



Something Wonderful
Written by Tanya Braham

The air was cool as Elia and her daughter, Louisa, reached the top of the mountain. The last bit of morning fog had faded away between the trees, dissolving in the afternoon sun. The day was bright as it had climbed high into the sky, seeming to settle there, with a warm smile all its own.

After what had been an hours-long hike, the pair had stepped out into a clearing, finding the cliff's edge and a view like nothing Louisa had seen in her young life.

The forest before them was green and flourishing. It spread endlessly through to the horizon, broken only by mountains and jutting stone cliffs. A waterfall rushed down the opposite cliffside, loud and sparkling in the sunlight, ending over a wide lake whose surface seemed mostly undisturbed, reflecting the light of the sky.

They stopped to take in the view. Louisa crept forward, looking beyond the edge of the mountainside, to find that they were very high up from the ground.

"Careful," said Elia, her voice filled with warning. "Stay away from the edge, *mija*. It is higher than it looks."

Louisa gulped. "Alright," she said. She stepped back, letting out an anxious breath before turning to her mother, smiling. "Wow," she said, breathless. "It feels like we're floating above it all."

Elia smiled. "I thought so, too," she said.

"Is that why you wanted to come here? Because it's so beautiful?"

"Not entirely," she said. "I wanted to camp here tonight and head back to the cabin in the morning. Your uncle and aunt will meet us there in the morning. Your cousins will be there too," Elia said. She hugged Louisa, leaning down to press a kiss on the top of her head. "What I really want to show you are the stars."

"I've seen stars, *mama*." She laughed. "I've seen a bunch of them in the sky back home. They're pretty, I know."

"Oh, *mija*. Back home in the city, you see a couple of stars. Here, you'll see something else. It'll be wonderful, trust me."

Something else? Something wonderful? Louisa tilted her head. Her mother might be exaggerating in that way she always did. "Careful, *mija*," she would always say, "watch your step on the stairs or you'll break something." Or, one of her favorites, "don't go tasting my coffee, *mija*, or you'll start shaking out of your boots." In any case, whatever it was her mother wanted her to see, Louisa was excited.

"I wanted to be here just the two of us first." She glanced at her daughter. "Your grandparents brought the family here when I was your age. This part of the park usually has the fewest campers because of the long hike it takes to get here. I've only ever seen other families at this campsite a handful of times," she said. "It was always worth it to me, though. And our family made the trip every summer until all us kids left for college."

"When you were my age?" Louisa's eyes opened wide. "I'm not sure I believe you. That must have been forever ago."

"How old do you think I am?"

"I don't think I should answer that," said Louisa.

"Good instincts," said Elia. She pulled a large blanket from her pack, spreading it on the ground. Its bright colors were made of recycled fabric, something she had picked up at a farmer's market a few weeks before. "Sit," she said. "Rest a moment, and eat."

"I'm tired," said Louisa, her cheeks warming at the admission. "Aren't you, *mama*?"

"I am," she said, with a soft smile. "My grandfather was a forest ranger for many years and he used to joke about nature liking to watch us break a sweat before gifting us a good breeze. Was it worth all the effort it took to arrive here?"

"Of course, it was, *mama*." Louisa nodded goofily, before looking around again. "Wow," she repeated. "I think I love it here."

Louisa sat, pulling her breakfast from her backpack and onto her lap. She smiled up at her mother as she leaned back on her hands briefly, adoring the feel of the breeze against her skin.

The forest around Louisa felt alive, like the trees might stand, ruffle their branches, and walk off to perch somewhere sunnier. Somewhere they might stretch out their leaves and grow an inch, or three, or ten. She imagined she might walk among them, slow and lumbering, to the highest point of the mountain, even closer to the sky than they were now.

"You're smiling pretty big over there, *mija*," said Elia, as she sat down beside her daughter. "Want to tell me what you're thinking?"

Louisa nodded absently, still a bit lost in her daydream. "Way up here, just the two of us, this place feels like magic."

"That is an interesting theory, Louisa." Her mother nodded. "But if you ask me, it's the history that you feel. It is the presence of things that have existed longer than either of us could imagine. These forests, these trees and mountains and cliff sides and rivers have been residing on the earth

for a long time. Long before people settled here. If these woods could talk their wisdom would be like nothing else.”

Louisa considered this. “What do you think they would say?”

“I think the first thing they would do is greet us, of course,” said Elia. “Like family, most likely. Trees know what it is to stand together.”

“They would say ‘Hello, Louisa. My, how you’ve grown. It is wonderful to see you, dear,’” Louisa said, deepening her voice to match what she imagined was the voice of an old wise tree. “That is what most people say, anyway. They would tell me I look just like you did when you visited them at my age,” she said, smiling at her mother. “And they would compliment my glasses. Most people like them.”

“You’re right, *mija*. They would definitely love your glasses,” she said. “And they would greet you like family because they know that we are all connected. On this earth, in any state, everything is connected. The wise old woods would know that.”

“And the mountains? What would they say?”

Elia tilted her head, her nose wrinkling as she thought. “Hmm,” she mused. “I think the mountains would tell you stories. Stories about every connection between them and the earth and the living creatures that have dwelled or passed through. They would tell you of the first people that managed to reach their highest points. They would tell you about the history that has been built around them.”

Louisa grinned. “They probably knew cowboys. And gold miners, forty-niners. And unicorns.”

“I imagine this forest has seen its fair share of cowboys and gold miners,” said Elia. “I am not sure about unicorns, though, *mija*.”

“Why not?” Louisa remained unperturbed. “This forest is huge, *mama*. It is beautiful and wild. It would be the perfect place for magical creatures to live. Or hide from any unwanted attention.”

Elia grinned. “That is an interesting argument. You know, most people believe unicorns are myths?”

“People believe a lot of things that aren't true. But there are new discoveries every day.” Louisa smiled. “I like to keep an open mind,” she said.

“Another excellent point,” said Elia.

“And the river? What would the river say?”

Elia thought for a moment. “The river would likely say that to reach one shore or another is to find clarity. A river is connected deeply to the lands it runs through, and to the people, animals, and wildlife it provides for. It would likely say that the connection between everyone and everything is as constant as its rushing waters.”

“The connection you keep mentioning, *mama*.” Louisa tilted her head. “Does it really connect everything? I mean, everything is a lot.”

“Yes,” said Elia. “And this connection between everything is why our actions have consequences. It is why what we do affects others, and why the things that other people do affect us.”

“Oh, yes,” said Louisa. “Cause and effect. I’ve learned about that in science class. When we look at the effect of something, we can guess the cause. Or the other way around. A rainbow is the effect and its cause is that rain is falling and the sun is shining at the same time. The rain droplets catch the light and bend it, breaking up the reflection and refracting outward to show the colors of the spectrum.”

Elia nodded. “That is exactly right,” she said. “Your knowledge on rainbows is quite impressive.

“Thanks. I have always found rainbows to be quite fascinating,” said Louisa. “And when my teacher gave us that example of cause and effect, I was rather disappointed. I’d hoped for a more whimsical explanation.”

“Leprechauns and gold, I presume?”

Louisa laughed. “That would be great, though, wouldn’t it, *mama*?”

“It would, though I found your earlier explanation pretty great, too, Louisa. The reality of things can be amazing if we let ourselves consider them.” Elia waved a hand. “The earth is full of things to wonder about. It is full of great things.”

“It is kind of amazing,” said Louisa. “That light can become something so beautiful.”

Her mother nodded. “Cause and effect,” she said again. “It is an important concept to consider. And when I said our actions have consequences, I mean that what we do matters, especially when it comes to the earth and the environment.” Elia held out her arms. “Just as human beings depend on the environment, the environment depends on human beings. All of us.”

“How can something so big and important depend on me? I’m only ten years old and this mountain, here, is a bajillion, at least. It must be doing fine on its own.”

“But it isn’t on its own at all, *mija*. This forest depends on things like carbon dioxide to feed the trees, the animals and insects that pollinate the plants and flowers that surround us, the new life of spring, and the seasons of rain and sunny weather. Everything depends on everything. Our actions affect other lives, whether those are the lives of trees or birds or butterflies. Whether those lives belong to the fish or the coral reefs of the ocean. Whether those lives belong to the bees that pollinate the flowers and plants around the world.”

“I don’t do any of that though. I haven’t even been here before. And the environment seems to take care of itself just fine. Why do I need to try and make a difference?”

“Even the biggest, most ancient tree and the smallest, most delicate plant survives through the carbon dioxide animals or people breathe out. In exchange, those trees create the oxygen that most every human needs to breathe. The oxygen that animals need to breathe. Do you see then how even in just this one way, people and the environment depend on each other?”

“Yes, *mama*, I see. But it still feels so much bigger than me. I feel as though I am too small to make a difference. What I could do might not be enough. Maybe when I’m older, I can do more. Maybe I can make a difference then?”

“It isn’t about how old or big you are, Louisa. It is about doing all that you can and working together,” said Elia. “Making a difference is always possible.”

“What can I do?”

“It all starts with awareness. Awareness is to be conscious of - to think about - the reality of things, of what is happening. It is important that we are aware of the harm we cause, whether we mean to or not.”

Louisa frowned. “Harm?” She thought of her hike early that morning. She considered the trail behind her marked in footsteps, broken blades of grass, and the paths of ants and other insects disrupted in the wake of her trudging forward. How much destruction had she already caused?

“Oh, no,” said Louisa, horrified. “I’m a monster.”

“No, no, *mija*. It's alright,” said Elia, placing a reassuring hand on her daughter's shoulder. “Some things cannot be helped. What is first important is that you are aware of the consequences of your actions, of the possible harm, of the effects, and that you work to do good.”

Louisa thought for a moment. She could do that. Trying was something that could always be done if you cared enough. And she did care. “Okay, *mama*,” she said. “I’m sure I can be more aware of what I do. I can try to give myself more time to think. That will, help, right?”

“Yes, *mija*, that will help.” Elia smiled. She finished up her breakfast and placed the storage containers that held her food back in her hiking backpack. Louisa watched her and did the same.

They spent the next few hours making camp, setting up their large tent, and pulling lots of supplies from their large backpacks. Louisa found her favorite stuffed animal, Penny the Penguin, and tucked her inside the sleeping bag she just finished arranging. “I’ll show you the view when we get back,” she said, looking down at her toy reassuringly. “You’re going to love it, believe me. And *mama* says the sky will be something, too.”

“Louisa,” her mother called. “Are you ready? We’ve got to get moving. There’s only about an hour and a half until dark. Let’s not waste the daylight.”

Louisa kissed Penny atop her head and rushed out of the tent to meet her mother. She pulled on her much lighter backpack, now containing only her water bottle, some trail mix, two granola bars, and a first aid kit and followed her mother into the trees once again.

Later as they walked through the trees, Louisa was struck by something. “*Mama*, are we starting a fire? Won’t that be dangerous? If it spreads through the trees, I mean, and into the forest?”

“We won’t be building a fire at all, *mija*. We don’t need one tonight,” she said. “It will not be cold tonight, though, and in any case, I’ve managed to fit a couple extra blankets in my pack. Don’t you worry, Louisa.” She patted the trunks of trees as they passed. “We’ll be safe for our sake and for these wise old things as well.”

“So why are we collecting firewood?”

“We aren’t,” she said. “I was mostly hoping to find a walking stick for the hike down tomorrow.”

Louisa nodded, keeping step with her mother.

"Also, I wanted to explore for a bit before it got too dark. And I wanted to talk to you more about why I wanted to share this place with you."

Elia bent down to pick up a particularly long branch. She handed it to Louisa, who proceeded to use it as a walking stick.

Louisa slowed, trying to be careful about where she stepped. She didn't want to crush any flowers with her boots or her new stick.

"Earlier you said being aware of ourselves, of others, can help," said Louisa. "What did you mean?"

"A large part of figuring out what we should do comes from how mindful we are. To be mindful is to live in the present, let go of selfish thinking, and maintain our awareness without judgmental attitudes. When we consider things, in this case, we do so in ways that are open and honest," said Elia. "Being mindful means being honest about what we can and should do to help."

"I want to help, *mama*, I do. But I'm not sure how." Louisa looked out again at the open sky. She thought of the mountains and forests that lined the horizon. There was so much to think about. Everything was so much bigger than her. She shook her head, feeling overwhelmed and a bit confused. "What are good consequences anyway?"

"Good consequences are the results of good action. Good actions are actions that cause the least harm practically possible. And these good actions involve acting in loving and peaceful ways toward the environment."

"That sounds simple enough," said Louisa.

"In many cases, it can be," said Elia. "So many of our actions can be positive if we begin by thinking mindfully. In the end, the aim is to create good consequences for the environment."

Louisa tapped at the trunk of a tree as she passed it. *Good consequences*, she repeated in her mind.

"It is important that places like this forest are known," said Elia. "That way we realize how big and incredible the earth can be. And also so that people can realize the connections we all have with the earth. It helps in our being mindful when we have the opportunity to feel that connection between everything. The Earth is our home, after all. And though it may be big, it is filled with many smaller parts including people and animals and trees. The earth holds oceans and deserts and jungles. Its atmosphere protects us and holds in the air we breathe and determines the weather we have."

Louisa watched the ants marching up along the trunk of a tree. She looked up to see birds shuffling in the treetops and heard them singing sweetly. There was so much to see, even just in that space where she and her mother walked. The whole world was like this, she realized. It was full of life and movement.

"Everything is connected," repeated Elia. "The health and the survival of the earth depends on us taking care of it. This is why we must remain mindful."

"How can I take care of the whole Earth?"

“When all of us work together, even simple actions can help,” said Elia. “When you recycle, you are helping the earth by creating less trash and plastic to pollute it and allowing for the conservation of resources like trees and forests. The more people recycle, the more good consequences are created.”

“You’re right, *mama*,” said Louisa. “Working together always goes better than trying to do things alone.” Elia remembered the project she and her best friends had presented at the school's science fair. What fruit or vegetable conducts the most electricity? Personally, she thought the poster board they'd created had been both informative and beautiful. They had won first place. “When Nina, Maxine, and I worked together on our science project,” said Louisa, grinning, “we created something magnificent.”

Elia nodded. “You did,” she agreed. “Working together is the best way forward for the environment, too, because it means that we all work toward the same goal.”

“Yes” agreed Louisa. “To protect the environment.” She scrunched up her face in concentration. “Like bodyguards. Like warriors.”

“Precisely. The goal is to maintain a healthy earth. It is preserving and protecting every part of the earth as we would our loved ones. In this it is important that we do not drain the Earth’s resources, waste what it provides, or dirty the land,” said Elia. “Instead, it is our responsibility to work hard to avoid causing damage. We must try to protect the earth and promote its thriving because that is what good action is. Because that is how we minimize harm now, and for all the earth's future inhabitants.”

“The earth protects us and we protect the earth,” said Louisa, repeating her mother's words. It was a big responsibility. To be a guardian of the earth, the trees, the oceans. It made Louisa proud and uncertain all at once. The newfound responsibility weighed on her mind.

Elia glanced at her daughter's frowning face and stooped to look her in the eyes. “It is not all on you, *mija*. We do this work together, alright?”

“Yes,” said Louisa. “Together.” It would work, she thought. Together people could do big things. She knew that from school projects, and soccer games, and the beach cleanups she and her mother volunteered at back home. Together was the best way forward.

They made it back to camp just as the sun was beginning to set. They dropped the twigs and branches beside their campsite. Louisa rushed to their tent to get Penny. Quickly, as if it might be gone any moment she ran back towards the clear mountain edge, the shifting colors of the sky.

She grinned, speaking in a hushed tone to her beloved plush penguin. “I told you, didn't I? Amazing.” She sighed. “I knew you'd love it, too.”

“You sit no closer to the edge, *mija*. I'll be right back. Sit tight, okay?”

“I will, don't worry,” said Louisa as she sat down, sitting Penny on her lap and watching the sun descend.

Elia pulled the numerous solar powered battery packs from the tops of hers and Louisa’s backpacks, connecting them to the small single burner she’d set in the center of their campsite. After the burner powered on, she set it to preheat and went to join Louisa.

The sun was almost half gone behind the mountains, when Elia sat beside her daughter, placing her arm around her shoulders, and kissing the top of her head. They watched as the sun disappeared before heading to their campsite again.

Elia had fixed their tent with the handful of solar lamps and hanging flashlights she had hung on their packs as they travelled earlier. The effect was a rather bright camping area, perfect for any lingering fears of the dark that might spring up as the night went on. She wanted Louisa to feel as safe and content as she did.

"Come on, *mija*. Let's eat," she said. The two of them warmed their veggie hot dogs and made some sweet organic popcorn in a small lidded pot over the fire. After they were both full and feeling a bit tired, they put out the fire and retreated to their tent, turning off the extra lamps as they went. They sat together just inside the tent, talking about the fun of the day and how it would be great to see Louisa's tío, tía, and cousins the following afternoon.

"*Mama*," said Louisa after a while of planning the next few days. "I had a question. It's about everything we talked about earlier."

"Go ahead, *mija*, ask me anything."

Louisa hesitated, looking sad suddenly. "I've heard so many people say the environment, the earth, is-they say it too late. They say it's doomed."

Elia's heart wrenched as she took in Louisa's expression, the way she hunched forward as she spoke, fearful - nothing like her usual nature.

She leaned down to tilt up Louisa's chin. "Some people do think that, I've heard the same," she said. "But I am going to tell you something extremely important. Will you keep your open mind?"

Louisa nodded, pulling her mother's hand from her face to clasp it in both of hers.

"The environment, the earth, may be facing danger. It may be seeing great damage and being posed against great threats, but it is not hopeless. It is especially important, in times of crisis, to have hope that we may yet save our home, our earth. You see, if people do not have hope, if they are not driven by that hope for the earth, they will lose sight of what can be done."

Louisa frowned. She couldn't think of a single time where being negative, feeling hopeless, helped anything. Even after losing a soccer game or doing poorly on a spelling test, moping about it didn't ease her anxiousness. It only made her feel defeated for a while longer.

"It also helps people to realize that what they do matters. What happens to the earth, happens to us. How we do things, affects the way the earth functions and survives. Being hopeful means that we are aware and confident in our potential to do better. It keeps us willing to keep fighting for the planet."

Louisa couldn't help the small smile forming on her lips. "I can be hopeful, *mama*," she said, excitedly.

"Do you promise, Louisa," said Elia. "It is important. That hope will keep you going. It will allow you to keep up with your responsibilities. It will keep you fighting for the environment and everything in it."

"Yes, I promise," said Louisa.

"Good," said Elia with a grin. "Because it's time now."

"Time?" Louisa frowned, still serious, still thinking about her promise.

"Yes," her mother said. "It's time for you to see something wonderful." She backed out from under the cover of the tent and stood, holding a hand out to Louisa.

Louisa's tiredness was fading away to leave only excitement as she took her mother's hand and emerged from the tent.

"There it is," said Elia. "The sky. Clear and at full power."

Something wonderful.

The stars were everywhere. Some standing still, others rushing past like rain. Louisa grinned. It wasn't just stars, she thought, it was a meteor shower. There were so, so many of them. They shined white and blue and purple and green. They took up every space, the whole sky, glittering and bright. The stars shimmered as they did in movies, only better, because they felt close enough to touch. The moon too, was full and nothing like before. Here, away from the city she called home, Louisa could finally see what the night sky could be. She could see what it was. Endless and open and magnificent. It shined on the valley below, casting an almost colorful glow upon the trees and the cliffs and the river. They seemed almost to be facing each other in greeting.

Hello again, said the night sky.

I've missed you, old friend, said the earth.

It was incredible.

"It is something, isn't it, *mija*?" Her mother put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "A meteor shower that only comes along once every few years. That and the stars. I hoped you would love it, too."

"You were right, *mama*," said Louisa. "I do love it."

Louisa looked out at the sky, thinking again that she was in a wondrous place, that the earth itself was amazing in so many ways. And it was connected to her, and she, it. Like family. It was full and shifting and it depended on her.

And she would do all she could to protect it.