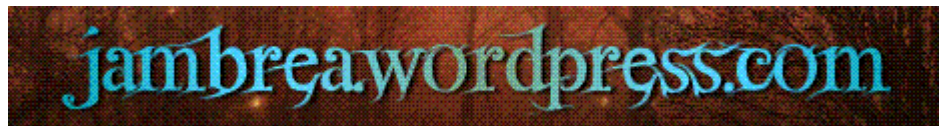




Without Camouflage
Faith Bicknell-Brown

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Without Camouflage

by
Faith Bicknell-Brown

The cabin sat on a hillside amongst a thick cluster of oak, maple and elm. A faint path straggled its way up from the well-worn trail and across the rugged Appalachian terrain that led to the porch steps. The wind stirred the leaves and burst through blooming multi flora rose bushes. Erratic sunshine patterns danced upon the roof. The sweet scent of the white blossoms tantalized Fran's nose. In silence, she studied the small dwelling.

Panting, Fran finally managed to lug the wagon to the top of the slope. She fished the key out of her jeans pocket and unlocked the front door. It took a couple of hard shoves with her hip to open it. Finally, the door screeched like a banshee and opened. The sound echoed through the forest, prompting a sense of dread in Fran's heart.

She looked around the dwelling and discovered a generator that powered the water heater and a refrigerator, but there wasn't an electric light in the entire place. Someone had placed oil lamps around the main living area and the bedroom. Sheets covered all the furniture, and a quick glance at the hardwood floors and scatter rugs revealed enough dust on them to plant a potato crop. The windows needed washed too.

Fran didn't know whether or not to put a lot of effort into cleaning. She had no idea how long she'd have to hide out at her friend's cabin, but Donna had told her to stay as long as she liked. With a resigned sigh, Fran shrugged out of her backpack. She turned, walking out to the cart full of supplies and began bringing things into the cabin.

She stooped, picking up the radio and the last bag, her back to the trail below.

"Hello neighbor!"

Startled, Fran spun on her heel, dropping the radio. It slid a couple of feet in the dry, slippery leaves and stopped.

"Oh, I'm sorry," a woman said. She looked up at her from the trail. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Where did you come from?" Fran asked and picked up the radio.

"I live in the next cabin up the trail." The woman climbed the hillside. She finally reached Fran, but didn't seem out of breath. The woman held her hand out. "Charlotte Anderson. I'm a nature artist, so I spend a lot of time up here taking snap shots and painting the outdoors."

Fran grasped her neighbor's hand and found it cold and dry. The woman looked like she might be about her age—another thirty-something gal. Short, wispy blonde hair framed a face full of light freckles. Her green eyes smiled warmly, her pert nose wrinkling. A gold stud sparkled in each ear, and a gold choker with a pendant that looked like it was half animal, half man gleamed around her neck. A ratty tee shirt with paint splatters hugged the woman's slim torso. She stood a couple inches taller than Fran, her paint-smeared jeans a little too short for her long legs.

"Fran," she said, deliberately omitting her last name.

"Just Fran?" Charlotte asked.

She nodded.

"Good enough," her neighbor laughed. "I'm not the prying sort."

"I bought some tea at the general store," Fran began, instantly liking the woman. "Would you like to come in?"

"Sure."

Inside, Fran lit a couple of oil lamps. The muted lighting did little to aid the meager sunshine spilling through the soiled windows.

"Once you wash the windows, you'll have a lot more light," Charlotte stated, walking around the main living area. She stopped at a small floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. "So many books," she touched several, "to read and get lost in each world. I used to like to read anything I could get my hands on."

"I take it you have little time anymore?" Fran asked. She turned on a gas burner and it lit with a soft whoosh. "I like to read too, but I find my leisure time is limited. I'm lucky if I read one or two books a month."

"No, my pleasure time is next to nothing now," her neighbor said.

"The Donovan's grandfather was the scholarly type," Fran said. She found a teapot and let the spigot run for several seconds before filling the pot. "When he died, the family stopped coming up here."

"So the Donovan's still own this cabin?" Charlotte pulled a cover off a bar stool pushed against the long counter.

"So you know the Donovan's?"

Charlotte nodded. "I remember them, yes. It's been several years."

"Donna owns this cabin now," Fran replied, "but she's thinking about selling it."

"Do you have family?"

"Three children." The less the woman knew the better. Fran shifted her gaze to the countertop. "They're staying with their grandparents for a few days."

"Where's your husband?"

"I'm divorced." Slowly, Fran's gaze met new her friend's.

Charlotte looked long and hard at Fran. A ripple of unease passed through her. The teapot issued a shrill cry, and Fran jumped, laughing nervously. She poured hot water over the teabags and wondered if maybe Austin had had one of his lady friends follow her. Months ago, he'd tried to kill her by having one of his low-life buddies break into her home, but Fran had cracked the guy over the head with a food processor, followed by the heavy clay crock she kept on the kitchen table full of fresh fruit. The police found him on the floor bleeding profusely from several head wounds. Once she had started whacking him over the head with the bowl, she hadn't been able to stop herself. Her oldest daughter had yelled at her to stop.

"Yeah," Charlotte said, "me too. My ex-husband tried to kill me several times."

The cup shook in Fran's hand as she lifted it to her lips.

"Are you okay?" asked Charlotte.

"I'm just tired, plus I dread the thought of cleaning this place up. It's going to be a lot of work."

"Rest first, then start fresh," Charlotte advised. She hopped off of the barstool. "I better get going. I have a painting I want to finish."

"Come back and visit sometime," Fran said, hating to see her new friend leave.

The woman walked to the front door. "You can count on it."

Fran finished her tea. She took Charlotte's cup and dumped the contents down the sink and rinsed both, setting them on a drain board. She wandered into the bedroom, pulled off the dust cover and flopped down on the bare mattress. Within moments, she fell into a deep sleep.

###

She awoke hours later, and gloom suffocated the room. Frightened, Fran sat up glancing about wildly, heart palpitating in a painful frenzy. Finally, the clouds of sleep dispersed in her brain, and she remembered her whereabouts. She fell backward on the mattress, taking big gulps of air in an attempt to calm herself. Dim light in the other room penetrated her consciousness. She'd lit some lamps earlier that day. With a sigh of relief, she sat up and swung her feet off the bed and walked into the kitchenette.

She set the teapot on the burner again. A cool night breeze soughed around her feet, and turning, she realized she'd left the front door standing open.

"Stupid!" she berated herself. "Austin could've walked right in and murdered me in my sleep!"

She shut the door and slid a bolt lock and a chain in place. Halfway to the kitchen unit, she stopped, glancing uneasily around the cabin that had been scoured. The clean windows glimmered in the lamplight, the dust shrouds lay folded in a pile in one corner and the floors had been swept.

Panic fluttered in the depths of her belly. She looked around the room expecting someone to materialize from a dark corner or to lunge at her from behind the couch. An object propped on a barstool drew her across the room. A large canvas painting of a creature blending with a forest gleamed in the lighting. A note and a hardback book rested on the stool.

Fran,

This is a nature spirit. It guards the helpless and the pure of heart. For those it likes, it bestows gifts of the future, such as precognition. For those who threaten its wards, it brings death. Perhaps if you hang it in the cabin, it will give you comfort and protection. The book is one I found on the shelf. It explains some of the Native American legends; it makes for entertaining reading.

*Your new friend,
Charlotte*

Fran stared at the painting, noting the photo-like reality of the trees and brook. The realistic quality of the painting was amazing, but the nature spirit was more of a form than a figure. It blended with a large oak tree. The spirit stood tall and muscular with long arms and stout legs. Its fur melded with the green of the foliage and the brown of the tree trunk and limbs. At first glance, a viewer knew that something was different about the painting, but a second look revealed that there was something besides scenery in the piece. Charlotte had painted a mystical shimmer around it. Eyes glowed in the foliage, bright green eyes that might be sunlight dancing on two leaves. Although otherworldly, Fran liked the artwork.

Crossing the room to the fireplace, she took down the picture of farmhands cutting hay and replaced it with Charlotte's painting.

###

The next two days passed quietly. Fran read the legend book. She sat on the porch watching gray squirrels forage for food; the tree rats leapt from limb to limb like trapeze artists. Both mornings a yellow-bellied sapsucker investigated a rotted log lying a few yards from the front porch. At night, a great-horned owl's ghostly shrieks sent shivers racing up and down Fran's body, and, if the breeze blew just right while she was on the porch, she caught the faint sound of burbling water.

On her third day at the cabin, the loneliness for her children grew too much to bear. She *had* to check on her kids, but feared it too risky. However, as the day marched towards afternoon, the need to hear her children's voices overwhelmed her. Regardless, she needed to call her folks and let them know she was all right. She wished she had a cell phone, but service in rural Appalachia sucked.

Fran gathered things to stow in her backpack for the trek down the mountain to the small town nestled at its foot. A soft knock on the front door startled her, but she remembered her new artist friend. Perhaps Charlotte would like to make the trip down the mountain with her. Smiling, she crossed the cabin to the front door. It would be nice to have the woman's company, and maybe Charlotte would need to restock on painting supplies anyway. Fran shrugged into a light jacket to ward off the early morning chill. At the door, she pulled the bolt lock back and opened the door.

She gasped, adrenaline shooting through her body on Mercury's wings. She pushed the door shut with both hands, but Austin shoved one shoulder through the opening just in time.

"Austin! NO!" Fran shrieked. She pushed harder.

"Hello, Fran," her ex-husband said sweetly. With his arm in the doorframe, he reached for her hair. His other hand made contact with the door—hard. It shot open, knocking her backward, but her ensnared tresses snapped her to a halt. "What a nice little hideaway you have here."

"H—how did you find me?" she rasped. Fire laced her scalp, and tears pricked her eyes. He jerked her against his body, and she squealed in pain.

"Our youngest told me where you've been hiding." His hot breath stirred the hair by her ear.

"You have my children?" Fran tried to turn her head to see the truth in his eyes, but his fingers in her hair prevented any movement.

"*Our* children," he corrected. "I spoke with Laura through the school's playground fence. Luckily, she's so young and trusting." He chuckled, the sound promising her hours of misery.

"You're a monster!" Fran hissed.

"Your point?"

###

The sun warmed Fran's backside. She laid face-first on the ground behind the cabin. The spicy aroma of dried leaves overwhelmed her nose. She turned her head, looking for her ex-husband as she worked her wrists and ankles in a futile attempt to loosen the zip ties Austin had used to secure her. Each movement urged the cramps in her shoulders and arms to knot tighter, and the skin around her wrists burned with irritation. The sounds of Austin muttering and slinging things drifted to her spot in the backyard. She guessed him to be somewhere behind the storage bin by the generator.

Austin's footsteps approached, and a spade landed on the ground next to her. The sudden impact startled Fran.

"Time to die," Austin said in a cheery voice and hauled her to her feet.

Maybe she couldn't camouflage the fear in her voice or her actions, but she refused to give Austin the satisfaction of seeing her shed tears. Better to let him think she was a hard-core bitch.

Austin thrived on fear; he loved to make the children cower from his shouts of anger and relished embarrassing Fran into obedience. He'd ruled their home with a mighty voice, a dictator upon a couch throne. He believed his only requirement as a husband and father was bringing home a steady paycheck. Austin was a man who drank beer like there was no tomorrow, and turned belligerent toward anyone who pointed it out. He'd always been an absent spouse and refused to help with the children or the home, yet was more than willing to administer punishment that left welts and bruises.

He pulled Fran tightly against him, their noses almost touching. Slowly, he closed the distance by placing a kiss upon her lips. He released her, and Fran looked up into his cornflower-blue eyes. The hate and animosity within them stunned her.

"What did I do to make you hate me so much, Austin?"

"You stood up to me." His gaze turned glacial. "Of all the relationships I've had over the years, you're the only woman who has ever stood up to me. That's unforgivable. You're nothing but a bitch."

As they stood eye to eye, wrath roiled in the depths of Fran's belly.

"You bastard," she whispered. It was time to show him just how much of a bitch she could really be. "No one should have to endure what you put me and the kids through. I'd had enough and there was no way I was going to let you terrorize the kids any longer."

He slapped her. Fran's head snapped back, and for the briefest of moments, she thought it would leave her shoulders and land somewhere in the undergrowth.

"I did everything for you, for those kids."

"You did everything that suited *you*," she said softly, her heart pistoning, cheek stinging.

"Well, it looks like I'm going to continue doing what suits me," he said. "By the time anyone finds your body, there won't be enough clues left to bother with a murder investigation." He pulled a knife from his pants pocket and cut the tie around her ankles. Picking up the shovel, he stepped behind her and pushed her forward. "Walk."

She crossed the small clearing behind the cabin, but movement in the bushes caught her attention. Charlotte hunkered down behind a cluster of sassafras. The woman placed one finger against her lips, straightened and tiptoed back into the woods.

For a moment, Fran wasn't sure she'd truly seen her neighbor. Where was Charlotte going?

They pushed through the undergrowth and made their way down a steep slope. Soon, Fran heard gurgling water. They broke through a grove of saplings next to a creek. A small waterfall spilled off a rock ledge.

Austin hit her across the shoulders. Her feet left the ground. Briefly airborne, the water rushed up to meet her. She landed facedown at the edge of the water. Hands grabbed her by the feet and dragged her backwards. Water seared her sinuses and trickled down the back of her throat. She choked, spewing moisture.

He rolled her over and said, "I can't make up my mind whether to bash your head in with the shovel or do it with the perfect rock." Austin grinned at her, and evil swirled in his eyes. "I've wanted to do this for months."

He took a step toward her and leaned over to grab her bound wrists. Fran kicked like a Las Vegas Rockette, and her foot made contact with the underside of his chin. The force of the kick spun him around. He fell into the creek and came up sputtering.

"YOU BITCH!" He shouted, the monster in him surfacing without camouflage, without restraining reins or chains. "YOU SELF-RIGHTEOUS BITCH!"

He scrambled to his feet. Cradling his chin, he stumbled toward the shovel. With both hands, he raised the spade over one shoulder.

"I'm going to make this last," he sneered. "I'm going to bludgeon you and tear your beautiful body into hamburger and enjoy every second of it."

"You know," Fran said, preparing herself for the worst, her heart slamming painfully in her chest. "There really are monsters in this world."

"Yeah?" He took a step closer.

"Yes," Fran said. She cleared her throat and spat her disdain at his feet. "The really scary part is that monsters don't lurk in the woods, dark basements or deep, murky water."

"You're babbling to buy yourself time." He laughed. "Okay, I'll humor you. Just where are these real monsters?"

"Some of us live with them for years before discovering them," Fran answered, her voice smooth despite the terror clamoring through her body.

"How sad for you," he said, his grin widening like a grotesque jack o'lantern.

Behind her ex-husband, a figure appeared at the edge of the undergrowth. Charlotte stood behind him, but turned and slipped through the shrubbery. Fran looked up at Austin and threw her bound hands over her head to avoid the shovel's blow.

But the blow never arrived.

Wonder filled Fran. She peeked between her forearms thrown over her face. A respectful sense of awe filled her. A creature held the spade in one hand and Austin's throat in its other. It used the elements to camouflage itself. The mystical being looked as if brown earth, green foliage and bright sunshine cavorted with one another in a solid form.

Fran sat up, her gaze riveted on her ex-husband suspended in the air, his boots dangling a good two feet above the ground. Austin gaped at the creature, his eyes bulging. Fran wondered what he was seeing; did he see the same thing she did or something else? Perhaps he witnessed only the shimmering earth tones and dancing sunshine that choked the life out of him.

"You should go now," Charlotte said suddenly at her side. She held a penknife in her paint-spattered hands and used it to cut the zip tie encircling Fran's wrists. "Go back to your cabin, Fran," she said, her face so close that Fran smelled earth and wood smoke upon her. "You don't want to see what happens next." She pushed her toward the hillside. "I'll check on you later."

Fran cast one lingering look at her ex-husband, allowing herself to savor his comeuppance for just a moment. The air still sparkled around him. His face turned an odd shade of blue, and his feet kicked half-heartedly.

She climbed several yards up the hillside, but stopped, her curiosity too overwhelming to ignore.

The creature shrugged off its camouflage. Long cinnamon fur covered its tall, powerfully muscled body. It stood every bit nine feet tall, its arms long, its legs shorter, the muscle evident even through its thick fur. Huge feet sunk into the soft creek bed and water swirled around its ankles. A large head sat upon wide shoulders that looked as though they could carry a Sequoia without breaking a sweat.

Austin's head popped off his shoulders like a pimple unmercifully squeezed by an overzealous teenager. The blood spurted, and the creature caught Austin's head as if it were a carelessly tossed ball.

The world swayed around Fran. Somehow, she managed to quell the nausea and watched in morbid fascination as the furry humanoid turned, tossing the shovel into the bushes, revealing its large pendulous breasts sparsely covered in reddish fur.

A female! Fran smiled. How fitting.

Their gazes met, and even from the yards that separated them, Fran saw humanity in its eyes coupled with high intelligence and wisdom.

The female dragged Austin's body by a hiking boot. In her other hand, she clutched his severed head by the hair and meandered down the creek bed, blood oozing into the rushing water.

###

The sunshine bathed what should have been Charlotte's cabin. Instead, a few scorched foundation stones, a half-blackened brick chimney and a couple twisted pieces of plumbing stood in its place. Several years had obviously passed since the cabin had burned to the ground.

What was going on? Fran stared at the site. Why had Charlotte lied to her?

She walked into the remains, stepping on grass and maple seedlings that had rooted in the ashy soil. A blue jay screeched nearby, and a breeze stirred a cluster of white trilliums growing next to the chimney. She walked the ruins, the scene with the creature still playing in her mind.

"You won't have to worry about *him* any more," Charlotte's voice rang out behind her. "You can go home to your children now."

"Why didn't you tell me what is in these woods?" Fran turned to find her friend sitting on one of the foundation stones.

"I did. I gave you the painting and the legend book." Charlotte's laughter rode the breeze. "If I had told you any other way, you wouldn't have believed me."

"I guess you're right."

"What you saw is ancient." Charlotte crossed her legs and leaned back slightly on the stone. "They live in the forests and protect the innocent. They camouflage themselves because Man doesn't understand their purpose. They're good and helpful. They possess mystical powers and psychological magic."

"How do you know all this?" Something glimmered in the soil by the hearth. Fran used the toe of her sneaker to scrape away the dirt.

"This is where I used to live," Charlotte said behind her. "My husband tied me up one night, nailed all the windows and doors shut, and set the cabin on fire." A heavy sigh wafted across the burn site. "God says in the end that all mysteries are revealed."

Her sneaker unearthed a bit of gold chain. Stooping, Fran pulled it free from the moist earth. Encrusted with ash and dirt, Charlotte's gold chain with its half-animal, half-human pendant hung from Fran's fingers. She straightened, turning toward her friend.

"Charlotte?" she called.

The wind and the blue jay's screeches replied.

"*This is where I used to live,*" her friend's voice whispered in her mind. "*My husband tied me up one night, nailed all the windows and doors shut, and set the cabin on fire...*"

A chill swept over Fran's body. "Oh, Charlotte, I am so sorry." She stared at the charred remains of a wildlife artist's cabin. Crossing the site, she stumbled over a protruding stick. Upon closer inspection, she found the end of a paintbrush and pulled it free from the greedy earth. She wiped the dirt and ash from both the necklace and the sparsely bristled paintbrush. Slipping the brush in her back pocket, she fastened the necklace around her neck.

She paused, sensing a gaze upon her. She turned in the direction of the sensation. Only the sunshine streaming through the oaks and hickory greeted her.

"I'll remember," Fran whispered. "I'll remember you both."



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