

THE BRINGALS OF CARLY

Chapter 1: The Tree

Progress is a funny old thing. Take Carly for instance. Carly was just a small fishing village when the Bringals first settled here, 150 years ago. The first people to live here, before the village even existed, chose this spot to settle on around 1,500 years ago. Their descendants lived a quiet, modest, simple life here for a long, long time.

The fishing in Carly these days is not too good. The catches became smaller and smaller as the village grew to be a town and industry arrived. Now there are almost no fish left, neither in the river, nor in the sea. By the way, Bringals don't eat fish.

Carly is situated in a delightful part of the country on the banks of a small river that runs across a narrow plain from the low hills in the east to the sea in the west.

Today, you can still see part of the old village with its narrow winding streets and little cottages. It's in the western part of the town, on the north bank of the river, close to the sea.

Times have changed in Carly. It is no longer the timeless, little sea side-village it once was. It is now a small modern town of around 100,000 citizens with industry and shops and banks and traffic and hospitals and offices and all the things that progress brings. You name it and Carly has it. I've said it before and I'll probably say it again, progress is a funny old thing.

Let's meet Jack McQueen. He is a citizen of Carly. Jack felt that things just couldn't get better, sitting high up in the shade of his favourite tree on a hot summer's day, watching the world go by. And this was just the beginning of the six-week summer break from school. "What a great idea!" Jack says out loud to himself. He's talking about the project he has chosen to do during the holiday. 'How a Tree Affects the Environment'. "What a way to pass the time on my project, lazing around in my favourite tree!"

It really was a wonderful tree. Right in the centre of the old part of town but so peaceful you'd think it was in the countryside. It had everything that a good tree needed. Those nice, wide comfortable branches for sitting on, plenty of space for your friends, thick foliage to hide you from nosey

people and best of all, it didn't look such a great tree from the outside so you didn't get many intruders.

Both Jack and his sister, Laura, always felt happiest when passing the time in this tree. It was as if they were at home here and that the tree was always there waiting to welcome them back whenever they were away from it. They had spoken to each other of these feelings they had about the tree but couldn't really understand them.

All these thoughts were going through Jack's mind as he sat there waiting for Laura to arrive. Jack was older than his sister by 20 minutes. There was another pair of twins at school but they looked exactly alike. You couldn't tell one from the other. The only way to tell was to call out one of their names and see which one turned round. But Laura and Jack didn't look much like each other. Well, first of all she was a girl and secondly, well, you don't need a secondly, looking like a girl was enough. "How can we be twins if you can tell us apart?" he just couldn't understand it.

Jack had walked all the way from the South-Eastern side of town where he lived in a pretty little house on a small street with his mother and two sisters, his twin, Laura and his older sister, Janie. His father had died two years ago.

As Jack sat there in the tree with his eyes half shut against the sun and deep in his thoughts, a few specks of multi-coloured light seemed to dance on the branch of the tree directly in front of him and then disappear. “What was that?” Jack thought to himself. “Must have been the sun.” Jack leaned back against another branch and looked up at the leafy canopy of the tree. “Wow, this really is a great tree! I wonder where Laura is.” He looked down to see if Laura was coming and as his eyes passed across the opposite branch there again he saw the flickering multi-coloured lights like a miniature firework display. They seemed to be moving along the branch. The sparkling lights stopped moving and turn 90 degrees. Jack felt as if they were looking straight at him. He thought he should get out of the tree as quickly as possible but somehow he just couldn’t drag himself away from the lights.

“Hi Jack! Sorry I’m a bit late.” Laura’s perky voice came from below as she climbed up to him. The lights disappeared.

“Hi Laura,” said Jack still staring at the place where the lights had been,

“I’ve just seen something very weird.”

“What’s that?” asked Laura settling down on the branch opposite Jack.

“I saw some sparkling, coloured lights just there, along the branch from you. I saw them twice but they disappeared each time. What do you think it

could be, the sun?” “I...d...don’t...kn...know,” Laura stuttered, “But look up above you.” Jack looked up. The higher branches had dozens and dozens of little clusters of the coloured sparkling lights moving about on them.

“What’s going on?” Jack whispered.

“Don’t be afraid. Everything’s ok”, said a pleasant voice nearby. Jack and Laura looked over to where the voice came from. A fair-haired boy of around their age was sitting on a branch of the tree quite close to them.

“Who are you?” asked Jack. Where did you come from?”

“You can call me Michael and I’ve been here for quite a long time,” the boy answered.

“I didn’t see you,” said Jack.

“Yes you did, Jack. So did you, Laura. You just didn’t know it.”

“How do you know our names?” asked Laura trying to sound brave.

“Don’t worry and don’t be frightened. Everything will soon become clear to you,” said Michael.

“Who’s frightened? We’re not!” Laura said, defiantly, her heart pounding.

“Good!” Michael answered with a smile. “We’ve been watching both of you for some time and we felt that one day you should see us. Now that you have seen us, we have a lot to tell you.”

“We?” asked Laura looking around for the others.

“Yes, there are many of us. You’ll understand soon. Let’s go up to the higher branches and start our journey.”

“Journey? What journey?” asked Laura.

“Follow me, you’ll find out shortly,” answered Michael. With that he disappeared and in his place was a cluster of sparkling multi-coloured lights. “Follow me,” said the lights and began making their way higher up the tree.

Jack and Laura looked at each other. What was happening? Was this real? Were they being abducted? Would they be back in time for tea? With their twins’ intuition, they spoke not a word. Taking a deep breath, they looked up at the motionless lights. Michael was waiting. Slowly, with some trepidation, they began to follow.

Chapter 2: The Secret

Up in the higher branches of the tree Jack and Laura found themselves surrounded by hordes of the sparkling clusters of lights. Michael appeared out of one of them. “How’s your knee, Jack?” he asked.

“Oh! It’s just a graze,” answered Jack in amazement. “I’m alright. I didn’t realize this tree was so tall!”

“There’s a lot you will come to realise,” responded Michael. “The journey is just beginning.”

“You mean we haven’t *started* the journey yet? interrupted Laura, her clothes disheveled and leaves caught up in her hair.

Michael couldn’t help but laugh. She was a feisty little thing, this Laura, but there was something very endearing about her.

Settling on an upper branch of the tree, Michael said, “Ok, Jack and Laura, we have a lot to tell you but first you must understand that whatever you hear and see here must be kept a secret between us. You can’t even tell your closest friends, not your mother, not your teachers, absolutely nobody. Can I have your solemn promise on that? Before you decide, I can tell you that nothing you will see here will be something that you feel it is your duty to tell someone else. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” answered Jack. “I understand,” Laura said.

“So, do you agree to keep our secret?” Jack and Laura look at each other.

“What do you think, Laura?” Jack asked

“I think,” Laura began slowly, “that if Michael’s telling the truth and there’s nothing here we have to tell anyone about, it’s ok. If Michael’s not telling the truth, then it’s ok for us to break our promise,” Laura answered.

“Is that ok with you, Michael?” Jack asked.

“It’s fine with me,” Michael answered.

“Ok,” said Jack, “I promise.”

“Me too,” said Laura.

“Good!” answered Michael. “Let’s get on with it then. We have a lot to do.

First, I’m going to try to get you to see us as we really are. Watch.”

Michael disappeared and in his place the coloured lights appeared.

“I wish he wouldn’t keep doing that,” said Jack.

“Now,” said Michael’s voice, “You can see the lights, right?”

“Yes,” said Jack.

“Ok. Now, the lights are the easiest part of us to see. I want you to stare at my lights until you can see more of me.” Jack and Laura stared and stared but all they saw were the lights.

“It’s no good, I can’t see anything else.” Jack said.

“My eyes are aching,” said Laura.

“Keep trying, it’ll soon work. Try to let your eyes go out of focus a little,” said Michael’s voice. They continued to stare. And stare. And stare.

After what seemed like a long, long time Laura exclaimed, “Wait a minute, something’s happening. I can see a green shape surrounding the lights. It’s becoming clearer. I can see a sort of face with eyes and a nose and mouth.

Wow! I can see you! I can see you!”

“I can’t see anything,” complained Jack.

“Let your eyes go out of focus,” Laura told him. “Try to look at a point through the lights and past them. Is it working?”

“No, I can just see the Wait! Something’s there. Yes, something green. Yes, yes I can see a shape. It looks like a garden gnome or something. Yes! I can see it! I can see it!”

“It’s not an ‘it’, it’s Michael,” laughed Laura.

“That’s right,” said Michael. “Congratulations! Well done! You’re probably the first human beings ever to really see a Bringal. That’s what we’re called by the way. We are Bringals.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Laura.

“Pleased to meet you too,” chuckled the glowing green Michael. “Now look around you at the other lights.”

Jack and Laura looked around at the other clusters of lights and found themselves face to face with about 100 Bringals of various sizes and shapes. Each one of them was either partly or completely green and had a light cluster inside its body. Two of the Bringals approached Jack and Laura. The taller one, who only came up to Jack’s knee, had a large bright green nose while the shorter one was as wide as it was tall. Both had an

aura of chubby cheerfulness about them “We are the Elders,” said the taller one , “You can call me Pa.”

“And you can call me Ma,” said the shorter one. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

Pa continued, “We would like to welcome you as guests of our family.

We’ve been watching you for some time and we feel that we can trust you to keep your promise.” He winked at them cheekily.

“Pa!!” Ma reprimanded him.

“The one you know as Michael will explain to you everything you need to know.” continued Pa. “ Welcome.”

“Thank you,” answered Jack and Laura.

“Welcome! Welcome!” cheered the rest of the Bringals.

Jack and Laura were quite overcome with it all. They’d never had such a joyous reception, not even when Jack had scored the winning goal for his school football-team, last year.

“Now,” said Pa, with a twinkle in his eye, “I think this is a good cause to CELEBRATE. Come on everyone!”

In a flash, the lights and the Bringals had gone.

“What! Where is everybody?” exclaimed Jack.

“Come on, slow coaches,” said Michael, “We’re going to have a celebration!”

“What are we celebrating?” asked Laura, trying to keep up with the lights that were obviously in a hurry to get moving.

“We celebrate all the time,” replied Michael’s glow, “And we always celebrate the same thing.

“What’s that?” panted Jack.

“We celebrate - Life!” answered Michael. “Life goes on - and so do the celebrations!”

It seemed like the tree went on forever, too. Michael led them up the massive trunk, along twisting boughs and through precarious branches. How they managed not to fall out was anyone’s guess, Jack and Laura certainly didn’t know! Then suddenly, they had arrived and the shadowy cover of the dark, leaf canopy became immediately transformed. Lights, sparkles, flashes and flares greeted their eager eyes and their ears were filled with the sounds of jubilation and festivity. Talk about a celebration, they’d never seen anything like it! There were no tables or chairs, no food or drink and yet the Bringals were very evidently having the time of their lives! Whizzing and whooshing, popping and pinging, chiming and tooting there was just no end to the cacophony of sound. And as for the illuminations, well, even the Aurora Borealis had nothing on this! It was as though an entire firework factory was exploding all at once! Of course,

it was only the Bringals dancing to their own tune, but the display of sky-rockets shooting upwards, Catherine wheels whizzing concentrically, Roman candles spluttering, star spangles descending in poetic beauty, the entire tree seemed alive with a flickering, incandescent radiance. Jack and Laura could only gaze in complete and utter wonderment.

“Would you like something to eat,” offered Ma, bearing a huge tray, almost the width of herself. “We Bringals don’t eat your kind of food, but I thought you might like some cheese and cucumber sandwiches with a glass of milk or perhaps lemonade and as it’s a party, what about a jelly and ice-cream trifle?”

The twins looked at each other. It was just what they needed.

“Thank you!” they shouted above the rejoicing, and tucked into the feast.

The privilege of being allowed to witness this amazing spectacle was uppermost in their consciousness.

Chapter 3: The Bringals

“I hope you don’t mind if I don’t appear as a human while we talk.”

Michael was saying, “You see it uses up a huge amount of energy to appear in human form and I’d like to conserve my energy at the moment.

“I’m not surprised, you must have used up a lot of energy at that party. I’m surprised that you have any left,” quipped Jack.

Michael beamed, “It was fun, wasn’t it? But in fact, all that dancing actually increases our energy levels – it’s a bit like the dynamo you have on your bikes – the faster you pedal, the brighter your lights get.”

“So why do you need to conserve your energy?” asked Laura.

“Well, changing our form uses up an enormous amount of energy and communicating with you in a manner that you’ll come to understand is even more depleting, so just now, I’d prefer not to appear in human form. The only reason I appeared as a boy at first, was so that I wouldn’t shock you too much.”

“That was very prudent,” said Laura. “We’d probably have jumped out of the tree! So can you appear in any shape you want?”

“Yes we can but when we are in our normal state we take on this form which uses up a minimum of our energy. We do have the ability to let the humans see us when we want to, by taking on some form of external shape that humans can recognize. So humans can see us, it’s just that they don’t know it’s us. Whenever you see a leaf, a dog, a human, a book, anything, please treat it nicely. You never know,” he laughed, “it might be a Bringal.”

“So, are you like fairies?” asked Jack.

“No, we’re not fairies. Although we’re completely different from humans, we’re not Fairies or Pixies or Leprechauns or any other spirits, though we do have some abilities that human beings don’t have. We are intelligent, living, breathing, eating, sleeping, creatures. We are green because of the super-chlorophyll in our bodies.”

“What’s chlorophyll again?” asked Jack as if he knew but had forgotten.

“Chlorophyll is the stuff that makes plants green,” Michael answered. “It helps the sun change water and carbon dioxide into organic compounds and also produces energy. You don’t have to understand exactly how it works right now.”

Laura thought about it for a moment. “So are you a plant?” she asked.

Michael laughed,

“Well, we’re not really plants or animals. We are a completely different life form from those that humans understand but I suppose we are what you would call part plant and part animal.”

Laura’s thoughts went off on a tangent to her biology class at school. She could just imagine her teacher’s face if she were to bring a specimen Bringal to the lesson. Who knows what kind of experiments he would conjure up to try and establish which parts were plant and which were

animal! She really didn't like Mr. Pugh very much. Her mother hadn't liked him very much at the Parents' Evening either. Her mother! What time was it? She hoped her mother hadn't come home to find them missing.

"Talking about the way we look, only other Bringals can see Bringals as they really are."

"How's that?" asked Jack.

"Well, only a Bringal can see those elements that make up a Bringal. That's to say we see each other's character and feelings and moods. We see each other's colours and minds and, as the humans say, inside each other's heart. Our external form and shape is not important to us and as you know, it is normally invisible to humans. That's one reason we have survived."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"Well, human beings don't have a very good record in dealing with forms of life that they don't understand."

"They're not all that good with forms of life that they do understand!" said Laura.

"That's right! We prefer to let them live in ignorance of us and let us get on with what we have to do."

“And what’s that?” asked Jack

“You’ll soon see,” answered Michael a bit mysteriously.

“Well, if it’s all such a secret from humans I don’t really understand why you’re bringing me and my sister in on it.”

“That’s a good point. But don’t worry, I promise you’ll soon understand everything more clearly,” Michael answered.

“I’m not sure that we should,” piped in Laura, suddenly. She was beginning to feel as if they had taken on more than they could handle. “It all seems very strange and more than a little suspicious to me.”

There was a silence. Michael’s lights seemed to flicker and dim a little. Jack moved uncomfortably.

“Why did you say that?” he whispered. “I think you’ve offended him.”

Laura shrugged. Michael’s feelings weren’t her problem. She was more concerned about their mother. And what was all the mystery? They hadn’t actually even been asked if they *wanted* to make this ‘journey’. It had all been taken for granted. And as for that promise, she couldn’t tell anyone if she wanted to – no-one would believe her! Anyway, she was tired!

Still, when all was said and done, perhaps she had been a bit insensitive.

After all, Michael and the other Bringals couldn’t have been kinder. It was just all so...so...weird!

“Where did you come from?” she mumbled in half apology.

“Not from here,” answered a quiet Michael.

“What do you mean ‘not from here?’” asked Jack in a friendly tone.

“I mean that we come from another planet,” replied Michael. “We’re extra-terrestrials.”

“Like ET?”

“I suppose so,” answered Michael a smile returning to his voice. “Come with me, I have something to show you. Let’s go over there and I’ll begin to answer all the questions that are bothering you. And I promise you, Laura, it won’t take more than 15 minutes” Laura smiled back shyly.

“Thank you,” she whispered to her brother.

Chapter 4: The Flight

Michael took Jack and Laura to a branch of the tree that they hadn’t noticed before.

Their gnarled, old tree had completely changed its character. What had always been a cosy, home-from-home, now contained so many nooks and crannies, shelves and caverns that it was difficult to recognize as a mere tree. It was more like a self-contained forest! Had they shrunk or had the tree grown? Or perhaps they were in a different dimension! And here they were, yet again, in a completely new part of the tree.

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