

The Steamkettle Kids and The Lucky Tentacles

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Inspired by International Octopus Day – October 8th, 2016

And also a gift for those who struggled with Hurricane Matthew

“I don’t believe you!” Christopher Cogan blurted out in exasperation, rudely interrupting Paisley Pockets’ story, not yet half-told. “That’s just... well... in the name of all that’s springloaded, that’s impossible!”

“No, it’s not,” Paisley huffed, lifting her chin and planting her fists on her skinny waist. “It’s just highly improbable, is all.”

“I think you got conked on the head by something during the storm and had an interesting dream, is all,” the ten-year-old boy retorted, trying to make sense of what he was hearing.

“Oh, so you think I made it up!” Paisley shouted. The grubby urchin girl, just a year or two younger than Christopher, paced angrily back and forth on the debris-strewn sidewalk. The colossal sea-storm known as Hurricane Matthias had battered the city of Steamkettle Bay throughout the night and vanished with the morning sunrise, leaving behind a city wobbling but still standing, though tattered around the edges.

“Well, dreams can seem pretty real, you know,” the boy said gently. Paisley’s expression had ramped up to wide-eyed rage, and Christopher immediately regretted his words. In fact, he was starting to regret the whole conversation. But really, it *couldn’t* be true. Street urchins simply don’t make friends with octopuses!

“Don’t patronize me, mister!” she spluttered. “Ain’t it time for you to go to school? You better hurry. Afore I punch you.”

Christopher wasn’t sure what ‘patronize’ meant, but he was sure it was something he shouldn’t have done.

Right about then, little Jimmy Cupper came trotting up, panting for breath. He always seemed to be short on air, that boy. “School’s closed! On account of the front door blew off its hinges and there’s window glass all over the room.” He bent at the waist and rested his hands on his knees, huffing for a minute, desperately trying to catch up with his breath.

Paisley’s anger notched back a bit, dampened by her concern for the sickly little boy. “We’re going to go find you some tater soup for breakfast this morning, I can smell some cooking on the breeze. Guess they’re fixing up the market stalls now, people gotta eat,” she said with a shrug.

“Yeah, too bad we can’t crack clams like Lucky did with his beak, ’cause I heard a rumor that the waves tossed clams and oysters and scallops all over the boardwalk. Of course, if we had a hammer we could. Oh! I can get one! Want to make boardwalk chowder, Paisley? We better hurry before they’re all picked up!”

Christopher boggled in confusion at Jimmy’s ramble. The boardwalk chowder sounded like a fine idea, but who ever heard of a chicken cracking clams? “Hey Jimmy, who’s Lucky?”

“Didn’t Paisley tell you? Gosh, if I had weathered Matthias in an old warehouse with a friendly octopus, I woulda told you right away!”

“I did try to tell him, I didn’t even get that far,” Paisley said through gritted teeth, giving Christopher one heck of a glare. “He thinks I’m crazy.”

“W-wait,” Christopher stuttered, “are you saying that really happened, Jimmy?”

“Course it did! I helped Paisley get Lucky all settled in, I sure did. Toted sea water for him to sleep in, and gathered clams for his supper, yessiree.” The little kid grinned up proudly at Paisley.

“Well in that case, I guess I’d like to meet this Mr. Lucky,” Christopher said, hoping to show Paisley he was ready to believe her.

Paisley hauled a battered crate out of the gutter and turned it into a makeshift chair, then sat down heavily, facing the bay. "Too late," she said wistfully. "He couldn't stay in that coal scuttle, so Jimmy and I took Lucky home at sunrise."

Christopher found another chunk of debris big enough to sit on, and dragged it over near Paisley. "So it's true then. I'm sorry I didn't believe you." He sat down gingerly on the rickety wooden boards that probably used to be a cabinet. "If you don't hate me and stuff, can you tell me more about Lucky and this time I promise I'll listen?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes and scurried off, muttering, "free chowder just for the taking, seafood all over the boardwalk, no time to waste yapping, you'll thank me later," and was soon out of earshot. Paisley watched the boy go, then turned to smile crookedly at her best friend. "I don't hate you too much, I guess."

She closed her eyes and let her mind calm down so she could remember the details of her tale. "See, yesterday I was down at the fishmonger's, figuring out how I could get me some cheap fish to fry for my supper. And everyone on the pier was talkin' about this big storm comin' our way. A storm so big they even gave it a name."

Christopher nodded, shuddering. "Hurricane Matthias," he said quietly, as he settled in to listen to Paisley's story.

Paisley's Story, In Her Own Words



My adventure started at the fishmonger's tables as I was staring at a whole lot of dead fish that had nothing better to do than stare back at me. "So, I could get four fish heads or one whole fish for a copper, then?" I replied to Gill's offer.

Gill's all right. I think he knows I ain't got family or an address, but he goes along with whatever I tell him and we always have a fine time pretending it's all true. Once I asked him why he was called Gill, cause that's a funny name for a fishmonger, right? He let out a big sigh and told me his family had been in fish (yes I laughed at that and he hushed me) for three full generations. Apparently his ma had a sense of humor about it, and his true birth name really was Gill.

"Yeah, sure," Gill said, agreeing to my offer. "In fact I'll give you two whole fish on account of I need to get everything sold real fast so I can get home and board up my windows." Gill sounded nervous. "You should be going home too, Miss Pockets. Not a good night to be out playing in the streets."

I looked over his shoulder at the big billows of dark clouds comin' towards us, blocking out the sun and turning the afternoon into night. "Don't you worry none about me, Mister Gill. I'll be snug as a cog in a crankcase just as soon as I finish my shopping." I looked over the rows of fish again, and it was plain to see that Gill still had a lot to sell, and so I made him another offer. "Give me ten fish for a copper and you'll be home all the sooner." I pulled a coin from one of my pockets and held it up. "You know you can't sell all you got. Might as well make us both happy." I figured I might be able to sell the extra fish on my way back to the warehouse and make back my copper.

Gill sighed and wrapped up a dozen fish in newspaper. "I sure hope you have a big family, girl," he said, shaking his head. "Now shoo, get indoors before Matthias lands on our doorstep! It's bound to be a gallumper of a storm!"

I'd overheard plenty of talk about Hurricane Matthias in the streets. A sea-storm, shaped like a gigantic pinwheel, was spinning right towards Steamkettle Bay.

So I hugged my big package of fish and stepped aside to let somebody's grandma buy some of Gill's fish. Waves were slapping hard and loud at the stone retaining wall that keeps the land and the sea from becoming real good friends here at the edge of the city. I leaned over the railing for a look at the churning water below.

And that's when I saw him.

He wasn't a giant octopus like in the penny books, and he wasn't pretty like in the nature paintings. Just a floppy tan and brown thing, with a head like a puffball mushroom and eight tentacles flappin' all about. His eyes looked ten sizes too big, and as I stared at the eyeball facing my direction—he saw me. I *know* he did, he looked right at me and held my gaze. And then another wave came along and slammed him up against the rock wall.

Suddenly I realized that this creature was in trouble. He was struggling to get out to deeper water, but the waves kept shoving him back against the wall. And with the storm coming in, the waves would get stronger and he wouldn't stand a chance!

So that's when I made up my mind that this octopus was going to come with me and we'd find some shelter from the storm together. I hollered back at Gill, "You got a pole net?" and to my relief, he looked puzzled but nodded and pointed at one laying on the ground next to his fish booth. "Good! Bring it over and catch me that octopus!" I demanded, pointing down at my floppy new charity case.

Gill frowned and pointed out at the storm. "No time for games, girl! Get yourself to shelter!"

I stood my ground. "I won't move until I have that octopus! I mean it!"

Gill grabbed his pole net and stomped over to where I was pointing. "That's just a common octopus, and a pretty small one at that. They don't taste like much and they're only a copper for a dozen. Nothing worth your bother, Paisley. Stop this nonsense now and scoot."

I couldn't leave, even though it might be nonsense. I had my mind set and besides, there was that look the creature had shared with me. He *saw* me. Maybe he even thought I was his last hope. I couldn't walk away and that's the truth of it.

I must have looked real stubborn, 'cause Gill leaned over the rail and swished at the water for a couple minutes until he finally caught him. He hauled him up over the railing and then pulled some twine from his grimy apron pocket and tied it 'round the net, just above the beast. "Ain't no use taking him out of there, he'll just run like water right back into the bay if you do. You want him, you take this whole net with you and be ready to watch him slide away when you cut him free, mark my words." He handed me the basket end, and I grabbed it as best I could. The octopus squirmed around inside its net-bag. "Now will you do an old man a favor and get the heck out of my sight before I throw you in a net and haul you off? Go get safe, child!"

I thanked him about a dozen times as I juggled my package of fish and a net full of squirming octopus. I finally got my load balanced and called out to Gill, "You go get safe too, and that'll be two less crazy people out in the storm." Then I staggered off, carrying my dinner and my odd new friend.

That bundle of fish and my squirmy pal made a fair load to haul. The wind was whipping all around me, stinging me with the bits of sand and debris it was starting to pick up. So it took me a while to get back to my favorite empty warehouse, the one with really thick walls that I knew would keep me protected. Once I was safely inside I looked around for something to put the octopus in, but all I could find was a battered coal scuttle. So I dangled the net-bag down inside it, but then realized I still needed to find some water or my bug-eyed buddy just might drown in the air.

"You behave and I'll be back as fast as I can," I promised him and then I lit out for Jimmy Cupper's house. They were in a grand confusion over there, nailing up boards over the shutters and pulling everything loose outside the house inside the house. Jimmy caught sight of me. As fast as I could, I filled him in on the situation. "Got a refugee octopus in the warehouse and he needs ocean water and I need a bucket!" Quick as good grease, he was pushing a tin bucket into my hands. So I pressed my luck. "Got two buckets?"

Next thing I knew, both Jimmy and I were running for that little piece of beach near the piers, the only place I could think of where we could quickly scoop up two buckets of sea water. Jimmy was working hard to pull in a good breath, but he never gave up. After he filled his bucket, he waded out a little and managed to grab several clams, which he tossed into his bucket. “He’s gonna need some supper,” he said firmly. I nodded, and then we both waddled back to the warehouse with our full buckets.

“It’s your lucky day!” I yelled at the coal scuttle as we stumbled through the door. Quick as we could, we got that scuttle filled up with sea water. Then Jimmy managed to push a couple of the smaller clams through the gaps in the netting, but the bigger ones wouldn’t fit. It seemed a shame to waste the rest, so I pulled out my pocket knife and cut just one stitch to make a bigger hole for the rest. “There you go, food and a fine tin house full of water. If I’m lucky too, my house won’t end up full of water from this nasty storm before the night is through. Say, I think I’ll name you Lucky. Now you listen to me Lucky, we’re gonna make it through this together, so don’t you fret none.”

Meanwhile, I knew Jimmy needed to get back home right away. So I opened my package of fish, pulled out two for my own dinner, then handed him the rest. “You take that home and give it to your mom. That way she won’t yell at you so much for running out in the storm to help me. Now you scoot.”

Jimmy took the package, gave me an unexpected quick hug, then ran right out the door. I stood there a moment, watching him as long as I could, then slid that big door shut and latched it tight against the storm.

Not long after Jimmy left, the rain started coming down hard and the wind picked up something fierce. It howled around the warehouse, making the roof creak and groan, and whistled through any cracks it could find. It rattled that big warehouse door and sprayed rainwater through the gaps around it, splattering and soaking the stone floor nearby. But those thick stone walls and a strong roof kept me safe and dry, and for that I was truly grateful.

I quickly built a small fire out of some busted up pieces of wood I found littering the warehouse, and skewered both of my fish on a metal rod I pulled loose from a long-forgotten piece of machinery. My grilled fish were quite a feast, and I ate every bite.

Comforted by that good feeling of a full belly, I pulled a blanket from my pile of belongings hidden in a back corner, and curled up next to Lucky’s scuttle to try to get some sleep. I didn’t think that’d be easy to do with the storm banging around outside, but what else did I have to do?

I guess I was a lot more tired than I knew, because what seemed like a minute later, I was waking up, all stiff from sleeping on the hard floor right next to Lucky’s house, and the outside world was so quiet I could hear the gulls calling in the bay, a quarter mile away.

And then—something moved, right next to my ear. One of my hair braids was wiggling a bit. Slowly, I turned my head, and found myself eyeball to suction cup with one of Lucky’s tentacles. From what I could tell, he’d pushed one of his arms out through that hole I’d enlarged in the net, and had reached over to hold onto me during the night. Whether he was scared and needed comfort, or maybe he was trying to take care of me, I surely don’t know. Maybe it was both. Either way it was a nice thing to have a friend to weather the storm with, and with that warm thought I dozed off one more time.

After a while, Jimmy entered the warehouse through the side door, waking me up again and bringing the nice warm glow of sunrise with him. As I crawled out from under my blanket, Jimmy asked, “You ready to take Lucky back home?”

I was a little reluctant to part ways with my new friend, but he sure couldn’t stay in that coal scuttle. And since I wasn’t likely to become a mermaid any time soon, Jimmy and I carried Lucky back down to the pier where I’d rescued him. I set the net-bag down real gentle on the pier, pulled out my pocket knife and cut through the piece of twine holding the net shut.

“Thank you for keeping me company on a dark and stormy night, Lucky. Now go have a good life, my friend.”

Lucky slid out onto the rough wood pier as easy as you please. Jimmy watched, his eyes big and his grin even bigger. I figured Lucky would head straight for the water and be gone in a flash, but he surprised me. Instead, he slid over to me and brushed a tentacle across the back of my hand, while looking up at me with those big, soft eyes of his. Darn him, that brought a tear to my eyes. I sniffled and carefully reached down to pet him real soft on his big round head, and he even held still for that nonsense. And then he scuttled over to the edge of the pier and splashed back into the calm waters of the bay.



Christopher exhaled a breath he didn't know he was holding. "Golly," was all he could manage to say. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you at first, but you have to admit that's a gollywomper of a story, Paisley."

She nodded, idly twirling one braid with her fingers. It was the same braid that Lucky had held onto through that terrible stormy night. "I went over to Gill's house to return his pole net, and to make sure he was okay. He was already up on the roof, replacing some shingles that blew off in the wind. He thanked me for bringing back the net so promptly, and asked how I had enjoyed all my fish. I told him I'd shared them with my friend Jimmy and his family, and that put a big grin on his face."

Christopher nodded. "I'm glad your friends came through all right. While I was walking over here from my house, I noticed plenty of damage to the neighborhood. Couple of buildings were pretty much demolished, but most of it looked to be repairable, although it's gonna take some time. I'm just glad the 'kettlers are safe and sound."

Paisley looked thoughtful for a moment, then spoke in a quiet whisper. It was very unlike her to whisper, loud and bossy was her usual style. "Gill told me that an octopus has three hearts. I guess that's why Lucky reached out and tried to let me know he appreciated what I was doing for him. Although I think I'm the lucky one really, 'cause I got to spend some time with him."

"I think you were both lucky," Christopher replied. The two young friends sat together and watched as Steamkettle Bay slowly roused itself and began to clean-up the mess left behind by Matthias, the rowdiest visitor to barge through the city in a long time.

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