

Hidden

By Ella Clapp

5 Years Old

Shiloh sat on her bed and stared at herself in the mirror. She watched the tears rolling down her face with hope that if she just focused on something else, she could calm down. She couldn't breathe or even really think straight. Thoughts were running through her head faster than she could deal with. She didn't know what a panic attack was and, obviously, neither did her parents. If they did, then maybe they would've stayed with her instead of sending her to her room. They would've taught her some method of coping, told her she would be okay. But they didn't. So, she watched herself in the mirror, knowing that she could only find the comfort she so desperately needed from herself.

The locked bedroom door opened up and her tear-stained face turned towards her mom, "Hey, stop staring at yourself in the mirror and cope like your father and I told you to do". Then the door was shut just as quickly as it had opened, and Shiloh was left sobbing uncontrollably and struggling to catch her breath. She watched the door for a moment more, longing for somebody to come back; for her dad or her mom to come back in the room, apologize, and hold her until she was able to stop crying. She looked away from the mirror and scooted up the bed so that her back was against the headboard and she hugged her knees to her chest. She looked everywhere else in the room, so long as she could avoid the mirror. Even if it was her only way to cope.

She didn't know why she was crying at this point, but it didn't matter. Whatever the reason, she knew it was a stupid one. Otherwise, her parents would have cared. She laid down under the princess themed covers of her bed. She glanced over Rapunzel, Ariel, and Cinderella smiling up at her. She squeezed her eyes shut as she laid against the pillow and she soon fell asleep, exhausted from all the tears.

She dreamed of a forest. Not a scary one, but a magical one. There were adorable creatures all around and the trees were all sorts of different colors. Some had pink leaves, while others had blue leaves. Even the trunks were different colors, causing some of the trees to look slightly tacky. Shiloh spun around in a circle, looking around her. She was standing in what seemed to be the center of this forest, or what was at least a clearing. She looked up to see blue birds, robins, finches, hummingbirds, and some yellow birds that looked like distant cousins of Tweety Bird from Looney Tunes. She giggled as she saw the wonders all around her and eventually started to walk around. The clearing was a big one and she was scared to venture outside of it, so she stayed within the circle. It was safe. However, due to the size, there was still plenty of room to walk around.

She walked to the edge of the clearing and peeked into the cluster of trees. She saw fawns, bunnies, foxes, hedgehogs, really any forest animal one could think of. She grinned widely when a fox walked up to her and sniffed her. She tensed slightly but in some way, she just knew it wouldn't hurt her. It curled up next to her feet and its soft tail brushed against her ankle, causing a quiet laugh to escape her. She slowly sat down on the grass next to the fox. She noticed that it wasn't itchy like grass usually was, but soft. This really was her happy place.

She blinked her eyes and was sad when she opened them again to see her bedroom. She shut her eyes again, hoping to go back, but then she heard the creak of her door. She looked at her dad. He smiled and walked over to her and crouched down next to her bed. He pecked her forehead and whispered, "See? You just needed a nap. Ready to come finish the movie with the family?"

10 Years Old

Shiloh had visited her hidden world many times since then. She knew it was just in her head, but that's what made it so great. Nobody else had access to it. It was hers. Whenever she got hurt, she had a place to go. It was no longer just a place accessible through sleep. She went there whenever she wanted. If class was too stressful, she didn't have to stay. If there were too many people around her, she went where there were none. Really, if she was overwhelmed by anything at all, she just closed her eyes and left.

In this particular instance, she could hear the yelling downstairs. Her brother had skipped school, and was hearing all about it from their parents. It was as if they took turns. If one stopped yelling, the other took over. She had tried covering her ears or even putting on headphones, but it was too much and she felt that familiar anxiety rising up in her chest. She knew now what was going to happen. She knew that she was about to have a panic attack.

When she was eight years old, she had finally been put into therapy. She liked her therapist, Becca. She didn't make her call her Mrs, Ms, or Miss. She let Shiloh call her by her first name even though she was an adult. Shiloh told her about a lot of things, except for one. Her hidden world. That was hers and she refused to ever tell anybody about it.

Becca had taught her coping skills and Shiloh was gradually getting better at avoiding panic attacks and calming down from them. So, as Shiloh felt the tightness of her chest, she started to wiggle her fingers and she looked at herself in the mirror. Becca had told her that was a perfectly normal thing to do, and she was allowed to do that, especially if it helped her cope. Shiloh took note of her eye color. It matched her mom's, but only when they were soft. She thought her mom's eyes became a darker color when she was mad. She noticed her eyebrows and thought about how her dad's furrowed whenever he was focused, or more often, angry. The tightening sensation got worse. She tried to count to ten and breathe as she did, but it still worsened.

She finally gave up and decided to do it her way. Looking over at the light pink wall, she stared at it for a while before closing her eyes and imagining the details of her world. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and looked around with a wide smile. The yelling had stopped, now replaced with the musical chirping of the birds above. She quickly ran over to the edge of the clearing and waited before she saw the fox, who she had named Fuzz. He ran over to her and she lowered herself to her knees and scratched his head. She stopped when he laid down next to her and they both sat at the edge of the clearing looking out at the other animals who weren't comfortable going into the clearing. Just like how she wasn't comfortable leaving it.

As the years had passed, her forest had changed with her. The trunks of the trees, for example, were no longer crazy colors. They were a lighter shade of brown, to match the pastel colors of the leaves. They were no longer one color per tree, All of the leaves were

pastel rainbow. There were pink, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple leaves on every tree. It fit her taste perfectly.

As she sat there, she thought about Becca's advice to talk to her parents about how they hurt her feelings sometimes. She had said that they couldn't read her mind, so how would they know? But sometimes, it felt like common sense. Shouldn't they already know how to not hurt their daughter's feelings? They even knew that she was diagnosed with generalized anxiety now, and yet they still didn't even try to understand. Usually, these thoughts were what Shiloh considered too scary. Any other time, they would work her up into a panic attack. Her mystical wonderland was the only place where she could think about it all. She knew she had to talk to them at some point... but she was scared. Although she wouldn't admit it to anybody else, not even Becca, she knew it wasn't just because she didn't feel like it. She didn't want to go through all the effort of having such a difficult conversation with her parents, and find out that they never cared. That they were never actually trying, Shiloh had just given them the benefit of the doubt. She liked being able to believe that they were trying and they just didn't get it. How could they? They didn't have anxiety.

So, as per usual, she decided against bringing anything up with them. She would just continue to visit her imaginary clearing in the woods, rather than deal with the confrontation.

15 Years Old

Shiloh had been overwhelmed a lot recently. More than usual. Her parents had gotten a divorce a few years ago and anytime she was with either of them, they talked badly

about the other. She hated this. She loved both of her parents and she hated being pinned against one by the other. She had talked to Becca about this and Becca once again recommended saying something.

“They can not read your mind, Shiloh,” was something she had gotten used to hearing. So she finally decided to talk to her dad about how she no longer wanted mean “jokes” to be made about her mother and vice versa. This took a lot of thought. She still did not feel ready for it. However, at some point, she had realized that she would never be ready. If she had it her own way, everybody would be nice to people without confrontation ever existing. But she didn’t have it her way. She had to push herself to do it.

Becca often said that once Shiloh finally talked to her parents about an issue, it would gradually become easier. Shiloh didn’t really believe that, but she really wanted to. So, in order to truly think about it, she did what she had always done. She closed her eyes and drifted off to her happy place. By now the trees were normal willow trees, with vines hanging down from most of them. The only odd thing was that there were small, shimmering crystals hanging from the vines. They were gorgeous and illuminated the clearing. Fuzz was still there of course, and as the years went by, several other animals had started to enter the clearing. Some still stayed away from Shiloh, even if they entered, and others allowed her to go as far as petting them. They were all opening up to her gradually and at their own paces. She, of course, allowed them to. She knew what it was like to feel rushed into things, so why would she ever do that to anybody else? That would hardly be fair.

As she held Fuzz in her lap, she looked out at the forest surrounding her; the forest she had never actually entered, choosing to remain within her safe clearing. However, this

time as she stared, a small smile formed on her face and she lightly patted the soft fox on her lap, signaling for him to climb off. He awoke, with a slight annoyance, but climbed off of her lap nonetheless. She stood and walked over to the nearest tree, grabbing one of the vines. Just as she was about to attempt to pull one of the sparkling crystals off, a much larger replica appeared by her feet. She crouched down and picked it up. It emitted a bright light that would've helped her to see at least five feet in front of her, if it had been dark. She hesitated for a second, but then felt the soft fur of her friend brushing against her leg. Knowing that he was by her side helped her gain that last bit of confidence she needed. She held the crystal out and moved towards the edge of the clearing. Only this time, instead of stopping, she kept walking straight into the forest.

After she made it a few feet out, her smile started to grow bigger and bigger. She was elated. A laugh bubbled up inside her before escaping because she knew now. She knew that she could do it, and she would. From this point on, she would stand up for herself, rather than let her anxiety stop her. She would talk to her parents about anything and everything. She still had anxiety; she always would. But she could make it a lot easier on herself if she could finally help her parents to understand. And if after all of that, they still don't? That would no longer be her problem.