

## SHORT STORY

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so surely to its climax that must have been inevitable. The kind of day that makes you believe in fate, and in predestination.

To begin with, it was hot. A windless day in late summer when the heat is cupped in the hills and the men cutting cocksfoot on the yellow slopes are like slow flies burdened by their own movement. The bees were blundering in the sweet peas, grasshoppers were shrilling their intolerable note, and the only cool sound was that of the stream, glucking among its boulders. We were drawn to the stream as surely as though we were brumby cattle of the Australian desert. We followed it across the paddock from the swimming pool, drawn as much by the current as were the leaves and twigs that floated upon it.

There was a great deal to interest us. We found dead dragon-flies, hunted for bullies, and ate watercress. We left "MY AUNT was helping Meggie up to the grass, where they collapsed" our shoes by the bridge and squelched our toes in the mud, and trailed our dolls until they were as damp as we were. We were all very proud of our dolls, and took them everywhere.

\* \* \*

It was late in the morning when we finished up at the whirlpool. There it lay, in to-day's heat, cool and inviting. The trees that hemmed it in no longer seemed dank, the moss and slime at the brink was now a cool green, not a rancid one. Because of the slope of the ground, on the upper side of the pool there was a deep bank, while the lower boasted a beach of sandy mud. Here we dipped our toes with a sense of brave excitement, while Annie again sought to terrify us with her tales of horror. But the day was too hot. Then we ate konini berries, but there's no flesh, really, just skin and pip. The elderberries were better, though we didn't care for them, either. We ate them because they were there, and edible.

The berries inspired Annie to more tales of horror, of poison ivy, nettle stings, and the terrible fate of cows which had eaten tutu. It was probably all this induced us, when we had somehow wandered back and over the bridge and then on to the back on the other side of the whirlpool, to play at hospitals. All through our childhood hospitals was our favourite game. My part was usually a quiescent one, that of patient. After Meggie had put my broken leg in splints and my neck in plaster, bandaged my hands and given me soup, she thought she would make my bed again before bringing in my baby.

"Shift over, Kate," she said crossly, "I can't get the sheet off."

"How can I shift over? My neck's broken. There isn't any sheet anyway."

"If there's no sheet then your neck isn't broken. Go on, shift over a bit. I want your bed on the soft grass. It's nicer."

"It's too near the edge. I'll fall in the whirlpool."

"Don't be silly. You're miles away. Go on. There that's better."

She settled me down and went to get my doll. Women in hospital always had babies. I lay there and looked at the tracery of trees above my head, and ran my fingers through the soft grass. Such soft green grass, and the earth beneath it was soft too and black. So

comfortable. Meggie came back with my doll, and for some perverse reason, in order to tuck in beside me, went round and knelt on the edge of the bank above the water. She was just rising to her feet when the earth gave way, and before she had time to shout she disappeared into the whirlpool.

I'm afraid none of us were heroes. I rolled away from the edge (it was only luck I hadn't gone in too) and the three of us went shrieking up to noise to wake the dead. Annie was first, but my aunt heard us coming, and when Mary and I panted over the bridge we were in time to see her shake some sense out of Annie and fly out of the garden. Fly is the word. She didn't go round by the gate. My aunt wasn't a young woman, but she went over the fence in one leap—she jumped right over it, Mary kept repeating afterwards, in awe, she jumped right over it.

Meggie was all right, as it happened. She was clinging to some branches growing out over the water, which there, under the bank, were deep and frightening. When I struggled back, my knees like jelly, my aunt was helping Meggie up to the grass, where they collapsed in the ruins of the hospital. Mary and I sat down too, and for a few minutes we all wept, and then my aunt blew her nose and said "Well!" I expect she'd have liked to spank us all, to relieve her feelings. Then she carried the bedraggled Meggie, now shaking with cold and fright, to the house, where she put her to bed with hot water bottles.

\* \* \*

PERHAPS by this time my aunt thought she'd had enough of us, for the next day she sent my mother a telegram, and mother arrived the same evening. She was pale and distraught, and spent a good deal of time going over Meggie to see if she wasn't hurt at all, and trying unobtrusively to listen to her breathing, to see if she hadn't caught cold. Meggie, who was now quite well, enjoyed herself. She sat at the tea-table, eating pikelets and basking in attention while Annie, who'd never had such a chance for recounting drama, went over and over her story. All the time mother listened anxiously, glancing at Meggie to make sure she was still there.



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