

BELLA CRIED

Bella cried the day we told her. I had gone back and forth so many times as to whether we even should tell her, since it was no longer relevant to her life. Would it cause her pain to know or would having an explanation give her a chance to reinterpret her life experience in a better way? I just didn't know. When I asked Carlisle for his opinion, he said that it was entirely up to me, either way. If I decided to tell her, he was willing to be present to explain his own actions and to answer questions if I wished.

Really, there was no reason for me to bring it up at all. It wouldn't change anything about anything except for perhaps the way Bella thought about herself or her past, but in the end, I decided to tell her. Secrets like that have a way of revealing themselves and causing problems that you can't predict. I had learned a few things in my time with Bella and one was that trying to protect her from upsetting information was something she didn't appreciate.

The issue came to the fore the day that Renesmee tumbled headfirst down the staircase when she was nearly two years old. It was so unexpected an incident that those in the living room at the time and those who raced in in response to the loud clattering noise froze in place and watched as she fell. Everyone thought she was doing a "stair somersault" as some kind of gymnastic fun. Only I could hear the panic in her mind when her foot, damp from the bath, slipped over the lip of the top step plunging her forward. Her head smacked into the fourth stair tread in the first revolution of her headfirst cartwheel.

When it happened, I was at Alice's computer nearby trying to figure out why her touchscreen was behaving erratically. As everyone turned to watch Renesmee's "trick," I read her panic and dashed toward the stairs, scooping her out of the air before her head could hit a second time. I pulled her against my chest and rubbed her back as she burst into tears, more out of surprise and fright than pain. Fortunately,

Renesmee's head is much harder than the oak staircase—the fourth tread splintered upon impact with her skull.

"It's all right, muffin. Daddy's here. Shh...shh..." I soothed quietly, turning my body so that Nessie couldn't see the shocked expressions on the faces below us and become more frightened. "You took a little tumble, didn't you?"

Bella, who had just returned home from running an errand in town, heard the banging and raced in to find me comforting our sobbing daughter. She ran up the stairs toward us in consternation.

"Nessie, what happened? Are you all right?" Bella held out her arms and Renesmee leaned into them, though she was no longer a small child. Nessie began to hiccup as she explained to her mother what had happened, how scared she was that she couldn't get her feet under her, and how Daddy had saved her. It was all a bit melodramatic.

"Bella, let's take Renesmee to the cottage," I suggested after looking around the room. All the concerned adults at the house were bound to overreact and make more of the event than it warranted.

Renesmee was exhausted. She'd had an upsetting nightmare the previous night and not slept as many hours as she needed, an amount that varied depending on how fast she was growing at any particular time. After laying her down in her bed for a nap, Bella and I sat by our fireplace to talk.

"She actually fell?" Bella asked in disbelief.

Physical awkwardness was something we'd never witnessed in our daughter and so we assumed that Renesmee's physical capabilities were on par with those of a vampire. Naturally, she possessed slightly less strength and speed than the rest of her family, but we'd never seen her human side reveal itself in a lack of balance or coordination.

"Yes," I responded to Bella's question. "She might have caught herself before reaching the bottom of the stairs, but her thoughts were frightened and helpless so I intervened. She didn't tumble on purpose."

“Well, that’s a first. But kids do fall, I guess. Maybe she inherited her mother’s clumsiness gene,” Bella commented wryly.

A silent alarm went off in my head. *Was it possible? Surely not! Was it?* I shuddered at the thought. If it was hereditary, we would have no recourse. After meeting Nahuel, the half-vampire, half-human man from the Amazon who was approximately one hundred fifty years old, we had assumed that Renesmee was not subject to the physical debilities of human disease. But what if she was? Quileute legends indicate that vampire bites are deadly to the shapeshifting wolves who have the same number of chromosomes as our daughter. Based on that, we have theorized that Renesmee could die if we tried to change her. My mind raced through the worst-case scenario in the flash of a second before I was able to compose my face. I needed to talk to Carlisle.

“What, Edward? What is it?” I looked at my wife. Obviously, I’d failed to hide my unease.

“It’s nothing, darling,” I said mildly. “I was just worried about the shock Nessie took.”

“You don’t think she’s hurt, do you?”

“She says not, but we’ll have Carlisle look her over anyway when she wakes up.”

Bella nodded in agreement. I took her hand and pulled her to our bedroom, laying her gently on the bed before lying down beside her. I wanted to exorcise my fears by making love with my wife, as Bella’s body never failed to soothe me. Sensing my stress, though, my wife kissed me gently, lovingly, and then made her way slowly down my body, unbuttoning my shirt and unfastening my trousers, kissing and caressing along the way. Normally, I was uncomfortable allowing Bella to love me unilaterally, but on this day, I did not object. The overwhelming sensations of her lips, fingers, and tongue touching my most sensitive places gave me much-needed relief. I reciprocated the favor with pleasure.

Later that afternoon, Jacob took Nessie hunting and I went in search of my father. He'd examined Nessie thoroughly and declared her to be healthy and whole, no harm done from the fall. Bella and I had assumed she was fine, but hearing it from Carlisle set Bella's mind at ease.

"Are you going to tell her?" Carlisle asked when I found him alone and expressed my concerns.

"Yes, I have to. What if there's a problem in Nessie's genetics? What if it progresses and leaves her immobilized for eternity? We don't know!" My voice broke on the last word and I covered my face with my hands.

"I think it highly unlikely, Edward," Carlisle said gently. "We're not even sure it's hereditary. It's just as likely to be environmentally triggered. We know that it is more prevalent in colder climates... northern U.S., southern Canada, Russia, northern Europe—"

"I hope you're right," I interrupted, regaining my composure. I knew that I was overreacting, but was unable to help myself. "Still, it raises an issue and I would rather Bella heard it from me now than discover it herself later. I've learned a few lessons since our courting days." I smiled grimly at my father. "I'll just go and get her. Okay?"

Carlisle nodded and I went to find my wife. Now was as good a time as any and Bella already had figured out that something was troubling me. After two years of marriage, she could read me better than I could read her. It was uniquely frustrating.

My wife became concerned when I asked her to join me in Carlisle's office. "What is it, Edward? Is it Nessie? Is something wrong with Nessie?" I could hear the panic beneath her words.

"No, not at all," I hastened to reassure her. My father had declared it unlikely in spite of my own panic. "But I'd like Carlisle to explain."

She looked at me with a wide, distrusting stare, but allowed me to tug her up the stairs to my father's office.

“Bella, thanks for coming up. Please sit down.” Carlisle motioned to the sofa near his desk, immediately adopting his doctor’s bedside manner for breaking bad news. It was such a habit for him after three hundred years of treating humans.

“What’s going on, Carlisle? You two are starting to scare me!” I took my wife’s hand while my father explained. I had no idea how she might react.

“Well, we’re all a little on edge about Nessie’s fall down the stairs. It’s unexpected and a little unsettling given her gifts, but let me reassure you that as far as we know, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with Renesmee. Edward shared with me your remark about how Nessie might have inherited her mother’s clumsiness and it reminded us both that... well...” Carlisle’s voice faded out. He seemed uncharacteristically at a loss to explain himself.

I took over for him. “Bella, what Carlisle is trying to say is that while you were pregnant, when he was drawing blood anyway, he did some testing that we never told you about.”

Bella’s mouth dropped open in surprise and her gaze switched from me to my father and back. “Why would you do that? What were you looking for? What did you find?”

“Carlisle was looking to confirm a suspicion of his about why you had so much trouble with balance...falling, you know...and with insensitivity to temperature and pain. Why you had so many old contusions and healed fractures on your x-rays.”

Bella glared at me silently. I couldn’t tell what was going through her mind. Surprise? Anger? Fear?

Carlisle had regained his composure. “I believe, Bella,” he said quietly, “that you were suffering from undiagnosed multiple sclerosis...MS...possibly for a long time.” He paused to let her absorb the information.

“Wha...a...t?” Bella stuttered, her eyes wide and her mouth gaping.

“Darling,” I said, stroking the back of her hand with my thumb, “you weren’t a clumsy child. You weren’t an uncoordinated teenager...well, you were, but Carlisle believes it was due to a serious and progressive disease. It wasn’t your fault that you weren’t good at sports or that you constantly fell or that you injured yourself so often. You had a serious dysfunction of the nervous system...well, he’s pretty sure.”

“I...I don’t understand. You’re saying I was sick?”

“Yes, darling. It’s a degenerative condition that would have crippled you eventually. It even could have killed you, probably at a young age.”

“You knew this and you never told me?” Bella’s voice rose aggressively.

I tried to explain. “We found out when you were so close to starvation...during those horrific days when I thought you were going to die. Then after Nessie was born and you were changed it no longer seemed important.”

I don’t know exactly what I was expecting Bella to do when she got this information. I rather thought she would be angry at me for keeping it from her and maybe at Carlisle for testing her blood without her knowledge, but I didn’t expect what happened. Bella stood up and paced across the office, then stopped and muttered, “That explains so much...,” her voice a whisper. Time stood still as she wrapped her arms tightly around her chest and stared blankly into space. Then suddenly, her face collapsed and she slumped over at the waist, gasping uncontrollably. A high keening sound broke from her chest and she began rocking back and forth, toes to heels, heels to toes. The noise turned into a piercing wail.

I glanced at my father in alarm before rushing to my wife and scooping her up in my arms. I dropped to the floor and pulled her into my lap, enveloping her with my body. I had never seen a vampire react this way under any circumstances, especially not my strong, stoic wife.

Bella was not an hysterical person in any way, but she was clearly falling apart, vampire tears wracking her body with dry sobs. Stunned and a little frightened, I was hit with an onslaught of concerned thoughts swirling through the house. Esme was on her way up the stairs. Carlisle looked chagrined.

Perhaps I shouldn't have told her...he thought.

"Bella, Bella, it's okay, love, that's all in the past. You're fine now...fine...darling, it's okay..."

Esme knocked quietly and opened the door enough to peer in. When Carlisle shook his head at her silent query, she closed the door quietly and retreated. Bella was showing no signs of regaining control over herself and I had no clue whatsoever what was going on inside her head. After a time, I decided to do with her as I would with our child and carried her home. I laid with her in our bed, wrapping my arms and legs around her and rocking slowly. It took Bella a long time to calm down, but eventually, the hysteria eased and her cries quieted.

"What's wrong, love? You can't be worried about this now, surely?"

"Oh Edward..." she moaned softly, regaining her voice, "if you only knew..." Another sob broke from her chest.

"Tell me, darling, what is it?" I could hear the anxiety in my tone.

Rather than try to find words to express her intense emotion, Bella paused for a few moments. She closed her eyes and brought her fingers to her temples, and then without warning, I was inside her mind. It seemed unreal to me, miraculous, as she'd allowed me to read her thoughts only a few times since discovering that she could raise her inner shield and let me in. It was still a difficult and demanding endeavor for her.

I was quickly overwhelmed as Bella reviewed memory after memory of emergency room trauma...x-rays, stitches, casts...and the even more numerous injuries she'd suffered in silence and hidden from everyone, including her parents. The scenes were pale and indistinct with fuzzy

edges and little detail, but all had a common dark thread of pain and humiliation running through them. She revealed incidents of relentless taunting and bullying by other children, perpetual exclusion from parties, outings, games, and lunchroom groupings, and a pervasive sense of being different—less than—her peers.

When Bella finished recalling the dim memories she could bring to mind, her shield dropped over her inner world of hurt, anger, embarrassment, and shame, stowing it away, hidden from me and from the rest of the world. I lay beside her, flooded with all the human pain and sadness that had survived her transformation and traveled with her into her new life. The fact that she remembered any of it revealed how emotionally shattering it had been. It explained a lot about my wife...her loneliness, her shyness, why she'd never had a boyfriend, her low self-esteem, her regard for others over herself, her emotional maturity...so much. I never knew.

I exhaled heavily to release this borrowed mountain of misery and held my wife tightly to my chest, rocking her gently back and forth. We didn't speak, but after a time, I began to sing "You are the Sunshine of My Life" by Stevie Wonder, a cheerful song of love and adoration as I cradled her in my arms and stroked her hair. At some point, singing turned to kissing and kissing turned to lovemaking and for the first time since Nessie was born, we stayed in bed together all afternoon.

Edward

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You are the sunshine of my life
That's why I'll always stay around
You are the apple of my eye
Forever you'll stay in my heart

I feel like this is the beginning
Though I've loved you for a million years
And if I thought our love was ending
I'd find myself drowning in my own tears

You are the sunshine of my life
That's why I'll always stay around
You are the apple of my eye
Forever you'll stay in my heart

You must have known that I was lonely
Because you came to my rescue
And I know that this must be heaven
How could so much love be inside of you

You are the sunshine of my life
That's why I'll always stay around
You are the apple of my eye
Forever you'll stay in my heart