Introducing Fiona O'Malley
In
The Reading Face-off

Come and see how Fiona manages her grief by helping a friend in need.

A Short Story by Sandra L. Bell

The Reading Face-Off

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Chapter 1

Life Changing Events

Fiona's world had been turned upside down as her beloved mother had recently passed away. Her dad had just informed her that her grandfather was going to move in with them to help out with running the household. Fiona's grandmother had passed several years before. Fiona welcomed the wonderful news as she had always been very close to her granddad and they could use his wise and calm presence in their home. She hadn't seen him since the funeral a few weeks ago and couldn't really remember much of that time.

"When is granddad coming?"

"He arrives Saturday. That gives him the weekend to settle in before you go back to school on Monday." her Dad replied gently.

Fiona was deep in her own thoughts. The thought of going back to school and not having her mother to come home to was overwhelming. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her Dad came to her side and embraced her. "Everything is going to be okay, Fi," he soothed.

Fiona awoke on Saturday with the usual, heavy sadness but felt somewhat happy and excited about her granddad's arrival. She dressed and went downstairs to find her dad and granddad sitting at the kitchen table having coffee. Fiona ran to her grandfather's outstretched arms.

"Fi, my precious girl!" He stood up and enveloped her in a big bear hug!

Fi felt safe and happy in his arms, "I'm so glad you are here".

Fiona's dad brought her a cup of hot chocolate and the three sat down at the table.

Knowing how much his granddaughter loved playing soccer, he asked, "How's soccer going, Fi?"

"I've kind of lost interest, Gramps, I just can't seem to concentrate. I've been burying myself in my books. I can get lost in the amazing stories. It seems to be the only place I can find some peace."

"That's perfectly okay, Fi. If you are not ready to go back, don't worry about it. But keep soccer in your thoughts as you are a very gifted player. You will know if and when you are ready."

Fi's dad studied his daughter's sad face and said, "Your gramps and I have been talking about something that

might be of interest to you. There's no pressure, but just hear us out."

Her granddad continued. "Friends of mine, Dorothy and Drew Sullivan, have a daughter about your age. Her name is Riley. A couple of months ago, Riley was thrown off her horse and seriously injured. She hit her head on a rock and she is now blind.

The doctors, at this point, don't know if her condition is permanent. Riley is like you in that she has a profound love of books. Before the accident she had entered to be a contestant on ***Literary Hounds***, the kids' TV show that invites avid readers to face off in a question and answer contest. Each contestant has to read the same four books, from which a series of questions will be taken. Four finalists were then selected, one being Riley.

She had read two of the books before the accident and would like to complete the readings and still be a contestant. Riley's mum got approval from the TV show's executives that, considering the circumstances, Riley could have someone read the unfinished books to her. I was wondering if you would like to help Riley out by reading her the remaining books?"

Fiona looked from her granddad to her dad. She felt terrible for what had happened to Riley. She thought about it for a few minutes and then said, "I would like to do whatever I can to help Riley." Her granddad gave

Fiona the Sullivan's telephone number so she could set up a time to meet with Riley.

Chapter 2

Anam Cara

After lunch the next day Fiona said she was going to the Sullivan's to meet Riley. Her dad and grandfather smiled at each other somewhat relieved.

When Fiona arrived, Mrs. Sullivan answered the door and welcomed her. "Hi, Fiona," she beamed. "It is so nice to meet you. This is truly a wonderful thing you are doing for our Riley." As they headed upstairs to Riley's room, she continued, "The only thing that Riley still seems to have an interest in is the ***Literary Hounds*** competition. We are so grateful someone her own age is willing to help us out."

Mrs. Sullivan opened the door, "Riley, dove, Fiona is here." Dove was Mrs. Sullivan's pet name for her daughter. She walked over and gave Riley a hug and said, "I'll leave you girls to get acquainted."

Fiona had never met a person who was blind. She was not wearing dark glasses and was sitting in a chair by the window next to her desk. "It's nice to meet you, Riley. It's pretty awesome that you made it on to the ***Literary Hounds*** show. I watch that show whenever it's on."

Riley smiled in Fiona's direction but did not respond. Fiona continued, "Your mom said you had completed

two of the books. "Which ones have you read? I am so interested to learn about the required reading." Riley reached out and, in frustration, hurled the books on her desk to the floor.

She lowered her head to her chest and began sobbing. Fiona was taken aback by Riley's reaction. She didn't know what to say or do. She was frozen in her spot. She just stood helplessly and watched as Riley cried and cried. Finally, there were no more tears left and she looked up.

"Are you still here, Fiona?" "Yes," she murmured.

"I'm sorry for the outburst. I'm sure you didn't sign up to help some whiney wackadoo."

"Whiney wackadoo?" Fiona questioned with her left eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, you know, someone who whines a lot and is a little nutty."

Fiona went over to Riley and put her hand on her shoulder. "I doubt very much that you are a whiney wackadoo but I'll keep that expression in mind." Fiona gave Riley a tissue from the desk and then bent down and picked up the books. "Are these the selected readings? Your mom says you have already read two."

“I can’t do this”, Riley whispered. My parents think it is a good idea for me to continue with the contest and I don’t want to let them down, but I just don’t think I can. I feel like I’m floating aimlessly on a big, black ocean. How am I supposed to take study notes? I’ll be at a huge disadvantage, not to mention getting up on that stage not being able to see anything.”

Fiona sat down on the bed and faced Riley. “Let’s just take things one step at a time.” Riley started to get worked up again and cried out, “You don’t understand! My whole life has changed.”

Fiona was thinking how her whole life had changed and mumbled, “I understand, Riley.”

Riley blurted out, “Don’t tell me you understand because you can’t possibly know how I feel! You’ve never had something as devastating as this happen to you! So, *please*, don’t tell me you understand!”

“Riley, you are right. I can’t possibly know what you are going through but I do know about devastating loss. A few weeks ago, I lost my dearest mother. It came right out of the blue. She got ill and then two months later she was gone. There is a lump of sadness deep inside of me which I think might also be inside of you.”

Stunned by this unexpected revelation, Riley exclaimed, “Oh Fiona! I am so sorry! I had no idea. Please forgive my selfish behavior. Each of us has suffered a

tremendous loss." Both girls were quiet, deep in their own thoughts. Finally, Riley broke the silence. "We both do have a love for books. Do you think that maybe we can use that to help each other?"

"Let's give it a try, shall we? You said you were concerned about notes. I think I might have an answer to that. We'll read the books together and put whatever notes you want on to flashcards. That way we can go over the notes until you are comfortable with them. And, I can quiz you! What are the books you have completed and which ones do you still have to read."

I've read ***The Secret Lake***. It's about a lost dog, a hidden time tunnel and a secret lake, sort of a time travel adventure. The other one I finished is ***When You Trap a Tiger***. This one touches on Korean folklore as a girl goes on a quest to save her grandmother. I really enjoyed both books."

"I haven't read either but hey sound great."

Riley continued, "The two I haven't read are ***The Girl Who Drank the Moon*** and ***Bridge to Terabithia***. But would you mind if we read them all together that way we can make the flash cards for all four books."

"Sounds like a plan, Riley!" Fiona picked up the two books that Riley had not completed and read a quick description. "***The Girl Who Drank the Moon*** is about Luna, who after being raised by a witch must figure out

how to handle the magical powers she was accidentally given before it is too late. ***Bridge to Terabithia*** tells the story of a young boy who befriends a young girl who is a class outsider. They create an imaginary world called Terabithia where the boy and girl rule as king and queen until a tragedy unfolds. These sound like fantastic books. I can't wait to get started. Riley, are you up to starting this afternoon?"

Riley smiled. "I am, Fiona. Let's give your idea a try. Have you ever heard of the expression *soul sisters?*"

"I have. With my background being Irish, my grandfather taught me the phrase, "*Anam Cara".* Anam means soul and Cara is friend. He would often refer to my grandmother as his Anam Cara. I believe it to be a term of endearment to someone who is very special to you."

"I believe that you are my soul sister, Fiona. I feel a very special connection to you." Riley confessed. Fiona smiled and gently squeezed Riley's hand.

Chapter 3

Show Time!

The last six weeks had flown by. Fiona and Riley had become close friends and really enjoyed their time together preparing for ***Literary Hounds***. Fiona had spent hours with Riley to make her comfortable both with the reading material and also navigating the stage. The T.V. studio had allowed them to come and practice moving around and once Riley had become familiar with the area she felt more relaxed.

The day of the competition had finally arrived. Riley's parents as well as Fiona and her family were all in the auditorium to support her. Earlier, Fiona had ushered Riley onto the stage and led her to the lectern from which she would be answering questions. It was exciting to meet the star of the show, Rex Newbury, who took extra time to make Riley feel confident in her surroundings .

Riley had done very well and they were now down to two finalists – Riley and Jason Armstrong, a boy from her school. Each participant received two passes, meaning they could answer incorrectly twice and not be disqualified. Jason had used up both his passes, Riley only one. The questions would continue until one player gave an incorrect answer. The same question would then be asked to the remaining player. If answered

correctly, that person is the winner. If both answer incorrectly, they start over with a new question. They would proceed in this fashion until they had a champion. Jason was up first.

Rex Newbury wished them both good luck and proceeded with the next series of questions. "Name the teacher, the student and the places they visited in the chapter, "***The Perfect Day***" which, in fact, actually ends in tragedy. Remember to preface your answer with the name of the book. Partial answers will not count. You must answer all the questions correctly. Jason?"

Jason responds, "Uh, I only know two of the answers so I have to pass."

Rex Newbury turns to Riley. "Would you like me to repeat the question, Riley?"

"No, thank you, sir. The book is ***Bridge to Terabithia***, the teacher's name is ***Miss Edmunds***, the student is ***Jesse Aarons, Jr.***, and the places they visited were the ***National Gallery*** and the ***Smithsonian***."

"Young lady, you are absolutely correct! Congratulations! You are ***Literary Hound's*** newest champion!"

The auditorium burst into applause! Fiona jumped up from her seat cheering, clapping and crying at the same time!

Rex Newbury and Jason walked over to congratulate Riley, who was just beaming! Rex told Riley that he was placing the ***Literary Hound*** trophy on the lectern and tucked an envelope with the prize money in her hand! "Thank you so much!" Riley exclaimed.

Rex motioned to Fiona to come up and help Riley off the stage.

Riley's parents took Fiona and her family out to dinner with them. Everyone had a wonderful time chatting about the events. The adults smiled and were thrilled to see the girls smiling and laughing.

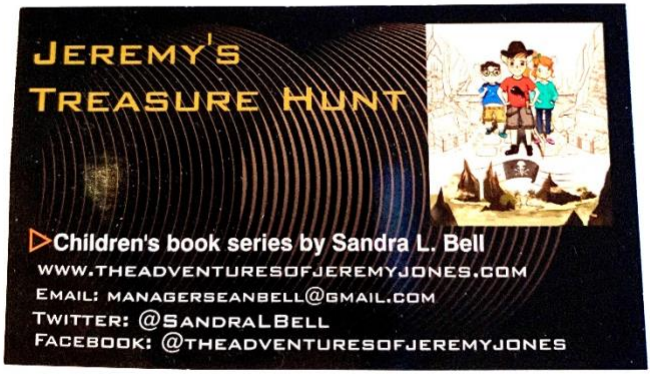
After dinner Fiona went to Riley's room to help her display her trophy. When they were lifting the trophy to place it on a shelf above the bureau, it slipped and hit Riley on the head causing her to fall to the ground.

"Riley!" Fiona bent down to help her up. Riley was shocked and blinked with unanticipated surprise. Fiona steadied her on her feet as she continued to blink repeatedly. She could now see hazy objects in her room. Things slowly cleared as she set her eyes on Fiona. Her sight had returned! "I can see! I can see!" she exclaimed over and over again. Fiona grabbed Riley and embraced her. "The doctor said this might happen but I never wanted to believe it in case it wasn't to be." She was studying Fiona's face and said, "You are even more beautiful than I had imagined. Just as beautiful on

the outside as the inside. There are no words, Fiona, to thank you for what you have done for me. You have seen me at my worst and still you came every day to help me." Tears started to form in her eyes. "You are truly my soul sister!"

Fiona hugged Riley and whispered in her ear. "And you are mine, Riley." Riley then moved to her desk and opened the top drawer, took out a jeweled box and handed it to Fiona. Fiona looked surprised as she opened the beautiful box. Resting on green velvet was an intricate gold bracelet with "***Anam Cara***" engraved on a delicate oval disk on the front of the bracelet. The back of the disk read "***Fiona and Riley, friends forever***". "Oh, Riley. What a thoughtful gift. I will treasure this always." The girls embraced and Fiona suggested, "Think we should let your parents know the good news?"

The End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