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Gillian Downey

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Top of the Pine Tree

by Gillian Downey

1. Same old day, same old punishment

It was a bright Autumn afternoon and the trees seemed to be calling to me to climb up their trunks and hide in their branches. How could I resist their whispers? I'm a raccoon and, as you know, we have a mischievous nature, so even though Aunt Molly (who isn't really my aunt because she's a porcupine) had told me I was grounded, I climbed out of my window and ran out to the huge, green guardians of the forest. I scampered up the trunk of a Douglas fir and found my best friend Spike, who's a porcupine, waiting for me, like always, at the top of the tree.

"About time, Ash," she smiled and playfully punched me in the shoulder.

"That hurt more than your quills!" I laughed.

I had met Spike when I was three years old, and I was on a walk with my Mom, when she was still alive. I had seen Spike and was confused because I had never seen a porcupine before. I rammed into her to see how she would react. You might be asking why I would do that to anyone, but that was kind of my way of saying, "What's your name?" when I was too little to ask. But she didn't react because I already had. I had burst into tears as her quills pierced my soft three-year-old skin. It was greater than any other pain I had ever felt. She was shocked to see me cry because she was only a small porcupine, and her quills weren't that sharp, but she was full of kindness, so she immediately asked if I was ok. I was fine, after the quills were pulled out of my skin, of course, and I asked if she wanted to play with me. Her smile said it all. I was really happy to see her today because we were going hiking together in three days and we were supposed to plan what route we were going to take on the trip. I didn't tell her I was supposed to be grounded, but I didn't have to. We were only talking for about five minutes when I heard my name being thrown from my house and into my ears by a voice that was so familiar that I already knew who was calling me.

"I have to go. Aunt Molly needs me," I sighed. Her face fell when I told her I had to leave.

"I might be back later," I tried to make her feel better because I would feel like it was my fault she was sad. I ran down the tree and sprinted back to my house but got a little caught up because of—

2. Aurther strikes again

Aurther. Damn it. Aurther was a black bear who...well, let's just say we didn't get along as well as most people would. He's kind of a bully. If I were to say "Hi," he would greet me with a paw to the face.

"Hey, Aurther. What's up? Family's in good health, I hope?" I smiled. He growled and shoved me to the ground.

"Enough with the sweet talk, or it will be the last thing you say!" he snarled, deflecting my question.

"No need to be rough, Buddy! How about we talk it out, huh?" I tried to act friendly instead of telling him what I was really thinking. He growled

"Where's your friend, Dirt?" *Dirt*. His amusing nickname for me.

"She's not here. And my name's *Ash*," he laughed and smiled. His breath smelled like rotten fish and made me gag. He looked around for a second.

"Good. That means she can't sneak up and spike me,"

"*He's scared of her??*" I thought. He was talking about the last time he had been picking on us. Spike had gotten scared, and all she could think of was rolling into a ball to defend herself, and it worked. Her quills, now sharp and strong, pierced him, and he practically ran away crying. The gears in my head turned, and I knew what to do. Trick him. I cleared my throat and said,

"Actually, now that I think of it, she's supposed to meet me here in a minute so if you don't want to be spiked again, you might wanna get out of here," he looked around, eyes wide, and huffed.

"You got lucky this time, *Ash*," I sighed, as he trotted in the other direction. Aunt Molly called my name again as she ran outside.

"Ash! Where have you been?" I rolled my eyes.

"I've been right here, Aunt Molly," I heard a voice behind me.

"Hey Ash, where are your *real* parents?" My ears perked up, and that's the last I heard before I felt a quick whap on the head, everything went into a slow haze, and then, darkness.

3. A Memory nightmare

My head drifted away from my thoughts of, "*What happened?*" and over to a memory that shifted into a dream.

I was in a dark room when I heard,

"Time for dinner!" I opened my eyes and saw my little sister, Shadow, sitting in front of me in our old house's hall. Ok, I was in my old house. At least I knew where I was, but, why here? I walked to the kitchen and saw my mom and dad. Mom was making fried crawfish (YUM!), and Dad was setting the table.

"Are you ready for dinner, Honey?" my Mom asked, flipping the crawfish. I was shocked they were actually there. A minute later, we sat down to eat. That's when my memory turned into a nightmare. I heard screams and saw fire coming from the kitchen. My parents

grabbed us and ran to the door. Then they shoved us out the door just as the flames consumed the house, and it collapsed. They didn't make it. The screams from my baby sister and myself filled my ears until I snapped awake. I was sitting on my bed, in my house. I was dripping with sweat, with a puddle collecting on my sheet. Shadow poked her head into my room.

"Good, you're awake. Aunt Molly wants you," she walked away, and I slowly got up to walk to the door when I heard a scream outside. My eyes widened. I knew that voice. I ran to the window and saw the worst; Aurthur, outside, with Spike, throwing her to the ground.

4. Too far Aurthur, too far

I stood, frozen, watching Spike scream for help. I snapped out of my trance and jumped out the window to sprint over to where Aurthur was brutally shoving her to the ground. I stopped in front of them and saw Spike's tear-streaked face crying for me to help her.

"Aurthur stop!!" I cried, helpless in this situation.

"Use your quills, Spike!" She couldn't speak. She couldn't move. She could only cry and scream in pain. Aurthur just laughed as he reached for her foot, grabbed it, and started to twist.

"No!!" I yelled. Spike's eyes widened, and she screamed louder than I thought was possible. I covered my ears, but despite my actions, I heard a loud crack as Spike's screeches rose. Aurthur let go and backed away, with a scared expression glued on his face. Was he sorry for what he had done? No, that was impossible. I called for help as he ran out of my sight.

"Don't worry, Spike, don't worry," I repeated my words, trying desperately to calm her down. But her screams would not calm, they rose, and fell, and rose again, despite my attempts to sooth her, and I wondered if she would ever stop.

5. An ash-covered sky

Spike's foot was broken.

I raced into my room and flopped onto my bed. I had just spotted Aurthur outside as I had been walking out, and I ran up to my room. I had been avoiding him ever since the Spike incident. I looked out my window to see if he was there, but he was gone. I sighed with relief as I, once again, walked out the door to go see Spike. Instead of being in the tree, this time Spike was sitting under the tree.

"You ready?" I asked her.

"Of course I'm ready," she said, standing up, her left leg a little wobbly.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Despite her injured foot, she still wanted to go hiking, so we decided to go a week after the incident. As we walked into the thick trees, I got the strange feeling that something was watching us. I whipped around, but when I saw nothing, I shrugged it off and kept on walking.

After about half an hour, we got tired and stopped to rest for a little while. I looked up and saw Mt. St. Helens staring back at me. I sighed and somehow felt comforted by the

sight of the volcano. Suddenly, a loud boom sounded and shook the ground with such intensity that Spike and I fell over and our supplies spilled and pooled over the ground like a stream.

“Ash! What is it?!” Spike yelled over all the noise.

“I think it’s the volcano!” I saw a nearby pine tree and climbed up to the top. I stared at the volcano and was in shock to see smoke rising out of the top of the volcano and the sky painted with pure black ash.

“Run, Spike!!” I screamed, as I scrambled down the pine and ran her way. I grabbed her paw, and I resisted the urge to scream as the searing pain of her quills ran up and down my arm. We turned in the direction that we came from and sprinted away from Mt. St. Helens, trying our hardest not to breathe in the ash that covered the sky. I felt the ground shake as we ran, hand in hand. I turned and saw the pressure build up to its highest point and my eyes lit up as lava burst out of the volcano like a jack-in-the-box that was too tightly wound. I turned to Spike, and her expression looked scared and sad enough to make me cry. Gradually, she changed the look on her face, and now I saw what she meant. Her face said-” *What are we going to do? I’m scared!*”

“Just keep running!” I told her over the ear-splitting sounds.

She nodded and said, “We have to warn everyone in the forest,”

This time, I nodded.

6. Time to apologize

We finally made it to where the village was and ran into Spike’s house. Her parents and older brother looked over as we slammed the door open. Her Mom was crocheting, her Dad was cooking dinner, and her brother was reading.

“We need to go! Now!” I yelled.

They all stared at me in silence until Spike’s brother, Boulder, said, “Why?” Just as I was about to answer, I heard the door open behind me, and I turned to see my family standing in the doorway.

“Ash!!” Aunt Molly yelled.

“Molly! Shadow!” I yelled and ran to hug them. I slammed into them and squeezed them in a hug. I looked behind them and saw the other creatures of the forest, including Arurther, standing anxiously. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth, but no words came out. I turned to Spike and she smiled at me. I opened my mouth again, and this time, the words spilled out.

“Me and Spike were hiking, and then we felt the ground shake beneath us, and – you felt it too right? – Anyway, we ran away, and then saw smoke and ash and lava coming out of the volcano!! So we really need to leave. Come on! We’re in danger!” For a second it was quiet, then the room exploded with laughter. I felt my face burn pink with embarrassment. Spike clenched her hands into fists.

“It’s true! You have to believe me!” I cried.

Mr. Carter stepped forward, fixed his crooked glasses, and said angrily, "Just like I believed the time you said there was a huge swarm of angry bees heading my way?"

I groaned as everyone laughed. Of course they wouldn't believe me. I had played too many tricks for them to think I was being truthful. Spike scowled and said "Look! He saved my life back there, and I probably wouldn't be standing here if it wasn't for him! Either you can believe him or risk it with the volcano! Your choice!" Everyone stared at her, waiting for more. When she didn't say anymore, I stepped forward.

"Everyone, I'm sorry for any trouble or pain I caused you. I was stupid and not aware of what was happening whenever I tricked you. I wish I was tuning into what was happening around me. I didn't realize that it might have scared you or made you downright angry. I'm sorry,"

Aunt Molly stepped forward and hugged me, "Thank you for apologizing, Ash," I smiled at her. Suddenly, the ground shook and screams rose in the air.

"We have to go now!" I yelled. Everyone ran outside, and my eyes widened as I saw lava spilling through the forest and heading for us. We ran as far as we could when a huge plume of smoke rose out of the volcano top, and onto the ground. I could see it heading straight for us.

"Everybody get down!" I yelled. Everyone laid on the ground, face-down, and covered their faces. I turned to see if Spike was safe. When she saw me, she gasped and was yelling something at me. I turned and saw the smoke cloud coming straight at me. I closed my eyes and ducked down as I felt the smoke engulf me.

I opened my eyes and saw that the smoke had disappeared, but everyone was still laying on the ground. I sat up and yelled, "It's safe! We need to go wash off in the river," everyone nodded and we walked in the river's direction.

7. The resolved problem

I splashed in the river and rubbed my fur, trying my best to wash all the ash off of me. I saw my reflection, and staring back at me was myself, but with a streak of black ash across my face. I tried to get it off by vigorously rubbing it with water but stopped when Spike squeezed my shoulder, and I turned around to face her.

"What's wrong with the mask? Makes you look like a bandit, plus it matches Shadow's,"

I looked around for Shadow and saw her, with an almost identical mask to mine, talking to Aurther. My eyes widened as I splashed over to protect my little sister, but I felt a tug on my fur that pulled me farther out in the water. Whoever was pulling me was dragging me back through the river. I pulled away and yelled, "What are you-" but I stopped when I saw it was Spike. I was surprised.

"Spike!" I yelled, "What are you doing? She's with *Aurther!*" Spike sighed and pointed.

"Yeah, but look! He's not hurting her," I looked and saw she was right. Arthur was actually talking to her and laughing. I looked at Shadow. She was smiling and talking to Arthur without a hint of fear. It seemed like they had been best friends and that they were having a good time. I looked at Spike, and she nodded. I turned, swallowed, and then walked over to them. Shadow turned and smiled.

"Ash! I was just talking about you! You should get to know Arthur better! He's actually pretty cool,"

"*She seems fine....*" I thought. I sighed and smiled.

"You're right. I should talk to him more. I think we could be good friends, Arthur," I smiled up at him. I was surprised to see him look down at me, smile, and say, "Yeah, you're pretty cool, Ash," I was relieved. I talked with them for a little, but when I saw Spike standing around, I realized she was waiting for me, so I said bye to Shadow and Arthur and walked back over to Spike.

"Guess I was right, Ash. He's a good person," she smirked. I laughed.

"I wouldn't go that far. He's not terrible, But I do want to get to know him better," I looked back at Arthur.

Spike laughed and said, "All right, come on. Aunt Molly is waiting for us on the shore," Spike and I walked together to the shore, Aunt Molly was waiting. She waddled over to me and hugged me.

"Are you ok? You took a lot of responsibility back there," She let go of me and smiled.

"You're really growing up aren't you?" Her eyes were filled with tears, and she gave me a watery smile.

"I'm not that old, Aunt Molly. Just becoming more mature," I smiled at her. Spike reached for my hand. I looked at it for a second, then grabbed it. I grabbed Aunt Molly's also and breathed in the air. I realized that this was special, having Spike and Shadow, and even though my parents were gone, I had Aunt Molly, who was the best parent figure I had ever known. Being that close to death had changed something inside me. I realized that life was delicate, and you had to care for it.

"Come on. Let's go find a new home," I sighed.

"Where would we even go next?" Shadow asked, looking around.

"Everything is destroyed," I nodded.

"I don't know, but wherever we go, we'll go together,"

We traveled for about a week, about 20 miles away from our old home and to an open field. We made our new home there. We adapted, we learned, we listened to each other, and we cared for each other. I realized that *that* is a community. And it stayed like that.

Always.
The End