

I loved my mother dearly. I couldn't stand it any longer.

"I pushed her," I said.

"Pushed who, dear?" said mother.

"I pushed her," I repeated loudly. "I pushed Meggie into the whirlpool. She knelt beside me and I pushed her." Annie looked at me with her mouth open.

"Don't be silly, dear," said mother. "The bank gave way. Or did it?" Suddenly she was agast. And certainly I'd gained her attention.

"That's lies," shouted Annie. "It's lies, Kate. You can see where the bank fell down. You're a big fib."

"I'm not a fib. It's true. I pushed her." I burst into tears. By now I believed my own story.

"She's overwrought," said my aunt. "We all are."

"She'd better go to bed, I think," said my mother. "It's a long journey in the morning."

* * *

I SAT on the edge of the bed in the room I shared with Meggie. I hadn't undressed. Instead, I'd put on my new coat because it reminded me of home. I was dreadfully unhappy, and homesick. I was so unhappy I wanted to die. That would show them. I'd drown myself in the whirlpool and that would show them. Muttering to myself, I climbed out of the low window. I hesitated when I found it was raining. The hot weather of the day before had given way to a southerly storm which during the afternoon had crept over the hills in long white trails of cloud. Now the wind and rain had come, making the evening an unfriendly twilight. But I was very unhappy. I went on.

Going to the whirlpool in daylight with other children, I found, wasn't the same as going at dusk on one's own, in a murmurous world that spoke with wind and rain and a stream already swollen and discoloured. The trees groaned, the grasses whispered wetly on my shoes, the shadows became alive and menacing. By the time I reached the whirlpool I was terrified. I stood on the beach for a long time. I hadn't the courage to throw myself off the bank, so I'd gone to the shallow side that shelved more gradually. I was going to walk into the water, perhaps to savour my agony to the full, perhaps to leave a way of retreat if I wanted it. To jump off the high bank was too irrevocable.

It was only the thought of my family and the remorse that would smite them that drove me finally into the water. It didn't seem much use to take my clothes off, since they were wet already so I walked in until the water covered my shoes. The feel of it was like a cold knife round my ankles. I tried to gather the courage to go further.

Actually the bull gave me the excuse to turn tail that I'd been waiting for. But that's not to say it didn't frighten me into a frenzy. So much so, that afterwards I wasn't sure it hadn't been the taniwha. As I was standing there, with my heart going lower and lower and my feet seeming rooted in the mud, there came from beyond the fence a puffing and wheezing and trampling, and a shadow loomed up and tossed its head above the wires as though it would be no effort at all to leap over. All I

could think of then was that I wanted, more than anything in the world, my mother.

I turned, but my feet had sunk in the mud, and I fell. I fell towards the beach, and in only a few inches of water, but nobody ever reached a deeper and more lost despair than I did in that moment. I really thought I was going to drown in the whirlpool. After a few moments I managed to get up from my hands and knees and stagger out of the water. I made for the house as though all the terror in the world was behind me, as indeed it was. Forgotten was all thought of impressing my relatives.

I burst in the kitchen door, and, since I was thought to be in bed, caused quite a sensation.

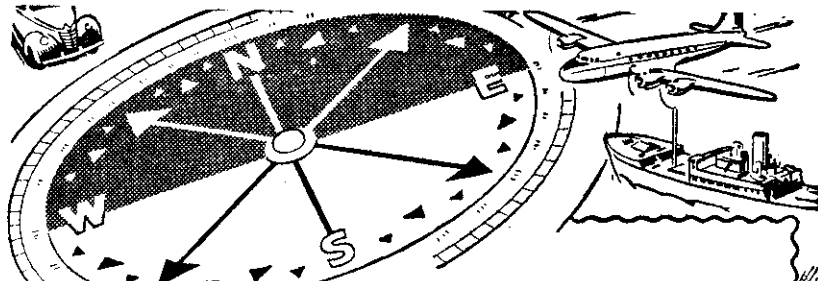
"I fell in the whirlpool!" I shrieked. "I fell in the whirlpool!"

My mother came to me in alarm, but then her face cleared.

"Kate, you exasperating child. You're telling lies again. Whatever have you been doing out in the rain? You're soaked. And the mud! Look at your new coat! How am I going to clean it before the morning?"

* * *

I HAD plenty of time on the journey home to reflect on the bitterness of life. All I'd achieved was a whipping for telling lies and soiling my new coat. But Meggie, in some strange way, still glowed as a heroine.



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