

Broken Ice

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Grampa's hands looked like big, hairy spiders as he caught hold of the edge of the lunch table to lift himself to his feet. When I saw him looking at me, I drew my shoulders up by my ears and huddled low in my chair.

"Laura," he said, his watery eyes glaring at me from under his bushy, red-tinted eyebrows. "Get me my wraps and I'll go and see how things are up at the barn."

I hurried to do what he said. When I handed him his cap and coat, he squeezed my arm.

"Don't stand there like a stump," he said, pushing me stumbling toward the table. "Get the table sided and the dishes washed."

Mama is little, dark-eyed and pretty. People say that I look like her. She put her arm across my shoulder.

"I'll do the dishes myself," she said. "Laura has helped me all morning. A girl needs to have time to play on Saturdays. Her face is so pale that it looks like she needs some sunshine to put pinkness into her cheeks." She turned to me. "You should take your sled and go up on the hill. There's a group of boys and girls up there."

"Bu-bu-bu-but I-I-I-I d-d-d-don't wa—"

I'd have liked to tell her how the boys jerk my sled on the steepest place on the hill or toss sticks under the runners so that the sled stops quick and I fall off, but talking takes me too long.

"You do as your mother says," Grampa snapped.

He put on his wraps and got the steak bone from his plate. As he stepped out of the door, he leaned his cane against the house and took the short-handled pitchfork he always carried when he walked outside. I watched him as he staggered up the path jabbing the fork tines deep into the frozen snow to balance himself.

Fluffy, my gray cat, came out from under the granary walking on three legs. She had walked that way since the time a year ago when she was so anxious for her milk that

she had put her paws on the edge of the milk bucket and lapped at the foam when Grampa set it down. I knew that she shouldn't but I couldn't get to her fast enough to save her. Grampa said some awful words and shoved the tines of the pitchfork right into her. She didn't die but when she got well, she couldn't use her one leg. Now, I wondered why he coaxed her along by letting her smell of the bone. He usually scatted her away.

When he came back and settled down by the heater, I tucked my jeans into the top of my boots and put on my red coat, scarf and mittens. I reached into the cupboard for a scrap of meat for Fluffy, and my arm bumped a bottle of jelly and sent it rolling across the kitchen linoleum.

"You stupid idiot," Grampa said, half rising from his chair and striking me across the back with his cane. "I don't see why your folks don't put you in the nut house where you belong."

"Don't you ever do anything like that again," Mama said to him. "If anyone is sent away it won't be she."

She held me tight and wiped away my tears.

"You mean me? Huh? I guess there's not room enough for both of us around here any more."

"Go on, dear," Mama said. "I'll clean up the floor."

As I started up the path, Grampa put his head out of the door.

"You stay away from the barn," he called. "A barn is no place for a girl to play."

"Bu-bu-bu-but . . ."

"Don't you bu-bu-bu-but me. Do what your mother said for you to do."

He watched me as I came back and went up through the orchard pulling my sled.

I was thinking how nice it was before Grampa came to our house to live. He had visited us when I was little, but he never even looked at me. He liked my little brother, Tommy. Everyone liked Tommy; he was so cute.

"You can have the upstairs bedroom," Mama said, when Grampa came with his shabby bags and boxes.

He was her father but he looked at her like he hated her.

"I won't have an upstairs room," he rapped out. "If I could climb steps I could still climb hills and mountains and wouldn't have to quit herding sheep."

"But, Grampa, we only have two bedrooms downstairs. Jack and I have one and the children have the other," Mama said.

"Then the kids will have to move."

He packed his things in and dumped them on my nice clean bed.

Tommy and I hated sleeping upstairs. It was so far that sometimes Mama and Daddy didn't hear us when we called. We often cried ourselves to sleep.

Just before Christmas time I caught the measles and was awfully sick. When I was better, Tommy got them and was so sick that he died. Grampa cried and threw his cane at me.

"She did it!" he yelled, sort of blubbering. "She's a murderer."

He came toward me with his hands out like he wanted to choke me. I threw my arms around Daddy's waist and hid behind him.

"Stop that, Grampa," Daddy said, very cross. "We all feel bad but no one is to blame. Don't ever let me hear you say such a thing again."

He didn't say it out loud, but he'd sit and look at me and shape the word with his mouth. It made my heart hurt deep in my chest.

They buried Tommy just before Christmas. Mama put a new teddy bear in the little coffin to keep him from being too lonesome. I cry now every time I think of him down there in the dark all alone.

Grampa seldom spoke to me, but his eyes followed me and made me think of Fluffy's when she is ready to spring on a mouse to kill it.

After Tommy died I had to sleep upstairs all alone. It was worse than before. When Mama tucked me in bed and turned off the light, I'd shut my eyes tight and cover my head with the blanket. Each time the stairs creaked I imagined it was Grampa coming up to kill me. I didn't dare to open my eyes for fear of seeing him there with his fingers ready to put around my throat and squeeze. He told Mama that he couldn't climb the stairs, but I knew he could. I heard him up there one day when I came home from school early. I crept outside and waited until Mama and Daddy came home.

I didn't like to think of Tommy down there in the dark all alone, but I couldn't think of anything else. Since Grampa said I killed him I thought maybe it was my fault and that I should be choked. My throat ached all the time. My head felt like it had a tight band around it, and my stomach was sick and vomity. It got so that I had to jerk my chin and shut my eyes before I could start to talk to people. It was only when I talked to Fluffy and the other animals that the words came out right.

When I got up into the orchard where Grampa couldn't see me, I leaned my sled up against the corral fence and climbed over it so I could go into the barn through the north door. After the brightness of the sun shining on the snow, the barn was dark and cold, but I liked the smell of the hay and the cattle. They made it seem a friendly place.

"Kitty, kitty," I called, running through the tunnel Daddy had cut in the hay.

Fluffy didn't come. Maybe she was in her box I had fixed for her in the hayloft. Maybe she was having her kittens. If she was I hoped Grampa wouldn't find them and drown them like he had the last ones. She had those in the granary, and they were only a few days old when I saw Grampa come out through the door with something in his hat and Fluffy trotting along by his side looking up at him. I knew he had the kittens. He went through the garden toward the canal. I ran and caught hold of his arm. He pushed me away and dumped them into the water. They put out their little pink paws and started to swim on the swift water. I got a stick and Fluffy and I ran along the bank and tried to save them, but they went over the weir and drowned. Both Fluffy and I were sick afterward.

"Kitty, kitty," I called again.

I found her inside the south door. Her head was mashed in and blood and gray stuff oozed out of the cracks. Grampa's meat bone lay by her. A bloody, hairy spot on the side of the calf pen showed where he must have hit her head as he swung her around by the tail.

I kneeled down in the scattered hay and stroked her. She didn't move or purr or anything. She was all dirty like he had wiped his boot on her. Now she could never make herself all clean and smooth with her little pink tongue. I felt the bumps

in her stomach where the kittens were. They were dead, too. I would never get to see what they looked like. My heart hurt and my throat ached. I wanted to cry but I couldn't as I carried her up to the hayloft.

I had laid her down in her box and sat down on my crossed legs by her when I heard the door of the calf stable pushed open. It was Grampa. He started to gather the litter up from the floor with his pitchfork and toss it out of the window. I was terrified. My heart pounded, and I hardly dared to breathe. When I thought of what he might do to me if he found me there, my teeth chattered until I slowly brought my mittened hand up to cover my mouth so he wouldn't hear them. I didn't dare to shift my position or straighten out my cramped legs. I just sat there and shivered.

He went back outside and came into the barn through the south door. He stood there letting his eyes get used to the dimness, then he looked for Fluffy. When he couldn't see her, he peered into the dark corners and the tunnel. I knew he was thinking he hadn't quite killed her, and she had crawled away. After a minute he took the straw puller and his pitchfork and went to get clean straw for the calves to lie down on.

The straw pile almost filled that end of the barn. Rain and melted snow had leaked in on the rounded top and frozen into a heavy roof. By pulling the dry straw from underneath, Daddy and Grampa had dug a deep cave under it. The ice was left jutting out at the top. As Grampa backed out with his fork load of straw, a big piece of ice broke off and started to slip. It would hit him.

"L-l-l-look out!" I screamed, staggering to stand up on my numb legs.

Grampa fell back into the straw as the ice hit the floor and shattered into bits. He got up brushing the chaff from his beard and clothes as he squinted up at me. He didn't once look at the broken ice but leaned on his pitchfork, his face twitching and his mouth opening and closing like a gasping fish. His dark eyes drew together until I felt like I was looking into the double barrels of Daddy's shot gun.

"So you—you—!" he screamed but he slobbered until he couldn't talk. "You—you come down here, and I'm going to teach you to do what you're told."

He held his fist high in its dirty, woolen mitten and shook it at me. I couldn't move. I was so frightened.

"Come down or I'll fetch you down." He was still screaming.

I knew he couldn't climb up to where I was. He must have thought the same thing because his voice quieted down, and when he spoke, each word was like a bee sting.

"Come down," he said, through his broken, yellow teeth. "If you don't I'll throw this pitchfork right through you."

I reached up and held onto the sloping, cobweb-covered rafters over my head. I knew he could do what he said. He had thrown a pitchfork at Daddy's prize Hereford bull, and the tines went right through his neck. He had staggered around the yard dragging the fork and dripping blood until he dropped to his knees and rolled onto his side and died.

"Come down!" his voice cracked like a whip.

As I took a step forward, he pulled off his mitten and clutched the fork handle with his white-knuckled hand as he raised it above his head and pointed it like a spear. I couldn't take my eyes from the tines that shone beneath the manure-covered shank.

Something snapped above his head and I looked up. More ice broke loose. I put my mittened hands over my mouth to shut off a scream and tried to close my eyes. They wouldn't shut.

My legs gave way under me and I sat down on the hay as the ice struck him. It spoiled his aim. The fork hit the edge of the heavy beam that held up the hayloft and dangled there, one tine deep in the wood.

His legs, in their dirty boots, twitched a little and were quiet. I knew he was dead. Now he couldn't call me a murderer anymore. I could have my bedroom back again. He couldn't kill any more of my kittens. I stood up slowly. My head felt nice and clear and the achyness left my throat. Without looking again at the broken ice, I let myself down from the hayloft and ran out of the barn.

The world was so clean and fresh it looked like the Lord had just made it. Every twig on the orchard trees was downy with frost. The sun turned the edges of everything to gold and the trees made feathery blue shadows on the white ground. I felt warm and at peace as I lay down on my sled, and with

a push from my foot, went sailing down the orchard slope. I stayed there coasting until I saw Mama coming to get me at supper time.

“Where are you, Laura?” she called. “Are you all right?”

“I’m up here, Mama, and—oh, yes; everything is all right now.”