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Cairnwoman

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Fiction; Cairnwoman; Rosamund I. Flambard

Cairnwoman

by

Rosamund I. Flambard

On a sun-warmed boulder far from the other children in her class, Francie Dunster sat eating her frugal lunch. Every now and then she peered out of the corner of her eye at her classmates who were playing softball, tag, and hide-and-seek in the adjacent field. She wished she could join them but knew that such a thing would be impossible, for she was an outsider, an outcast by reason of a homely face and an obese form that grew constantly fatter due in part to her aversion to gym class. She couldn't bear to face her peers in P.E. shorts and T-shirt, or listen their laughter as she tried, unsuccessfully, to run five laps or do a flexed arm-hang.

Francie was fairly accomplished academically, especially in History and Language Arts, but, friendless and alone, she thought scoring A's was rather unimportant. She would have rather had someone to talk to than a glowing report card! Her intelligence added to her unpopularity, too: pre-teens into rock music and video games weren't terribly impressed by a girl who listened to Mozart and read *Beowulf* for pleasure!

Francie rose as she heard her teacher, Mr. Harvey, shout for the class's attention. Dropping her lunchbox, she hurried toward him, head bowed, hoping no one would notice her. But as she approached Mr. Harvey, who was sitting on the steps of the school bus, she heard a loud giggle and knew that she'd been spotted. Raising her head, she saw Lisa and Kim, two of the most popular girls in school, observing her with spiteful eyes. Francie thought they looked awful, their round, childish faces plastered with makeup, their still-boyish figures draped in gaudy, New Wave gear; but she didn't dare say so, even though they teased her mercilessly. Francie had been taught to accept other's differences, and also that it wasn't nice to fight back.

"Here comes jelly-belly!" Lisa said loudly.

"Wibble-wobble, wibble-wobble!" mocked Kim, rocking from side to side in an exaggerated manner that was supposed to be an imitation of Francie's walk.

Francie hung her head till her hair covered her crimson cheeks. Oh, if only she had the courage to stand up to them!

"Have a nice lunch, Fran?" asked Lisa in a syrupy voice.

"Yes," Francie whispered meekly, not knowing what else to reply.

"Lots of gooey cakes, no doubt."

"No, I'm on...on..."

"A diet?" shrieked Lisa, finishing Francie's sentence for her. "You're on a diet? Kim, did you hear that? Francie's *diETING!*" Kim snickered. "A lot of good it'll do her. *She'd* have to stop eating altogether to get thin!"

At that moment Jason and Rob, Lisa and Kim's 'boyfriends', appeared behind the tittering girls. "What's happening, baby?" asked Jason in his best grown-up imitation, slipping an arm round Lisa's waist.

"Oh, we were just talking to Francie." Lisa gestured to Francie, who arms crossed defensively across her belly, was staring at her toes.

"Fat Fanny Franny? Ugh, why? Who'd want to talk to that dog? She's so ugly, I bet she weighs at least 110 pounds!"

Tears welled up in Francie's eyes. She was *far* heavier than Jason's cruel guess!

"We were discussing her diet," smirked Kim.

"She's on a diet? Big deal! Even if she was skinny, she'd still be a dog. That *thing* couldn't be pretty if she tried."

Fists clenched, choking on sobs, Francie whirled away. If she'd been prone to tantrums, she would have beaten herself with her fists, striking the body that had betrayed her, made her an object of ridicule and scorn. She felt sick, sick with bitterness and hatred towards herself and her classmates.

"Now kids," Mr. Harvey was yelling over the children's clamor, "Settle down and listen! On today's field-trip, we are going to visit the burial cairns and defensive works of the Songhees Indians who lived in this area about 800 years ago. Be prepared to take notes as we go along; you'll be tested on the subject later! Now line up in pairs, please!"

There was a scurry as the children fought to pair up with their friends. Francie was bumped to the end of the line, where she was partnered with Todd, whose usual crony, Jimmy, was absent.

"Yuck; it's Miss Piggy!" Todd exclaimed as she took her place beside him. He began moaning and groaning loudly, pretending Francie's presence was killing him.

Suddenly Lucy, one of the girls standing in front of Todd, whirled about and snapped: "Oh Todd, shut up!"

Francie's eyes widened. Was someone actually defending her?

Todd glowered at Lucy. "Easy for you to say, Lu!

You don't have to stand next to Francie!"

"Neither do you," said Lucy. "If you don't want to walk with her, push her out of the way. It's as simple as that! Just give her a shove!"

Francie's heart sank. Lucy wasn't on her side after all.

Todd turned on Francie. "I'm not walking with you. Stand behind me or something."

Francie shook her head. "Mr. Harvey said . . ."

"I don't *care* what Harvey said; I'm not walking with you! Get lost, Francie!"

"N . . . No," she said haltingly. "I . . . won't."

"I'll make you, you blimp!" he snarled, and he gave her a shove with both hands. Crying out, she overbalanced and tumbled to the ground, her skirt flying up and exposing her great white thighs.

"Oh gross!" exclaimed Todd.

All the other children burst into raucous laughter.

Noticing the disturbance at the end of the line, Mr. Harvey roared: "What's going on back there?"

Francie struggled to her feet, and made to reply, but Todd clutched her arm in a painful grip. "Keep your mouth shut, Dunster," he ordered. "You squeal, and I'll kill you!"

"Yeah, we'll kill you," echoed Lucy, glaring over her shoulder at Francie.

"I . . . I've had *enough* of this!" Words suddenly burst from Francie's lips. "Get your hands off me, Todd!"

"Aren't you fierce," mocked Todd. "I'm so scared!"

Francie's eyes blazed. "I hate you, Todd!" she screamed. "And not just you! I hate the rest of you, too! You're a bunch of rotten little creeps!"

Jerking away from Todd, she fled across the field without glancing back. She heard Mr. Harvey bawling her name, but paid no attention. She couldn't face those kids ever again!

Soon the field ended. Francie clambered over a steep embankment and entered a hoary wood. Panting, she forced her way through dense underbrush and clumps of vines. Maybe there are bears in here, she thought darkly, as she groped her way through the tangle. Perhaps I'll get eaten. I hope so.

Before long the vegetation thinned out, becoming less impassible. The trees were taller and less gnarled, their twined branches forming a leafy canopy through which faint daylight filtered. Francie ceased her flight and stared around her at the gnarled trees, the emerald moss carpeting the ground, the clumps of fungi sticking out like ears from rotting stumps. And she felt as if she were in another world, a world of magic and enchantment, where perhaps, a homely little girl would be accepted.

"Yes," she said out loud, "this is a magic place. *My* place! I am a Princess here!" Yes, a Princess here in her private woodland world, where good Princesses didn't have to be blond and beautiful to win the love of Princes or anyone else.

Francie began to dance, pirouetting gracelessly upon the moss. She had always wanted to learn ballet, but hadn't taken lessons for fear of ridicule. Who'd ever heard of a fat ballerina? She'd have been laughed straight out of dance class. But now, alone, she could dance without fear of criticism.

As she twirled, she heard a strange whistling noise. At first she thought it was the wind blowing through the trees, then she recognized it as pipe music. Francie stopped dancing. Someone else was in the woods! Keeping to the shadows, she crept forward, seeking the unseen piper.

After crawling through a hedge of brambles and a ditch, Francie entered a clearing. In the clearing stood a large cairn of lichenous boulders. The piping came from behind the heap.

That must be one of the cairns the class was supposed to visit, thought Francie. I wonder if the piper is one of the kids? I had better find out, though I'll probably regret it!

"Hey!" she shouted. "Who's playing that music?"

Francie jumped in fright as a strange woman sprang from behind the cairn. Her long grey hair tumbled out of a bright kerchief and her face was brown and wrinkled, much like the faces of the dried-apple dolls Francie had seen for sale at agricultural fairs. She was wearing a dress made of deerskin, and her eyes were black and shiny, resembling a raven's. "Do not fear me, child," she said. "I shan't harm you."

Despite her better judgement, Francie believed the old woman. Although she looked queer, Francie did not think she was a bag-lady or an alcoholic. She could not say why. Perhaps it was the intelligent and somehow magical glitter in the old woman's raven-dark eyes that told Francis she was not a derelict.

"Are you an Indian, or an Indian *ghost*?" Francie asked. She did not know why she said the word "ghost".

The old woman laughed. "No, dear, I'm not a ghost. Nor am I an Indian: I belong to no race of Men. What I am, child, is a spirit."

Francie paled slightly. "A spirit? Then you *are* a ghost!"

"No, for I am not the shade of one long dead. I have always been as I now am. Ah, child, do not recoil from me! I am harmless." The old woman smiled at the girl; it was the most beautiful smile Francie had ever seen. The stranger's smile made the coy smirks of the magazine models Lisa and Kim emulated look positively loathsome.

"What's your name?" Francie asked shyly. "I'm Francie Dunster."

"I am called the Cairnwoman," the old lady replied, "because I live in cairns of stones."

"Cairnwoman isn't a proper name!" said Francie indignantly. "What's your real name?"

"I have no true name. Or, more correctly, I have so many I could not possibly decide which one to use!"

Francie blinked in surprise. "How did you get so many?"

"I am old, child, and one tends to acquire such things with age."

"How old are you?" asked Francie.

"Oh, very, very old. I was old when Stonehenge was raised on Salisbury Plain. I have seen all the great sites of the ancient world: Ur, Babylon, Troy, Thebes . . . I cannot name them all!"

"You've certainly seen some things, haven't you?" said Francie. "What ever brought you to this humble Indian cairn?"

"I am a traveller," said the Cairnwoman. "I never tarry in one place for long. After dwelling in Albion for two millenia, I clothed myself with the shape you now see and headed for new lands. For many days I blew about the wild seas, then I happened on these shores. The natives here mistook me for a goddess, and so I took up residence with them. When they passed away, or changed as all men must, I entered my cairn and went to sleep. I have slept for almost two hundred years."

"Your tale is incredible," said Francie, "but I believe it anyway. But, Cairnwoman, one thing puzzles me. Why have you woken from your sleep to speak to me? I'm no one special!"

"You are so lonely and unhappy," said Cairnwoman. "I could *feel* your sorrow as you approached, and it woke me."

"I'm sorry," muttered Francie, bowing her head.

"Don't be, my dear," said the Cairnwoman. "I'm glad you woke me. Perhaps I can cheer you, ease the the grief and sorrow in your heart."

Francie flushed, embarrassed that the woman knew of her problems. "I'm not lonely," she muttered unconvincedly, shuffling her feet in the dirt and pine needles. "I was just a bit depressed. I . . . uh . . . failed a Math test at school."

"You are lying, Francie," said the Cairnwoman, shaking her head. Grey hair frothed on her shoulders. "Do not be ashamed of your loneliness, Francie. It is not your fault."

"Oh, yes it is!" Francie blurted. "I eat too much and don't exercise enough, and that's why I'm fat. And everyone hates fat kids!"

"You won't always be fat," said the Cairnwoman, "and one day you will realize that physical appearance means little. If one's spirit is fair, the outer shell is of no importance."

"Oh, sure," said Francie, her disbelief evident in her tone of voice. "Tell that to Kim and Lisa, the popular girls at school."

"Unfortunately, neither girl would believe me," said the Cairnwoman with a heavy sigh. "Not at this stage of their lives anyway. Girls who behave like Lisa and Kim can not even see me, Francie. They could walk into this clearing right now and see no one but you."

Francie shrugged moodily. "I'm glad I can see you,

but I also wish I were like Lisa or Kim. Everybody likes them: they go to parties and get Valentines and *everything*. They've even got boyfriends, Cairnwoman. I bet I'll never have a boyfriend. I shall probably end up an old maid like my Aunt Josie."

The Cairnwoman shook her head, then beckoned for Francie to come closer. "Over here, child," she said. "I want to show you something."

Francie strode over to the old woman and sat down on the mossy cairn. The Cairnwoman reached into a pocket on her primitive kirtle and drew out an amber pendant on a leather thong. She dangled it before Francie's upturned face. "Take this," she said, "and look into it."

Francie cupped the amber in her palms and gazed into its heart. She gasped loudly. "I see me!" she cried. "Only I'm older, and I . . . I'm not very fat! Or ugly!"

"I told you you wouldn't always be fat, didn't I?" laughed Cairnwoman. "Things change, child. You must have faith."

"It's so hard," said Francie. "No one even tries to understand . . . Oh gosh, I hear someone coming!"

In the thicket nearby, a girl was shrieking Francie's name.

"It's Lisa!" cried Francie. "Oh Cairnwoman, I don't want to see her! Hide me—or help me against her!"

Cairnwoman grasped Francie's shoulder. "Lisa can't see me, Francie. I can't help you—in that way. You must stand up to Lisa yourself. Tell her how you feel."

"She'll just be mean!" Francie was bordering on tears. "She won't listen."

"If she won't, show her my pendant . . ."

Cairnwoman faded from view as Lisa stumbled into the clearing, red-faced and disheveled. "So *there* you are, Dunster," she snapped. "I could hit you! Mr. Harvey's given us all a detention!"

"Don't blame me. You and your friends were the nasty ones."

"Why should we be nice to *you*?"

"What did I ever do to you, Lisa?" Francie spoke up as Cairnwoman's reassuring hand brushed her elbow.

"Nothing. My only crime was looking different than the other kids. You think you're real grown up, Lisa—but you're not, until you learn to be nice to people who are—different."

"Don't give me that Sunday School crap!" said Lisa. "You're fat, you're ugly, and no one who's popular likes you! No one ever will . . ."

"Stop saying hurtful things!" said Francie. "don't you understand? I don't enjoy being fat! How would *you* like to be fat and made fun of?"

Lisa arrogantly tossed her head. "I'll never be fat . . ."

Cairnwoman's soft breath tickled Francie's ear. "The amber—it may be the only way."

"Lisa, look at this." Striding over, Francie shoved the pendant in front of Lisa's glaring face.

Lisa made to slap the gem to the ground, but then

she paused and snatched the pendant from Francie, staring in horrified fascination into its heart. "No, no," she breathed, her eyes growing glazed as she watched pictures flicking by inside the magic stone.

Francie peered over her shoulder. In the amber, she could see an older Lisa in the hall of a big High School. She had grown very tall, for a girl, and her hair looked lank and dull, the fairness of youth darkened with adolescence. Her thick makeup couldn't hide her bad complexion. And, despite her avowals to Francie, her willowy figure had vanished. If not fat, Lisa was certainly plump.

"I can't believe it," murmured Lisa, but then she fell silent as more people entered the picture. A group of tentrily clad teens clustered about Lisa, hooting and jeering, taking great sport from her crestfallen expression. They called her many of the same hurtful names she had called Francie. One threw a broken pencil, another mimicked her slouching, embarrassed walk.

Lisa's emotions were sucked right into the stone; it was as if she lived that moment in the future and was not merely a spectator. Tears began running down her cheeks. "Oh no!" she cried, throwing the amber on the ground.

She glanced over at Francie, an agonized expression on her face, new realization dawning in her eyes. "I—I—I'm sorry, Francie!" she cried and she fled into the trees, still sobbing.

Francie picked up the pendant as Cairnwoman reappeared.

"Here's your stone," she said. "It really scared Lisa."

Cairnwoman nodded. "She knows now. I hope what she's experienced today will make her think; shock her into realizing that looks are not the most important thing in life—and that they can be deceiving. The fairest spirit may dwell in the homeliest shell. Now, my girl, you had best be going. Your teacher is probably frantic with worry."

Francie nodded. "Thanks for your help I'll try to remember all that you've told me about my future . . . and about people's appearances. Do you think the kids'll still tease me?"

The woman nodded sadly. "For a while, dear. But one day the teasing will end. Your classmates will mature. The next few years might be difficult—but if you continue to grow and don't sink into self-pity and self-hatred, all will turn out well." Then she bent forward and kissed Francie's forehead, and Francie gasped aloud to see the old woman's wrinkles and wiry hair melt away, leaving fair smooth skin, lovelier than any mortal's and gleaming locks that burned like fire in the gloom.

Francie left the clearing feeling strangely elated. She did not look back; she knew the Cairnwoman would be gone. Besides, there was no point in gazing back on the past. Instead Francie would look to the future, a future in which she would dream dreams that no one, no matter what they said or did, would ever take from her.

TAKING OFF

by Jill Solnicki

The ferris wheel
creaks,
shudders,
then lifts off

above the hawkers,
pointing and gawking,
the dizzy carousel horses,
the tired tinsel,

swings over the big city,
towards the forest,
the balding plain,

then rolls on, on,
across the ocean,
past Hong Kong, Chittagong,
towards Tripolitania,

wheeling higher,
higher,
arching up,
heading out,

a new constellation
of spinning lights and
shrieking people,
leaning out, waving
pink cotton candy

at meteors, the moon,
the startled stars,

at small
receding earth,

and the face
of the laughing sun.