

Story

Mary and Jonathan and Jennifer came in from the garden in the afternoon. Mary said, "Are those ants? They're huge."

Jonathan said, "They're scissor ants, leaf-cutters. That's what they are."

Jennifer said, "Oh oh." She ran into the playroom. "We left Story in here, propped open. Oh oh." Paper, cut into many pieces, was piled between Story's unharmed covers. Jennifer said, "I'm going to get the spray and spray them."

Jonathan said, "That wouldn't do any good. I'm sure they don't mean harm. They came through here, and Story was standing open, with the pages showing. They call pages leaves, you know, so the ants probably thought, 'Leaves. Cut.' It's really our responsibility to keep them out and to put everything away."

Mary said, "What can we do for Story? Oh look, a lot of the pieces are still words and some phrases."

Jennifer said, "We could glue the story back together onto pages, just like it was."

Mary said, "That would be impossible."

"It might. But you know, all the king's horses and all the king's men tried to put Humpty Dumpty together again. They didn't succeed, but they did try."

Jonathan scooped ants into a sack and shook them out outside. "Actually, it doesn't say they tried. It just said they couldn't do it. They might have ridden up, taken a quick look and said, 'Nope, can't be done,' rode away."

Jennifer said, "This isn't Humpty Dumpty. This is Story. Paper glues easier than eggs. We could do it. We need to remember how it goes and glue it all on the right pages."

So they began to sort and arrange. Mary found half a paragraph and some of the words that went right before and right after. Jonathan said, "Well, Story, how's it feel to have

your words all scrambled, so you're saying stuff like, 'The snow leaves purple shoe, sunshine night?'"

Jennifer said, "Jonathan. That's not nice. What if you were all scrambled up, and somebody made fun of you for it?" But then they all started to do it.

Mary held a group of pieces and said, "Leafbud was was, beetree, from a green moon."

"Beetree? Here's honey and sting and wing. Put all these over here together. Start on page one. Sun comes up and the moon goes down when they wake up, so we glue that up here, and the pieces of the illustration here. This might go a lot faster than you think. Oh oh."

"What? What?"

"Words on both sides. Glue it down, and what happens to the back of the page? What do we do, read every other page?"

"We'll have to copy the backs off onto another piece of paper."

"Okay." They sorted and copied and resorted and glued and arranged.

Mary said, "It isn't looking very good, you know. The glue squishes out everywhere, and the words are all crooked from each other, and I see several places where we've got it wrong already. Like here, it says, 'moon rose brilliant blue.' That's not in there. We got it wrong."

Jennifer said, "It's a poetic figure, Mary. It doesn't mean the moon was really blue."

"I know. But Story wouldn't use a poetic figure like that. Think about it. You know that wasn't in there, because it sounds kind of silly, like something an adult would say if it was trying to be cute, or like science fiction, and Story isn't adult nor science fiction."

Mary said, "Well, you two can finish it. I quit. I'm going for a bike ride." But she came back in a quarter of an hour, and they began to perfect their work methods.

Jennifer said, "We're already writing one side of the page, because we lose it when we glue. Let's copy the other side. Print it like the words are here."

Jonathan said, "I can't print that neat."

“You can if you work at it.”

They worked at it until after dark and then started out early the next day, sorting words, arranging them, copying neatly onto the heavy paper they had selected.

Jennifer said, “We have to punch the pages and the cover, so we can sew them together.”

“We’ll punch them when we’re finished.”

“How?”

“Somehow. Let’s get all the words onto the pages first.”

They began to disagree, in some places, about how Story went. Mary said, “Page six won’t fit after page five. Part of a sentence is missing or something.”

Jonathan looked at the pages. “Frog. Look, it says frog in the garden. Story never says that.”

“Yes it does. I remember there’s a frog in the garden.”

“There’s a frog and a turtle and some toads and a snake. They live in the garden and eat insects. Don’t you remember that?”

“Yes, I do. But that’s in the illustrations, not in the story. Am I right? Because if I am, we have to remember where it goes, because that’s what’s throwing our line-up off between pages.”

So they reviewed the story. Jennifer told it. Jonathan said, “Wow. You sure remember it different from the way I do.”

Mary said, “Me too. I don’t remember anything about little people living on a mountain.”

Jonathan said, “Me neither. But I remember big parts you didn’t even mention. Let’s look in the pile and see if the words are there for it.”

They were. Every time one remembered something that the others didn’t, the words were there to make the story and so were the illustrations to go with the words.

Mary said, “It’s a lot longer than it ever was, and some parts of it don’t fit together very well.”

Jennifer said, “We can fix that. It’s just harder to remember what’s between what happened than it is to remember what happened. Some of these illustrations weren’t even in there, but they should have been, so I guess it’s all right. Anyway, they help fit it together.”

They finished. They carried it in a box to a shop and had the pages punched. They all three stood by to make sure the workman did no damage, and he was very careful to punch the pages for an exact match to the covers.

They carried the box of pages and the covers home and bound them together with twine.

Mary said, "Maybe we should glue the pages together too."

Jennifer said, "I don't think so. It would be messy. This'll hold. When we read it, we might find out we made a mistake and have to change something. Here, push down on the cover. Pull this. If we get it tight all the way, it'll be a sturdy book."

They closed up all the entrances that leaf-cutter ants could use, and they kept all their books in ant-proof cases.

The first adult who read Story immediately found Jennifer and asked, "Where did this book come from?"

"Mom bought it for us."

"It's mostly handwritten. She says she never saw it before."

"Well, the book she bought got ruined, so we had to copy it over. We liked it so well, we wanted to keep it."

"I should think you would like it. It's a beautiful story. It just says Story. It doesn't have a title, and it doesn't say who wrote it. Didn't you copy that?"

Mary joined them. She said, "There were some words left over, names and cities and Roman numerals and page numbers. They weren't part of the story, and we didn't know what to do with them. Probably we left them, and they got vacuumed up."

Jonathan also joined them. The adult realized their waiting was becoming pointed and handed the book to Jonathan, who was closest to him.

The second adult almost didn't give the book back.

"Could I borrow it for a few days? I would take very good care of it. I could give you insurance that I'd bring it back, say fifty dollars that you could hold until I brought it back. Or more, if you want, because I would bring it back for sure."

All three children moved closer to him. He didn't know what they would do if he didn't hand it back, but when he saw their determination and the anger beginning to burn in their eyes, he

decided not to wait and find out what they would do. He handed the book back and asked, "Well, could I read it again while I'm here?"

Mary said, "Maybe some other time. We promised some friends of ours they could read it this afternoon."

They kept the book in the far corner of the bookshelf, but still, it attracted attention, because it was a hand-sewn book among manufactured books. All the adults who read it obviously enjoyed it, and some of them wanted to buy it or borrow it. Some of them became very adult-like in their persistence, which always upset the children. They began to keep the book hidden in their rooms.

One day, Mary closed *Story* and said, "I know this story. I can tell it to you, and you can both tell it to me. And we can all three tell it together so all the memories are in it and fit together, so we don't really need the book anymore. There are two or three friends of our parents I don't trust around this book. Seeing it seems to stimulate greed to hold onto it in people who don't normally seem greedy."

Jennifer said, "What did we do with our Teddy Bears when we didn't need them anymore?"

"We gave them to children who did need them."

So they found younger children who needed a story to read and gave them the book. "Don't give it to any adults. Show it to your parents sometime soon, so you're not keeping a secret from them, but show it to them when they're busy. That way, they'll glance at it, and it will be familiar to them, but they won't have time to look at it very closely. Except for your parents, never show it to an adult. Some adults will try to keep it, and it might be hard for you to get it back. When you don't need it anymore, give it to someone who does. But not an adult. It's for children."

Jonathan and Mary and Jennifer are grown now. Jonathan and Mary each married, and they have children. Jennifer has not married yet. Perhaps she never will. She writes and illustrates children's books, and she does very well at it. Sometimes she worries that a book she made is too similar to

Story, and she takes it to Jonathan or Mary or to both of them for consultation. Always they conclude that the flavor of her book, the warm feeling it stimulates in the reader, is very similar to the feeling created by Story, but her book is original to her. The story, the actual happenings in her book are not very similar to the happenings in Story.

All of them are a little uncertain about how the actual story went. They have disagreements about how it went, though the disagreements are congenial.

Once, when all the family gathered together for holidays, Mary said, "My children had Story recently. They might still have it. I don't know for sure. I haven't asked them about it very much."

"The first time I saw it, I was busy getting ready for company, and I only had time to glance at it. I don't think I ever realized before how much of an adult I've become. The second time I saw it, it was when I was cleaning Jonathan's room. I found it tucked under his mattress and took it out and looked through it. What a beautiful book. I cried so hard, I could hardly see the book, it moved me so deeply and brought back so many memories of when we were children and the world seemed so much simpler and so pure.

"I wanted to study it. The story was so different from what I remembered. The same, and yet so much more modern. The illustrations seemed more modern, and many of the details."

Jonathan said, "Maybe children have changed it over the years."

"Yes. I don't know. First, for just a moment, I didn't recognize it. Then it stirred deep memories and deep emotions. But it was as if an alarm had gone off when I sat down on the bed and started looking through it, because very soon, Jonathan and Bruce and Marie showed up, and they wanted their book back. They weren't aggressive about it, nor even very direct. Their attempt was to distract me, to throw up things that would occupy my senses and my time so I would go about my adult ways and leave their book.

"I resisted. I started to explain that I was no threat. I thought

about telling them the history of Story, but I looked at them again, and I could see I was changing, in their concepts, from their loving mother to a grasping adult, hoping to own what no adult can own, so I dropped all my ideas and gave their book back and went about my adult business.”

Jonathan said, “I would like to see it again.”

Jennifer said, “I don’t think I would. Every book I write is an attempt to recreate Story from the faded memories of my childhood. Not to recreate Story, but to create the feelings Story created in us. That I can’t remember Story very clearly gives me something really wide to pick from. If I read it now and fixed it into my adult memory, it might define it so clearly that all my creativity that is stimulated by vague memories of it might dry up.”

Jonathan looked out the kitchen window. “I don’t think I would ask to see the book. I don’t want to change, in your children’s eyes, from favorite uncle to greedy, grasping adult.

“Besides, I see your children out there now giving something to those ragged children from down the road, and the secretive, almost ceremonial air about their transaction reminds me so much of how it was when we passed Story on to the next in line that I think Story has passed from this family again and is beyond our reach now.”

They watched the children, and though they said nothing more about it, each of them knew Story was traveling as it should, outside of the world known by adults.