

THE FAIR WELL

This story takes what I call a Twilight Zone approach, inspired by the 1960s television series of the same name that delivered – what were then – popular short stories of the kind that were being published in pulp science fiction and fantasy magazines. This kind of story is often characterised by ending surprisingly, either with a twist or inconclusively. (See ‘Stories with a twist’ in ‘Types of story’ on page 5.) Even though there were no regular characters or settings in the series, what seemed to unify the stories was the way in which they were told. They often took a perfectly ordinary situation and then turned it on its head through the introduction of a character, device or inexplicable occurrence – a novum (see ‘Types of story’ on page 5).

These are classic examples of what are known more generally as What if? stories (see ‘Types of story’ on page 5) and are closely related to the more scientific and philosophical thought-experiment (see ‘Types of story’ on page 5 and ‘Stories and thought-experiments’ on page 17). Thought-experiments are designed specifically for thinking so the similarity between What if? stories and thought-experiments shows why What if? stories are so suited to thinking with. Many Twilight Zone stories use the ‘Careful what you wish for!’ theme, and that is what The Fair Well does, though without the moralistic downfall of the main character that the television series often had.

Many children hold the belief, pre-reflectively, that fairness is ‘getting what you want’. Using this What if? story we are able to ask, ‘Okay! What if you did get what you want? Would that be fair?’ We are able to test the class’s intuitions about what is fair against the events of the story. This is a perfect example of how thought-experiments work. (See ‘Stories and thought-experiments’ on page 17.)

Storytelling hint: use your hands to help the class understand the unusual word ‘undulated’: as you say it, describe, with your hands, a hill with an undulating descent. (See ‘Vocabulary’ on page 50.)

THE STORY

Mary had been coming home from school each day that week thoroughly miserable. ‘It’s not fair!’ she had exclaimed to her mother at the close of each school day.

‘What’s not fair?’ her mother had asked each time.

‘Miss never chooses me,’ Mary had said.

‘Now, I’m sure that’s not true,’ her mother had tried to reassure her.

‘It is true. She never chooses me. It’s not fair!’ There seemed to be nothing her

mother could say to change her mind.

(Optional) Task Question 1: Is Mary right, is it not fair?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ If she has never chosen her then is it not fair?
- ✓ If she has only chosen her once is it not fair?

In order to take Mary’s mind off whatever it was that was troubling her, her mum decided to take her to a special place that weekend for a picnic. On Saturday they packed up a delicious picnic and drove to the country. It seemed to take hours. ‘We must be a long, long way away from the city now’, thought Mary. When they arrived at their destination Mary was spellbound by the beauty of the spot her mum had chosen. They laid their picnic on a blanket in the middle of a sloping hillside that undulated its way down to a stream at the bottom of a valley. The sun sparkled through the running water that flowed beneath an old wooden bridge; the whole place seemed to be enchanted, as if magical. On the other side of the bridge was a dark, but also enchanting, wood. After finishing her picnic Mary asked her mum if she could go and play by the bridge. ‘Only if you promise not to wander off into the wood; make sure you can always see the bridge,’ said her mum. ‘I promise,’ Mary replied as she trotted happily down to the bridge.

For a while she played by the bridge as she had promised but then she found herself gravitating towards the wood. As she stood by the wood and stared inside she felt an irresistible urge to go inside. Then she thought, ‘as long as I don’t lose sight of the bridge I’ll be safe’. So, she started to make her way into the wood, step by step. After a short while she looked back to make sure she could still see the bridge and hear the running water. There it was. ‘Surely I can go a little deeper,’ she thought and she ventured further into the wood. She stopped again to check for the bridge and the sound of the water. Just then, a beautiful little butterfly suddenly appeared around her head. She tried to catch it but it was too quick and fluttery. Without thinking, Mary found herself chasing its random movements. A minute or two later it was gone; lost in the darkness. She remembered the bridge and looked around her but she could no longer see it, or the light at the edge of the wood, or hear the sound of the stream. She tried to retrace her steps but found that she could not. There was no pathway under her feet. She realised that she was lost.

As she stood there wondering what to do and starting to feel a little scared, up ahead she noticed another light. She thought it must be the edge of the wood again but when she went towards it she found something very different. There was what seemed to be a magical light issuing from a well, which – oddly – stood in the middle of the wood with no path leading to it. On it there was a sign that read, ‘wishing well’ across the top. By now she was no longer scared; simply filled with a feeling of wonder. She took out a coin from her pocket and threw it into the well. Thinking back to her miserable week at school she silently wished her wish.

(You may want to ask the class what they think she will have wished for.)

The moment she had finished she heard her mum's voice in the distance, 'Mary!' She shouted back, 'Mum!' and they kept shouting to each other until, at last, they were reunited. Her mum took her into her arms and said, 'Thank goodness you're safe! You must never go off like that again! Do you hear!' But Mary wasn't really listening. She was trying to tell her mum all about the well and its magical glow.

Back at school on Monday, in the morning during register, her teacher Miss Slocombe asked if there was anyone who wanted to volunteer to take the register to the school office. Everyone's hand went up. Miss Slocombe then said...

(Leave a pause and allow the audience to anticipate (see 'Pace and Pause – Audience Anticipation' on page 32) what will happen next.)

'Mary, would you like to do it?' Mary jumped up with a big smile on her face. After all, this was what she had wished for when she was at the wishing well in the wood. Later on, another errand needed doing. Everyone's hands went up again. And Miss Slocombe chose... (Pause, as above) Mary. And then again... Mary. It went on like this all week.

On Friday, when Mary came out of school to meet her mum at the school gates she had a huge, beaming smile. Her mum said, 'How was school this week?' and Mary said, 'It was great. Everything is fair now!'

Task Question: Now that Mary is being chosen, is it fair?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ If this isn't fair, what would make it fair?
- ✓ Is fair 'getting what you want'?
- ✓ Is fair 'everyone getting what they want'?
- ✓ Is it possible for everyone to get what they want and it still be fair?
- ✓ What is fair? (What does 'fair' mean?)
- ✓ What do you think of the following definition for 'fair': 'fair is the right thing to do when the circumstances have been considered'?