

Ten years can seem like a long time when you're young, can't it? When you're an adult with all kinds of worries and responsibilities the days seem to last an eternity, yet the weeks, months, and years are but a blur. When you're a kid however, a week may as well be a year despite the days themselves flashing past in a whirl of colour and fun.

So, when Frederick – he preferred Freddie – was offered the prospect to return to the house they'd vacated ten years previously it seemed like a golden opportunity to return to those happier times when life was simple and seemed to stretch into infinity. Of course, he would have to bring some of his new adult way of life with him back to the gilt-edged world of his formative years, namely to run a new branch of his family's now-successful publishing business, but he considered that a worthwhile sacrifice. Indeed, if he had any of the business nous his parents possessed there was a good chance he'd be able to earn himself a nice little income along with living in the abode of which he had such fond memories.

It seemed that his parents hadn't sold that fabled family home when they'd left. Instead they had merely sought a place more conducive to a family of four and which had more ready access to quality education while keeping the old place to provide some rental income. In fact, it was that very income which Mr. and Mrs. Garnett had used to fund their fledgling business while their day jobs kept the family afloat.

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"Are you really leaving?"

The plaintive voice of a young girl floated across the teenage fox's backyard as he hunted around in the bushes in search of the soccer ball which had so carelessly been booted there by his younger brother during their most recent kick-about. He straightened up, the offending leather sphere clutched in his hands as he turned to observe the speaker. As he'd expected, his eyes found the face of one of his feline neighbours as it peered over the fence that separated their respective backyards.

"Yes, Melissa," he answered patiently as she began to haul herself over the wooden barrier without invitation from her precarious position atop a piece of garden furniture. While she caused him some degree of irritation – as many fifteen-year olds find when they have a talkative younger neighbour – her glum expression and downcast eyes made him feel for her. "C'mon, it's not the end of the world," he told her encouragingly, placing a hand gently on her shoulder, "You'll probably have someone even cooler than me as your new neighbour!"

"Yeah, maybe," she admitted, managing a small smile as she raised her gaze to match his. The feline, whose precise lineage Freddie had never been able to discern, stared at him for a time with her wide blue eyes which seemed to sparkle in the afternoon sun. He could tell she was building up to say something and, while he had his suspicions, he could never really tell what it would be. Her mouth opened briefly, then she appeared to change her mind only to do so a second time and begin speaking, "I really like you, Freddie. You're the best neighbour ever!"

Freddie laughed in a slightly incredulous fashion, now smiling as he looked back at the feline. "Even though I tell you to go away sometimes?" she gave several nods in response, her expression starting to brighten as they talked.

"I know you don't really mean it," she said in a confident and forgiving tone. The fox shifted uncomfortably; as it happened he often *did* mean it as, despite his patient and tolerant nature, he found near-constant badgering to be a little grating on the nerves. There was one subject in particular, which seemed to be her favourite and the very reason why she was so keen on him in the

first place, that irritated him above all others. However, this was likely going to be one of the last times they would see each other so Freddie felt that he should at least indulge her presence once more. His response was merely to smile, shifting the ball he'd retrieved under his arm.

"Would you like to help me pack?" he offered, hoping to combine fulfilling her desire to hang out with doing something he actually needed to do.

This idea seemed to sit quite well with Melissa whose face lit up still more and she nodded her head vigorously. "Yeah! I'm good at that!" she exclaimed keenly. Without any further ado she grabbed hold of his hand and began to drag him inside, knowing perfectly well where his bedroom was. Freddie trotted along behind her, dropping the ball into the bag of sporting equipment which sat dutifully in the hall.

Reaching the foot of the stairs, the pair had to stand back as a figure came charging down from the upper floor. Matt, Freddie's thirteen-year old brother, leapt the last few stairs and turned to face them.

"Oh, hey, Melissa!" he greeted her cheerily, smiling at her with his and Freddie's badminton racquets clutched in his hand.

"Hi, Matt! I'm helping Freddie pack!" she replied, beaming at him briefly before tugging the eldest of the trio up the now-vacant stairs. The brothers exchanged looks as they flashed past each other: Freddie's of helpless exasperation, Matt's an amused little smirk.

Apart from her footsteps pounding on the carpeted wooden steps, Melissa was silent as she led the way to her favourite neighbour's bedroom. This silence, like the one he had experienced in the garden just a few minutes earlier, made Freddie certain the feline was building up to say something and this time he was pretty sure he knew what it would be.

Up to the top of the stairs they went, along the upstairs hallway, then Melissa burst through the last second and last door on the left which she knew opened onto the older vulpine's rather cramped bedroom. A single bed stood in the middle of it with its headboard against the wall that separated his room from his brother's. As there was no built-in storage in any of the house's three bedrooms the walls were lined with several bookcases, a dresser, a wardrobe, and a desk stood beneath the window which overlooked the backyard, its accompanying chair blocking the way to the far side of what little clear floorspace there was. A couple of holdalls and Freddie's sports bag sat on the bed, currently empty but looking expectant. Melissa appeared to consider these for a second, then turned to the fox as he squeezed around the side of the bed while she stood at the foot of it.

"Why is Matt taller than you?" she asked abruptly; just as Freddie had suspected, Melissa wanted to broach the subject of his height...or lack thereof. This was a topic he wasn't all too keen on discussing yet happened to be her absolute favourite, her obsession, the primary reason why she had become so interested in him.

He sighed, but was a man of his word so he wasn't prepared to shrug the girl off just because she wanted to talk about something he didn't. "He just is..." he began for the umpteenth time, never certain how to explain it more than that.

"But he's younger than you! Younger and taller!" she pressed, becoming more excited as she rounded the bed and approaching him until they were almost nose-to-nose.

It was perfectly true what she said; Matt was five-foot-three at thirteen while Freddie was two inches shorter despite being the same number of years older. The fox knew that this wasn't the real

reason she was so interested in the subject, though. No, it was because she – only eight years old and barely more than half Freddie's age – was a mere inch shorter than him. Of course, this meant that Melissa was very tall for her age (something which she had undoubtedly inherited from her family which was made up almost exclusively of six-footers) but she didn't seem to factor that into her consideration of the admittedly diminutive vulpine. In her eyes, the only relevant and interesting fact was that Freddie was short and she seemed to absolutely love that.

So, as they stood there with blue eyes gazing into golden, they were nigh on the same height, Melissa barely having to look up at the boy she had taken so much time to befriend. He shuffled uncomfortably, not able to back away particularly given the clutter of his undersized bedroom.

"So, umm..." he began uncertainly, looking for a means of breaking the awkwardness he was feeling, "shall we get to packing?"

She gave a little nod, but continued to stare at him until Freddie nudged her in the direction of his bookshelves. "You could put my books and stuff into this bag here," he rustled the bag nearest him, "if you'd like?" At long last she looked away, turning to the shelves of numerous books and grabbing a couple of handfuls.

A fresh silence fell on the pair as they gradually took Freddie's room apart and crammed everything they could into the bags, only speaking occasionally to excuse themselves as they squeezed past one another. This silence was different to those that had come before it, the fox thought; the aura around Melissa was contemplative rather than anticipatory. There was no imminent exclamation or question coming, merely thoughts that drifted around the feline's head encrypted with a cipher he couldn't hope to crack.

The Garnetts were to leave just two days later, all their belongings packed into various bags and boxes which were then crammed into the back of their car – mercifully a station wagon. The four vulpines had spent their last couple of nights sleeping in rooms bare but for the empty shelves, lonely wardrobes, and hungry dressers that surrounded them; they would not be taking their furniture with them.

The friends they would be leaving behind had all said their farewells but for the family of cats who lived next door. They had waited until the moment of departure to have their final moments with their neighbours of more than a decade. A few laughs were shared for the road and best wishes were exchanged, but one figure looked to be too forlorn and devastated to join in. Melissa merely stood near the front door to the Garnetts' now-vacant house, tears streaming down her cheeks as she alternated between glancing at Freddie and averting her gaze.

Freddie couldn't fail to have noticed this. He did his bit in saying goodbye to Melissa's parents, then extricated himself from their presence to comfort the girl with whom he'd spent so many hours over the course of their years of knowing each other.

"Hey, it's okay," he said soothingly, placing an arm around her shoulders. As soon as the two had made contact, Melissa flung her own arms around him to pull him into a surprisingly strong embrace.

"W-Will you c-c-come b-back?" she asked as she sobbed into his shoulder. Momentarily caught off-guard, the fox stood there blankly for a time before gently patting her back.

"We'll have to see," was his slightly evasive answer. He didn't want to upset her still further by answering in the negative, but he couldn't have given someone so distraught a vestige of hope that for all he knew would be for naught.

Melissa, for her part, knew perfectly well that the odds of seeing the boy she'd obsessed over for as long as she could remember were very slim indeed. With an effort she raised her head off his shoulder to look at him with their noses nearly touching one last time, her eyes puffy and red with each breath coming to her in the form of a sharp gasp.

"J-J-Just..." she took a moment, deep breaths appearing to calm her enough to allow for unbroken speech, "Just don't forget about me, Freddie."

A small smile crossed the fox's lips as he nodded his agreement to her terms.

"You promise?" she asked, her tearful blue eyes desperate for confirmation.

"I promise."

At that, she managed a watery smile. The pair hugged one last time, then they heard his mother calling him over so they could be on their way. Melissa stood by her parents as the family of foxes pulled out of the driveway for what surely would be the last time. All three of them were waving, but the little girl's gesture was for the vulpine sitting behind the driver's seat, and for him alone.