

Between

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Between

by [genarti](#)

Summary

One would have thought that the first days back would be the hardest. But as it turned out, that wasn't true at all.

Notes

This ended up focused rather more on Susan than I initially meant it, but I hope you like it anyway! It was *tremendous* fun to write. Thanks to TL and Becca for being excellent betas.

Originally written for [Gen_Ficathon 2009](#) and posted [here](#), for the prompt "After The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe how did the kids cope with being returned to their normal lives, being children again with adult memories and emotions?"

One would have thought that the first days back would be the hardest. But as it turned out, that wasn't true at all.

They weren't *easy*, certainly. The memory of Narnia made one stronger, for a little while, and more swift and easy in motion, but after that faded all four of them spent some weeks with barked shins and bruised elbows from forgetting just how high a young body could jump and which shelves they couldn't reach. Susan winced away from mirrors, sometimes, but other days she stared into her own reflected eyes for minutes on end, studying the familiar and half-forgotten shape of her young face. And she would always remember the awful silence after that moment at tea when Peter made some comment about Father and Lucy exclaimed, "Oh! We have *parents*, don't we?"

All the same, in Professor Kirke's house, coming back from Narnia was almost easy. The Pevensies found that they liked him more than ever, now that they could tell him everything. He would listen, with his eyes twinkling above a flyaway white beard and below flyaway white brows, and one never felt at all silly for telling stories of fauns and Moles and Horses. He had met Aslan. And that, Susan supposed, was what made all the difference.

Mrs Macready and the three servants, of course, were not in on the secret. But that didn't spoil a thing, because it became a kind of game to hide from them, or to let the women believe that the Pevensies were only playing at childish make-believe.

"It *does* make me wild to hear Ivy and Betty laughing about menageries," Lucy confided once, looking more child than queen with her hair-ribbon loose and her socks rumped. "I know they only suppose we've picked a lion out of a book. But to think of those poor old lions in zoos, and then to think of Aslan!"

"Well, they've not met Aslan," Susan had pointed out, practically. "They can't know. Lu, your hair's a fright. Come here and let me fix it."

Amongst themselves, they talked endlessly of Narnia. "Do you remember this?" one would ask, and the others would chime in eagerly, "Do you remember that? Oh, do you remember?" In those first days, none of them had any trouble recalling any detail. In scratchy woollens amidst the Professor's English furniture, they whispered together in corners. Sometimes they spoke like Narnian royalty, calling each other *lord* and *madam* and *royal brother* in sober, loving earnest; sometimes they spoke like English children, gabbling together of Cair Paravel's throne room and the cries of gulls over the Splendour Hyaline's prow.

Later, Susan looked back on that time as a sort of sunlit dream, the last of her childhood.

* * *

The first hard part came when they were allowed to come home.

Susan ought to have expected that, she thought later, but of course she didn't. She had a vague idea that she would go home to Mother and Father, and everything would be just as it always had been. Even at the train station, when it took her a full minute to recognize her mother, and when she only realized that the anxious, hollow-cheeked, limping man in the brown jacket was Father because he was standing next to Mother, she still thought it would turn out all right. The war was over, and they could all adjust to that.

But Peter and Edmund traded grim looks at the sight of their father's bleak eyes, and Lucy pressed a hand to her mouth then and burst into tears as soon as she and Susan were alone. "I want my cordial," she sobbed into her hands, while Susan stroked her hair helplessly. "Su, I should only need a drop, and I haven't *any*, and Daddy's leg must be hurting him so." Susan ought to have known then that nothing would be the same.

"I'm fine, love," Father said whenever any of them asked, and his cheerful smile would have convinced any real child. "It's only this game leg of mine, and it's healing fast. I'll be racing you all in the park come next spring. Just you wait."

And he was; by spring he walked without a limp, and at footraces he could beat any of them except Peter. But the trouble had already settled in, and the trouble was that Mother and Father were trying to be parents to children who had spent months in the country and come back home unchanged. Mother gave anxious unnecessary advice on getting along with schoolmates, and Susan couldn't tell her that she was accidentally antagonizing Mrs Hadley down the road meanwhile. Mother baked the best treats she could with rationing still in force, and by unspoken agreement the children stopped discussing Narnian ices and cakes and sugar sculptures. Father was bluff and hearty and only told jolly little stories about his squad mates, and Susan could see Peter and Edmund biting back their own anecdotes; she wondered sometimes what they discussed in their own room, late at night, and whether they ever mentioned Father's silences. She asked Peter once what he thought, but Peter only said in his most High Kingly way that Father had done his duty for a noble cause like any man of honour and knew it, and Susan left it at that.

"I was nearly married!" she longed to shriek, in the middle of quiet evenings with the radio on and Mother knitting socks. "Don't you see? Peter and Ed fought giants in the Waste, and Lucy wept over dead men, and every one of us has killed! We grew up and it was dryads and badgers who explained matters to us, not you. Peter and Edmund have been wounded worse than Father ever was. My brothers protected me from Rabadash's villainy, not you. Stop trying to protect us from things we already know!"

She never said a word. It would have broken their hearts. All four children had tried to tell them about Narnia, Lucy over and over again. Mother and Father only laughed and told them it was a lovely game, truly, and they'd made it ever so real, but hadn't they better be careful? Lucy was awfully little, after all, and she seemed to believe in the game a bit too much.

Every time she ached to scream, Susan settled her face into the mask of calm composure she'd learned as a queen. Queen Susan the Gentle had been gracious to Calormenes and surly dwarves and even hags; she could keep her parents from worrying about her.

"Oh, darling, you're turning into such a lady!" Mother exclaimed, and Susan felt brittle with the effort of smiling.

* * *

School was all right. Her girlfriends seemed awfully silly sometimes, but it was a comfortable sort of silliness. It was easy to be that Susan.

The boys were at their own school, and Lucy was still in her last year of day school back in London. There was no one to remember Queen Susan with her ankle-length hair and her bow and horn, and somehow that made it matter less that Susan Pevensie had a mostly-flat chest and her hair in braids and couldn't talk to anyone about centaurs and giants. She swam laps and grumbled over maths and checked in every mirror that her uniform was looking tidy, and sighed over Bing Crosby and Clark Gable, and some days she forgot all about Narnia.

The memories caught her in odd moments, always unexpectedly. When she looked up at the night sky, her eye searched for the Leopard before she remembered to look for Ursa Major. A chance sentence in her History textbook would remind her of dear Mr Tumnus lecturing solemnly about the kings and queens of old. The cook had a broad seamed face with soft dark eyes that were somehow exactly like Mrs Beaver's. In archery, the only times she ever missed the target were when she forgot that she was holding a cheap student bow instead of her own beautiful one from Father Christmas, and after the first moment's shock at the arrow going awry she would remember where she was, and who. When Nellie Featherton sneered at her, as Nellie Featherton sneered at nearly everyone, and called her "pleasant enough, but dreadfully common," Susan's first thought was, *I have seen my subjects kneel before our thrones on Cair Paravel's fair dais, and known they loved us for our good rule. Dost think such insults touch me a whit?* "You looked dreadfully adult for a moment there," Jenny Brown told her afterwards, laughing and a little in awe. "As if you were about to call her Miss Featherton and say something terribly scathing."

Sometimes those memories were a comfort. Sometimes, Susan needed to clench her fists hard to summon her mask of queenly composure, or even run to the loo where she could cry a little in peace, where no one would catch her and think her a soppy baby.

By the end of term, she had learnt to forget for days on end that she had ever been anything but Susan Pevensie the schoolgirl. She never truly *forgot*, of course, but the immediacy receded, and the detail, and the ache of wishing. She could no longer have said what each of their chess pieces looked like, nor how exactly to navigate from Beruna to Glasswater, nor how to make an elegant crown of masses of flower-twined hair. The thought made something hurt in her stomach, but all the same she was glad of it.

But on her first day of holidays, Lucy caught her hands after tea and cried, "Oh, Su, I've missed you so!" she was such a mixture of little girl and Lucy the Valiant that Susan could do nothing but squeeze her sister's fingers in a sudden burst of affection.

"Sister," she said, "I have missed thee sorely also," and Lucy laughed aloud and kissed her cheek.

* * *

After they helped Caspian, everything was awful all over again.

Susan had managed to half-forget, in that year, so that Narnia had receded into a pleasantly dreamy memory. It had been only occasionally that the longing struck her in force, or that she felt furiously wrong at living in a child's body; most of the time she had been simply an English schoolgirl. Now she remembered how Narnia's air smelled and the indescribable warmth of Aslan's mane under her hands, and being back in England was pure heartbreak.

"I shall never go back," she whispered to herself, alone in the school garden. "I shall never go back."

The very worst of it was that she couldn't even hate Aslan for it. He explained matters to her and Peter, and she knew he was right. And besides that, he was *Aslan*.

But it was harder than ever. She knew that England was her world now, and that that ought to be enough. She knew that Aslan was in every world, and that she might learn to know him here too, but somehow it never felt the same. She knelt in church, watching stone and stained glass, and wanted to weep with how empty she felt. The words were beautiful and true, but they weren't what she wanted. She wanted sun-warmed golden fur and a rumbling purr. "Oh, Aslan," she cried silently, kneeling with folded hands, and Jesus gazed back at her with limpid eyes of glass and paint.

She didn't mean to avoid Lucy, but she found she was doing it more and more. Lucy simply *would* keep pestering her. Susan might be scowling at algebra, or darning a sock, and in would burst Lucy with "Oh, Susan, *do* look at this picture!" and "Su, Jenny found such a dear little mole in the garden, and do you remember...?"

"Yes!" Susan snapped at her once. "I remember! But it doesn't matter in the slightest right now, does it? Some of us are trying to finish a composition!"

Lucy's stricken look nearly made her apologize right on the spot, but she was too full of bitter fury to manage graciousness for her little sister. She grabbed up her books instead and stormed out of the room. Lucy did apologize later, saying how awful it must be to have been told one could never return and that she hadn't meant to be beastly, and Susan apologized (rather stiffly) in her turn, saying she was tired and out of sorts. After that, she began to revise with girlfriends increasingly often. It was pleasant to be sociable, and Jenny Brown was brilliant at explaining mathematics when Susan had trouble. And besides, when other girls were all around, Lucy could hardly bring up anything awkward. It made life easier.

All the same, she found she hadn't lost any of her old skill at crying silently in the loo, nor at hiding the tear-marks after.

* * *

In America, Susan was startled to find that she could be alone with her parents and not feel as if she were keeping miserable, beautiful secrets from them. All it took was having no one around to share any of those secrets with.

"Come *along*, darling," Mother urged, the first night in New York. "Your hair is lovely. We're only going to the corner restaurant, nothing fancy."

"Now, now," Father said indulgently. "Girls must have their primping. Especially in a city full of strangers, I should think. Though you're pretty enough without any, Su."

Susan smiled brightly at both of them, without turning her head too far from the mirror. Her hands were busy with her hair, tucking the last few strands into their roll. "You can go ahead, Mum. I'll be straight down."

"Well..." Mother hesitated.

Susan could read that pause perfectly well. Mother was still excited to travel in America, and wanted to watch passersby from the hotel lobby more than she wanted to wait in the room while Susan did her hair, but she felt guilty about it. "Honestly, Mother. I don't mind."

"Well... All right." Mother crossed the room to drop a kiss lightly on Susan's head. "Don't be too long."

Susan smiled at her mother's image in the mirror. "Of course not."

A few moments later, the door closed behind them. Mother's footsteps clicked away down the hall, not quite in step with the deeper scuff of Father's stride.

Susan tucked the last two bobby pins into her hair, and pressed her hands to the counter. A young woman stared back at her from the mirror. Her lips were red, her frock stylish, and her black hair was tucked into elegant victory rolls instead of flowing to her ankles. Once, she would have had suitors asking for her hand. Now, young men vied to catch her eye.

There was no noise from the rooms next door, nor the hallway. The entire hotel seemed silent.

"Hast a choice, madam," Susan said softly to her reflection. "You can weep forever over Narnia. You can defy Aslan's bidding, and look only to the world which you have left." In the mirror her face seemed almost to belong to someone else: a cool bleak mask, elegant and regal and aching young. "Or you can live in this world. Live *here*, in the world where you have a future, and stop splitting yourself between them. No more *do you remembers*, no more games, no more wishing. Live where you are."

There was no sound but her own breathing. No lion's roar split the silence; no flash of tawny gold flickered in the corner of her eye. Her own face stared back, framed by dark hair and pink hotel wallpaper.

"I choose," whispered Susan Pevensie, and she went down to dinner.

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