had spent most of the day in the garden trying to put the finishing touches to the tepee she'd started building a few days earlier. It was hard going,

though. There was always something wrong. If it wasn't leaning over, then it looked so stupid to her that she'd have to tear it all down again. Mum was busy as usual, working at her computer all day, and was so tense and stressed that she wouldn't have been of any help. On top of all that, every child in the neighbourhood seemed to have vanished underground. After hours of strenuous effort, Anne decided that the tepee just wasn't worth it, and so she went back indoors.

Although the cottage was small, it was cosy and rather pretty. Downstairs there was a spacious kitchen-dining room. Next to that was mother's bedroom and the 'everything room': a big closet full of old, useless stuff. Anne sometimes spent whole days in there making up stories about winding paths and endless mazes. She wasn't in the mood today, though, so she went straight upstairs to where her mother's study and her own bedroom were.

It would, of course, be exaggerating to suggest that Anne's room usually looked clean and tidy. With Mum's help she managed to keep it some kind of order, but only on days better than this one. To be honest, today her room looked as if a herd of frisky baby elephants had just charged through it. There were pens, pencils and crayons strewn all over the desk. Several unfinished drawings were lying on the floor next to the overturned chair. The bed she had attempted to transform into an enchanted castle that morning now looked very much like the abandoned tepee in the garden. The contents of the shelves and boxes were scattered over the floor after she'd rummaged through them looking for tools for her building project. Her poor, forlorn toys, most of which were in a very sorry state, lay heaped all around in every imaginable or unimaginable place.

Anne entered the room shooting murderous glances all around her, looking for something to vent her anger on. It didn't come to that, though. One glance convinced her that someone had been meddling with her things, and there was no way she would let that go unpunished.

'How dare she!' she just managed to blurt out in fury and rage, before yelling at the top of her voice, 'Muuuuuum!'

'What on earth's the matter?' Mum wasn't in the best of moods herself as she was desperately late with her translation. 'For goodness sake, stop shouting!'

‘Have you been tidying my room?’

‘Not exactly tidying. I was just looking for the scissors. I still need them, actually.’

‘They’re in the bathroom,’ Anne snapped back.

‘How come in the bathroom?’

‘My new doll’s got lice and I had to do something about it.’

‘You... what?’

Anne watched while Mum dashed into the bathroom and immediately reappeared clutching a mutilated, bald-headed doll.

‘This is disgraceful!’ Mum was so angry that Anne was quite taken aback. ‘We only bought it a week ago and it’s already totally wrecked. Well, you’re not getting away with it this time. Listen to me: You’re not getting any more toys from me until Christmas. I’m sick and tired of your destructiveness!’

Red was wondering whether to carry on scowling or to admit her guilt when the doorbell rang. She was glad of the excuse and tore downstairs. Maybe she could use the confusion to come up with something better than a lame apology.

However, she was in for a surprise downstairs, which would make her forget all about her doll. There was a tall old gentleman at the door. He looked so strange that it gave Anne a start at first. He was dressed in a long coat that nearly reached the ground (Anne began to sweat at the very thought of wearing such a coat in summer). Perched on his head was a rather tall top hat decorated with shiny golden stars. His gaunt, bony face was covered with a long beard reaching down to his chest, and his appearance would have been rather frightening altogether if it weren’t for his eyes which looked so sparkling and cheerful, even under the bushiest eyebrows Anne had ever seen.

‘Good evening,’ the gentleman greeted her. His voice sounded unexpectedly youthful. ‘My name is Nerod Laptsev and I sell toys. May I come in for a moment?’

Anne was so surprised that before she could grasp what she was doing, she found herself hauling the man up the wooden staircase. The old, wheeled trunk that he pulled along squeaked as it rolled over every step.

‘Mum! Mum! Mr....er.. um.’ Anne looked back questioningly at the old gentleman.

‘Laptsev. Nerod Laptsev,’ he told her.

‘Mr Laptsev sells toys. His huge trunk is full of them!’ Having already forgotten about the doll, Anne was dreaming about the fantastic surprises hidden within the trunk.

‘Maybe I can explain a little better,’ said Mr Laptsev. ‘The word ‘salesman’, I’m afraid is a bit misleading. I am in fact a member of an ancient and, alas, declining craft guild. We define ourselves as ‘toy salvagers’. However, since that term is unfamiliar to most people, we introduce ourselves as salesmen. I trust you will forgive this slight... inaccuracy.’

Mum had been listening attentively all along, and was scrutinizing the man in a very distrustful manner. Yet he didn’t seem in the least perturbed by this. He just stood there on the landing, leaning on his large trunk, and looking completely at ease.

‘Would you mind telling me more precisely what it is you do?’ she asked. ‘Is it some kind of restoration work?’

‘Good gracious, no, Madam! I am chiefly concerned with locating and recovering those species of toys which are threatened with extinction.’

‘Endangered species? Of toys?’ Mum started to giggle. ‘Then you needn’t look any further as our house is full of them. Mr Laptsev, I reckon you’re about to make the deal of a lifetime.’

The elderly gentleman gave a short bow.

‘Precisely, dear lady.’

Now, Mum really looked confused, though she was trying hard not to show it.

‘Well, now, let’s be serious,’ she said coldly. ‘What is it you are trying to sell us?’

‘I don’t want to sound rude, Madam, but the one and only word I always give is: *nothing*.’

‘I’m sorry, but I still don’t quite understand what this is all about. Are you buying toys or selling them?’

‘Let us rather say, my dear lady, that I *exchange* toys. But only when I find something that is of particular interest to me, naturally.’

Mum looked a lot more relaxed when she heard this.

‘Okay, I think I’m finally beginning to understand. You are some sort of collector. In which case, you have probably not come to the right place. You won’t find anything here older than a couple of months. The poor things just don’t survive any longer than that.’

‘That is of no concern,’ replied Mr Laptsev. ‘May I take a closer look at them?’

‘Please, go ahead, if you can handle the sight of a battlefield.’

The next fifteen minutes were torture for Anne. She was so curious to know what was in the trunk that she could hardly restrain herself from begging Mr Laptsev to hurry up. As if deliberately trying to be annoying, he was so preoccupied with his search that he seemed to have forgotten about everything else. Very slowly and carefully, he examined every toy he came across in the room. He even produced a magnifying glass from his coat pocket to take a closer look at some of them. Every now and then he would mutter something under his breath, and once or twice he scribbled something down in a little notebook. Anne’s mother was meanwhile typing away at her computer, and was clearly not distracted by his presence. But for Anne, time dragged by slowly like thick, gooey molasses. On more than one occasion she tried to show her impatience by coughing loudly. For a second, she even considered demanding he stopped what he was doing, but oddly enough for her, she didn’t dare to. There was something about him that made her feel uneasy. Besides, the toys were all in such a pitiful condition that she also felt a little ashamed. What if he didn’t find anything interesting? Would he then leave without opening the trunk? For a split second Red had a twinge of regret. If only there were just one toy that was still intact! She was a practical girl, though, and rarely wasted time on such thoughts. So she quickly reassured herself that if he took a fancy to something, that would be great. If not, then too bad, and good riddance to him!

‘Hmmm...,’ sighed Mr Laptsev at long last. ‘I see. You were quite right, Madam,’ he turned to her mother who had immediately appeared in the doorway. ‘I have found nothing ... substantial here. However, I would like to treat you to a little surprise so that you won’t be left with the impression I have wasted your time. Otherwise my visit would have been pointless, wouldn’t it?’

## Ghost Forest

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He bent over the case, opened it and carefully pulled out a large, flat box. It was weird, but Anne could have sworn that the box was bigger than the trunk, and yet she had watched Mr Laptsev take it out of the case in front of her very eyes. She didn't dwell too long on that thought, though, because the elderly man was already slowly opening the box and setting it down on the floor.

At first Anne thought it was some sort of television set. Someone had once told her that there were televisions in Japan that could be watched from all sides. Then it suddenly dawned on her that this was something stranger altogether. Mum was already squatting down next to the box and staring at it in awe and disbelief.

There was a river flowing inside the box.

Actually, the river was just one element of the game – it surely had to be a game, although Anne had never seen anything quite like it before. There was a mountain range in the far corner on the left-hand side, right under Mr Laptsev's elbow where he was leaning on the open lid. Anne couldn't imagine how mountains so steep and high could possibly fit into that flat box. The river had cut through the mountains, frothing and roaring its way through the narrow gorge in between before it widened out into a gentle flow dividing the hill planes which made up the rest of the game. Those hills were covered with dense forest, except here and there you could see clearings with forest animals the size of insects roaming around in the meadowland. Set into the landscape at various points were a number of tiny buildings: there was a watermill, a fishing jetty, and a minute hut nestling in the branches of a huge tree with an ingenious system of ladders leading up to it. Even the clouds suspended just under the lid of the box looked real and drifted slowly over the misty mountain tops. The scene was so incredible that Anne was speechless and just stood there staring at it wide-eyed. Evidently pleased at this reaction, the old man gave a little smile.

'That's amazing!' said her mother after a long silence. 'I can hardly believe my eyes. Whatever will technology come up with next!'

'Well, a somewhat *forgotten* technology, if you don't mind me saying, Madam. This game is much older than we might imagine.'

Anne's head was spinning with excitement. She had so many questions she didn't know where to begin. What kind of a game was it? Where did the old man get it? What did he mean by 'old' when it was obviously very new?

However, there wasn't time for questions. Before she had even collected her thoughts, she had already said, 'I want it!' And then all other ideas vanished from her mind except knowing she would rather die on the spot than part from this magical game. Although her mother was also transfixed by the box, she reluctantly tore her eyes away and put her arm round Anne's shoulder.

'Sorry, my love, but we can't afford anything like this. This game must cost a fortune.' She looked at the old man for support. 'Isn't that right, Mr Laptsev?'

'Quite frankly, one can hardly measure the value of such a game in financial terms.'

'I want it!' repeated Anne, biting her lip to keep from crying.

'But Anne...', replied her mother unconvincingly as she already had a fairly good idea of where this was going.

'I want it!' Red insisted for the third time, clenching her fists. As hard as she struggled, she could think of nothing else, which made her even angrier.

'I understand,' said Mr Laptsev. 'In such cases our profession has devised a rule that permits...'

'I want it!'

'...that permits the temporary loan of a game for a few days in special circumstances. I would be delighted to apply this rule here.'

'Did you hear that, Anne? The gentleman has offered to lend us the game.' Mum clutched at this idea like the proverbial drowning man grasping at straws.

'Only a few days?' Anne asked disappointedly before immediately adding, 'Ok, ok, I agree.'

She knelt down next to the game and tried to grab a tiny animal that sprang away at lightning speed.

'Anne!' Mum exclaimed nervously.

'What? ... Oh yes, thank you. Thank you very much.'

‘Not at all,’ replied Mr Laptsev with a smile. ‘It’s merely part of my job.’

‘But we haven’t been able to offer you anything in exchange,’ said Mum with some embarrassment.

‘Yes, well, I have to admit things have got a little out of hand here. Let’s be optimistic, though, and hope that it only applies to toys. No doubt we’ll soon be persuaded of that in practice.’ The old gentleman reached inside his coat pocket and drew out a large watch, glanced at it and then flew into hurried activity. ‘How time flies! Madam, it was a great pleasure. Until next week, then.’

‘But you haven’t even given us a phone number!’ Mum looked terribly flustered, even ashamed.

Mr Laptsev was already on the doorstep. He turned round and looked at her in astonishment.

‘Number? What number?’ For a brief moment he seemed rather confused, then he tapped his finger on his forehead. ‘Ah, yes, I’m so absent-minded. Actually, there’s no need, and I shall contact you anyway. Goodbye, Madam. Goodbye, Anne.’

He hesitated before leaving and added, ‘I wish you...strength.’

Still feeling confused and awkward, Mum stood watching after him for a long time, all the while tapping at the doorframe, deep in thought.

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Anne was furious. It was the second day the game had refused to work.

Everything had been going fine and the first few days had simply flown by. She was so enchanted by the box that she would have forgotten to eat if it hadn’t been for Mum. She would only flop into her bed at night when she no longer had an ounce of energy in her. The magic game continually offered new surprises. At the beginning, Red had tried to catch some of the little creatures that populated the box. But after she had pricked herself (or had been bitten) and bled, she quickly gave up on that. Then she busied herself with exploring the landscape. There wasn’t a great deal to see among the dense woodland, but she nevertheless managed to establish that animals were only to be found on the near side of the river. In gen-

eral, the game's two halves divided by the river, looked quite different from each other. Where there was meadowland on the one side, there was virtually impenetrable forest growing on the other. Each side differed in terms of colour as well. This side glowed with cheerful reds, yellows and browns, while the opposite was monotonous dark green broken up here and there by a few grey patches as if a disease were eating its way through the woods. Even the birds flying around were keeping well clear of that side of the river. Anne couldn't find any explanation for that, and to tell the truth, she couldn't really be bothered to as she was quite happy exploring the near side, which was also full of lots of much more interesting things. The watermill's wheel was turning and clattering cheerfully, the tree-house swayed gently in the breeze, and Anne even came across a waterfall in the gorge between the mountains. Its tiny proportions made it look rather comically bad-tempered, but still it was incredibly beautiful and fascinating. The game had been a lot of fun until yesterday when, quite out of the blue, it had stopped working.

At first, Anne refused to accept that the magic was over, and for a long time she was cross with Mum, who had tried to calm her down. Then she looked the box over to see if something was damaged, but eventually had to give up. And this made her so furious she was fit to burst.

'Are you going to work, or do you want me to smash your face in?'

'Stop it, Anne!' shouted Mum from the next room. 'I've told you a hundred times, it probably needs new batteries.'

'New batteries, my foot! That old man has given us some cheap junk, but I'll soon sort it out!' She prodded at the river which had turned into something resembling a kind of hard jelly. 'If only I could find how to get into the works!'

'I'm not going to put up with that tone of voice! Leave the game alone and find something else to do. You've been getting on my nerves all day!'

'Yeah, yeah...'

If she hadn't been so tired, maybe Mum would have noticed a dangerous tone in Anne's voice that would normally have warned her that some mischief was brewing. But either because she was too tired or simply because she was fed up, she preferred to end the conversation. And to show that she didn't want to be bothered anymore, she shut the door to her room.

Anne had been waiting for just that. Without losing any time, she rummaged through all her shelves and cupboards until she found a big hammer. She then made her way to the box, tight-lipped and frowning. Slowly, she lifted the hammer above her head, hesitating a few seconds as if expecting the game to show some sense at the last moment before spitting through clenched teeth, ‘good riddance to bad rubbish!’

Bang! The hefty hammer smashed down right in the centre of the game somewhere between the mill and the fishing jetty. To Anne’s great amazement, nothing happened, except the hammer bounced off as if made of rubber. She stood there for several moments not believing her eyes. Then she realised that something really had happened. She bent down over the box in order to take a closer look.

First, she noticed that the game was radiating a light blue-green glow as if a thin, transparent veil had been thrown over it. Then somewhere in the centre, a little puff of smoke appeared that quickly started growing thicker. Anne was beginning to worry and thinking of running to Mum, but to her even greater horror, she discovered she was unable to move. Panicking, she attempted to shout, but her mouth just refused to open. She struggled with all her strength to free herself from the grip of the invisible force that held her, but it was useless. Something like thick mud enveloped her and she couldn’t blink an eyelid let alone move a leg or speak.

In the meantime, the smoke had expanded and was taking the form of a tall, upside down cone. It was spinning round at rapid speed and was slowly getting nearer to Anne. Just a few days earlier Red had been watching a programme about tropical storms and, to her horror, she now realised that it wasn’t smoke, but a small tornado. One of her arms was lifted up and drawn towards the neck of the cone. ‘No, no, no!’ she tried to shout, but to no avail. Unwillingly her arm stretched towards the tornado which drew near and started slowly swallowing her. Her body got thinner and distorted like a cartoon character. The invisible force gradually lifted her up, turned her upside down and stuffed her into the mouth of the tornado. ‘Like a scoop of ice-cream in a waffle-cone,’ thought Anne. Then she lost her bearings completely and decided simply to let herself be carried away. For some reason she no longer cared what happened to her.