

## **A Tug on the String**

Before she got old enough to start school, Kate was my slave. If I was tired of playing a game, I'd see a black widow spider in the box. If I wanted to go inside, I'd swear I heard giants stomping towards our backyard, hungry ones. Kate had long, pampered blonde hair and I wore bifocals and a pixie. She was the baby. I was the middle child, expected to eat all my potatoes and make my bed and, without exception, watch out for my little sister.

When she started school it was my responsibility to get her there safely. Every day as we ran down the slate walk my mother would warn, "Hold your sister's hand crossing the streets and be careful. Don't dawdle along the way."

Kate thought I held the answer for everything then. She'd pester with question after question all the way to school, when she knew I couldn't get rid of her.

"Mags?" she'd ask, "What would happen if there was a hurricane and all the telephone poles fell over and we had to walk to school?"

She tried to hold on to my jacket sleeve as if she thought I might escape. I'd shake her off, swing my book bag forward and take long steps toward school.

“Don’t be silly,” I said, “They wouldn’t make us walk to school with electrical wires all over the place. School would be canceled.”

Kate always worried about dramatic natural disasters and how they would affect our family. I could never figure out why.

“What about volcanoes?”

“What about volcanoes? Leave me alone or I’ll run all the way to school and you’ll have to walk by yourself.”

This usually shut her up although there were days when I’d shove her away from me. I’d stamp and yell and force her to walk twenty steps ahead where I wouldn’t be bothered by her relentless questions. Kate would adjust her plastic hairband and step cautiously towards school, clutching her blue Huckleberry Hound lunchbox. When she came to a corner or the edge of some woods she’d sneak a glance back at me to make sure I was there. Besides volcanoes and hurricanes, she worried about Bobby Morris.

Kate worried about Bobby Morris because of something that happened when I wasn’t home, before she started school. Kate was outside when Bobby Morris found her tied up and alone in the yard. When the weather was good my mother would put a kind of zip-up harness on her and tie her to a rope outside. Mom kept an eye on her through the kitchen window as she crawled around the swing set and dug in the sandbox.

Bobby Morris ran home and stole some fresh eggs from his mother's refrigerator. He came back and gave one to Kate to play with. The rest he cracked onto her head. When my mother stepped out the back door, Bobby Morris climbed the fence and took off across Mr. Armstrong's yard. By then Kate's pale, silky hair was gobbled with stiff, yellow goo.

When I came home from school, Mom was washing Kate's hair under the kitchen faucet. Kate was red-faced and sobbing. Her hands gripped the edge of the Formica countertop as she stood on the kitchen stepstool. Mom stood her up and jerked her around, pulling a wide-toothed comb through her long, tangled hair.

"Why wasn't Bobby Morris in school today?" Mom demanded before I put my book bag down.

"I don't know Mom. When Mrs. Lenzen took attendance, she said Bobby Morris was absent. Chrissy O'Donnell was absent too." I said, as if that might help explain things.

"I don't understand it." Mom said, "Why? Why would he pick on a little girl? Where are his parents?"

From behind bushes or around dark corners, there was always a chance of running into Bobby Morris. His backyard bordered ours. In our development, Poets Corner, there

were no through streets. Our street, Wordsworth Road, met at a right angle with Spenser Drive and Spenser flowed into a right angle with Keats Road. Everything crosshatched over rolling hillsides of old oaks and maples. The long way to school zig-zagged over neatly kept, black-topped roads with cobblestone curbs. The short way, the one we took when the weather was good and the ground wasn't muddy, took us through backyards and driveways and small squares of woodlands.

Mrs. Lenzen, my third grade teacher, always called him 'that Bobby Morris.' He was the kind of kid known always by his first and last name. He wasn't just any Bobby, he was Bobby Morris. He was the bad boy of our class, unpredictable and always in a chair outside the principal's office. I once saw him pull Michael McGovern, a fifth grader, off the monkey bars at White Oak Ridge Park, pin him down with his knees into Michael's chest, and drool mercilessly onto his face. He once knocked Robert Brady off his bike and broke his wrist. When two sycamore trees in front of Mrs. Hockinjas's house were covered with toilet paper one morning, everyone knew who did it.

Bobby Morris's parents were a mystery. We'd heard his mom didn't want to get her house dirty so the family lived in the basement. I can't remember ever seeing his father. No one I knew had ever been inside their house. The window shades were always drawn down tight. Mrs. Morris never came to school functions. She never answered their door on Halloween. They left candy in a basket next to the pumpkin on their front porch.

Most mothers in the neighborhood rang a bell from their backdoors to call their children home. I never heard one ring for Bobby Morris. Bobby Morris always seemed to be the first kid out to play and the last to go home as darkness fell. He cruised the neighborhood on his too-small bike with its monkey handlebars and banana seat, taunting us and goading us to come and get him. To him we were nothing but a bunch of sissies.

On a chilly afternoon in early spring I brought my new pet Easter bunny, Fluffy, around to show off to the neighborhood. Fluffy was the first pet my parents allowed in the house, the only thing ever dependent solely on me. I knocked on the doors of the people I knew and let them admire his downy white fur and long soft ears. All the kids wanted to touch and hold him. By the time I got home he was shivering and wouldn't eat his dinner.

I found Fluffy cold and dead in his box the next morning. My mother gave me an old shoebox for his burial. Kate and I lined it with cedar shavings and I wrapped Fluffy's body in a blue bandanna I found in my dresser drawer. The day before I held him inside my jacket, his twitching whiskers tickling my hands, his pink-rimmed eyes looking blandly into mine.

We carried the shoebox out to the corner of the yard and picked a spot under the willow tree to bury him. I traced a rectangle in the dirt and began to dig with a garden trowel. Kate sat cross-legged in the grass watching me, the shoebox in her lap.

“Mags?”

“What?”

“I was thinking. Fluffy was a baby rabbit. He didn’t do many bad things in his life, right?”

“I guess so.”

“That means he’s going to heaven, right?” She lifted one corner of the box lid and peeked inside.

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“Well, I wonder. If we took a piece of string and tied it to his leg? We could bury him and pull the rest of the string through the window to our room. Then tonight, when it gets dark and God calls him to heaven, we’ll feel a tug on the string. We can look out the window, see him come alive, and pull him back.”

“I don’t think so. Only his spirit will go to heaven.” I looked up from my digging. Kate was staring hopefully at me. “Dead is dead, Kate. He got cold and sick and died. He’s not coming back. We can’t make him come alive again.” I gazed into the brown hole in the ground and picked a wet pebble from the bottom.

“We’re never going to see him again.” I whispered.

Kate got up and went into the house. She was going to find some cardboard and make a headstone for Fluffy.

A clod of mud hit me on the back of my neck. Bobby Morris was balancing on the bottom rung of the split-rail fence.

“What you doing four-eyes? Gonna bring your rabbit out today?”

“Leave me alone Bobby.”

“What for?”

I sniffed and put the trowel down to wipe my nose with the back of my hand. “None of your business Bobby. Leave me alone.”

I went back to digging. Bobby Morris swung one leg over and settled himself on the top of the fence.

“Hey, what’s in the box?”

The hole was deep enough. I still needed to straighten out the sides. My eyes stayed down, measuring the hole. My hand was getting tired from gripping the wooden handle.

“Four-eyes, the box – what’s in it? Burying treasure or something?” He started snorting.

“Leave me alone, Bobby, or I’ll call my mother.”

“The baby needs to call her mommy to save her. I’m not doing anything. I just want to see what’s in the box.”

Bobby jumped off the fence and landed right next to me. Before I could stand, he grabbed the box up in his arms and scrambled back to the other side.

“It’s mine, Bobby. Give it back!”

“Settle down twerp. I’ll give it back.” He was opening up the top. “What do we have here?”

I climbed to the top of the fence. Bobby lifted Fluffy out of the box and pulled back the corner of the bandanna. My stomach tightened.

“Cool. Looks like your bunny rabbit died, four-eyes. What happened? You kill him?” He gripped one of Fluffy’s legs and lifted his stiff matted body into the air.



“Give him back, Bobby.” I tried to keep my voice steady. I slipped down to the other side of the fence and took a few steps closer. Bobby was examining the dead body, his lips parted in a gap-toothed grin. I lunged for his arm, hoping to make him drop it. Bobby twirled and laughed and swung Fluffy just beyond my reach. He circled me in a hopping dance, and all the while dangling Fluffy’s body above my head.

“Want the rabbit, four-eyes? Want it back?”

I sniffed and wiped my nose again.

“Yes.”

He threw Fluffy. The body skidded into the pile of dirt next to the grave, scattering it through the grass. “There you go. It was nothing but a dumb animal anyway.” Bobby Morris walked over to the fence and dropped the shoebox and bandanna onto the heap. Hot tears welled up behind my smudged glasses.

“Shut up! Just shut up, Bobby!”

Bobby snorted and took a step toward me. “Gonna make me? Better go home to Mommy, twerp. I think I hear her calling you.”

He started to take another step. I backed away and ran for the fence. Halfway over, my foot slipped off the bottom rail and I landed hard on my back.

A howl rose up from the other side of the fence. "What a twerp you are, four-eyes. You can't even keep a stupid rabbit alive."

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One morning a week later Kate and I put on our yellow slickers and grabbed our lunches off of the counter. It was a drizzly and grey. I looked out into the backyard and saw a little brook formed during the heavy rain the night before. It was flowing past the stone wall and turning the spring grass into mud. We would take the long way to school.

"I don't want you cutting through the woods today," Mom warned, "You'll ruin your school shoes."

We climbed up the hill to the top of Wordsworth Road. Little rivulets were finding their way through the curbstones, carrying skinny pink worms and stray leaves.

"Maggie?" Kate was right at my elbow, "How come worms don't crawl up trees so they won't drown in the rain?"

"Because they are stupid worms."

“Maggie? When birds eat worms can they feel them wriggling in their stomachs?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should eat one and find out.” I stopped at the corner and pushed Kate out in front of me. “Go ahead. I want to walk by myself for awhile. I’m watching you.”

I didn’t watch her though. I turned and searched the corner of Spenser and Browning. There was nothing unusual there, only dripping maple trees and a battered yellow sign with two stick figures carrying books. By the time we returned from school, the backyard would be dry and Mom would make us play outside. I looked down at the polished white toes of my saddle shoes.

He must have been hiding behind the bushes on the side of the Brady’s house. They formed a thick hedge there close to the road.

Kate didn’t cry. I heard the air coming out of her lungs when Bobby Morris shoved her from behind. I turned around and saw Kate face down on the wet grass, Bobby Morris on her back, his thick hand wound into her hair. He yanked backward. His purple CPO jacket was ripped under the arms, a white undershirt showed through the open seam. He pinned her down, trying to grab her arm and wedge it up behind her.

I don't remember getting there. I never took my eyes off him as I came up from behind. I could see hazy droplets of drizzle across his shoulders, the smudgy dirt on his neck. I dropped my book bag and hopped onto his back. I raked my fingernails through his blonde crewcut and reached forward to find his eyes.

He stood up effortlessly, shrugging me off like a rag doll.

Suddenly he was on top of me, grinding the back of my head into the mud. His wet breath smelled of egg salad. It was getting harder to inhale. His face loomed above mine.

He forced a leer and started to talk. "What's a mat- . . .?"

I brought my knee up hard into his crotch and scrambled out from under him. I kicked him in the side. He fell over and I kicked him in the stomach. I threw myself on top of him and howled, winding my arms around and socking him again and again. My hands found his neck and squeezed, pumping his head up and down against the ground. My hands felt strong now. I could keep them this way forever.

I heard Kate's voice from somewhere behind me. I forgot she was there. She was saying something to me, crying something. I could barely make it out.

“Mags! Maggie!” she sobbed. The sound broke through the roaring in my ears. “Stop . . . stop!”

My eyes looked down. Bobby Morris’s face was doing something I’d never seen it do before. It was crying. Blood and snot plugged his oddly sideways nose and coursed down between his lips. I opened my hands and let him go.

Kate was holding my book bag above her head as if she were about to throw it. Her slicker was smeared with bits of grass and mud. A red welt slashed across her cheek.

Bobby Morris rolled to his side. He threw his arms over his head. His jacket and shirt were hitched up over his stomach. The blue stripe on the top of his underwear showed above his pants. My arms floated at my side, lighter than air. I pushed my glasses up my nose and swiped the wet hair out of my eyes. I looked at my hand. It was covered in blood.

“Get out!” I screamed, “Leave us alone. Leave my sister alone or I’ll kill you!”

He rolled away and started getting up on his hands and knees. He hiccupped and spat a yellow gob in the grass. When he drew his sleeve across his nose it left a smear of blood from nose to ear. He turned and walked away.

I knelt down by Kate's lunchbox. It broke open in the fall. Waxed paper from the peanut butter and jelly sandwich fluttered in the damp breeze. Her apple was rolled down into the gutter with the worms and leaves. I picked up the thermos, shoved it in the box and closed it. My knees were crisscrossed with brown and red scratches. I couldn't hold my hands steady.

I stood up and handed Kate her lunchbox. Her face was streaked with mud and tears. Her hair was damp and wild. She handed me my book bag and grabbed hold of my sleeve. Together we turned and headed toward school.