

Mud

It had rained for days but on Saturday afternoon the downpour stopped and the building site down the road stretched enticingly in a gleam and glister of mud and shining puddles. Deep bulldozer ruts made miniature canals and several rows of half-built houses now stood, doorless, windowless, their new red-tiled roofs dripping in a flash of sun. I was seven, just old enough to play out with my friends.

Robert, David and I stood in our wellingtons, hands in our pockets gazing at this paradise, when to my fury I realised that my five-year old sister, Katy, had tagged along. "Go home," I hissed, "you're not allowed out of the garden unless Mum lets you."

She looked smug. "Mum's gone into town and dad says you have to help look after me. So there!"

I glared at her and pulled a face of pure sisterly hatred but Robert shrugged and said, "Are we going to play in there, or what?" To tell the truth we had been hesitating even before Katy had caught up with us. It wasn't that there were signs around the building site saying "KEEP OUT", and no one had exactly forbidden us to play there, but it felt prohibited.

In some unspoken way we all knew that we did not want our parents to know that we had played here despite the fact that no fence stood between the gorgeous acres of mud and the mundane tarmac of the existing road. I glared again at Katy. "Go home!"

"NO!"

"Well don't blame me if you get into trouble!"

And with that we ran, wellies splashing through mud as silky as treacle leaving Katy to flounder along behind. We roamed the setting concrete floors of unplastered living rooms, clumped up bare staircases, leaving footprints on the untreated wood. We dangled out of the window sockets and waved mockingly at the miserable little figure below us. We sat in huge wooden spools of cable and drank flat cherryade out of a half empty bottle some brickie's mate had left propped in a hod. Katy's uncertain, miserable little face seemed to stoke some devilish fire within us and we dared each other to climb among the Jurassic teeth of bulldozers and into the bath-like buckets of diggers.

Soaked and streaked with mud we finally began to squabble as we headed back towards the road. I don't know if I heard the splash or if that is why I glanced back but my stomach lurched. "Where's Katy?" I said.

"How should I know?" Robert grunted sourly. "She's your sister!"

And then I was running back the way we had come, my heart beating wildly as I heard a terrified choking cry from a foundation pit that the storms had filled to the brim. A well, twelve feet deep, filled with water the colour of coffee. It was loosely fenced with wired stakes. A small white hand splashed above the surface, then slid below. It came up again once as I yelled her name and I grabbed at a stake to stop me falling in too. There was no time to think and no time to reach out so I thrust my leg deep into the water and felt the weight of it pulling off my wellington.

I screamed for help but David and Robert had fled.

Suddenly beneath the water a hand grabbed my jeans, another nearly pulled off my boot and Katy broke the surface gasping, her grip still not secure. Slithering in the black ooze I hauled her out, splinters from the rough stage needling into my palms.

She was spluttering and sobbing wildly as I took her home, limping in one tiny red wellington, the other vanished in the pit. In me it was as if all feeling had stopped, shut down. I was in the slow motion of shock. All that remained was the numb dread of facing my father. At first his anger was swift and efficient. He yelled at us for the soaked, muddy state we were in, for spoiling our clothes, and he ran a bath and ordered Katy in. His anger, I realise now, was probably tempered by guilt. Our mother was out and he should have been keeping a better eye on us.

Gradually, as Katy's sobs became more coherent as he towelled her dry, his voice became clipped and he stared over her shoulder at me. "She nearly drowned?"

I nodded.

"Where?"

My mouth went dry. I couldn't answer. He pushed Katy's limbs into dry clothes, picked her up, took my hand and said, "Show me."

As we returned to the dreadful building site, my father was silent, apart from insisting that I show him the exact place where she had fallen in. His silence seemed to go on and on. He picked up a long stick and pushed it into the pit but even that could not probe the bottom. His face was yellow as we turned away and he hugged Katy tighter. When we were safely back on the tarmac road he turned to me and said, "You saved your sister's life you know." His fingers burned on my face as gently he wiped away hot tears of guilt.

Two days later the entire building site was fenced.

(880 words)