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When the Bough Breaks

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When the Bough Breaks

by Ellen Packer

KATHY'S arm was in the way. It was almost touching Andrea's paper. Kathy was taking up too much room at the art table.

"Ouch!" Kathy began to cry. She hit Andrea hard enough to knock the open scissors out of her hand.

"Girls!" Sister Mary Augustine rustled back to the table like a huge black angel. Both little girls were staring at the long, slowly reddening mark on Kathy's arm.

"Sh-she scr-ratched m-me."

"Her arm was on my paper."

"That's enough, girls. Andrea, please apologize. We must always remember to ask politely when we wish someone to do something. Katherine, you may be excused to the nurse's office."

"Yes, Sister." Kathy got up to leave. Andrea put her head down and shut her eyes tightly, mumbling "sorry" as Kathy left, holding the arm as if it were broken. Several boys in the room laughed behind palms cupped over their mouths. The girls eyed them sternly. They did not want to upset Sister Mary Augustine any more because it was Friday.

"Class, it's nearly time for the bell. Please put away all of your things and pick up all scraps you see on the floor. John may erase the blackboard."

The third grade room was at once filled with giggles and whispers, the metallic clink of scissors, the crunch of paper being wadded.

Sister Mary Augustine looked at the large institutional clock in the front of the room, then the crucifix which hung below it. Her lips moved “—illumine me, Deus—” The bell rang. The third grade stood at attention for the closing prayers.

“—in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, amen. Andrea, I should like to see you for a few minutes, please. Class dismissed.”

Andrea remained standing at attention while the others filed out, quietly until they were outside the classroom door. She stood, head down, treasonous strands of hair hanging down over her ears, faithless to her dark, thick braids. The blue jumper with its frayed emblem, and the white blouse bore traces of colored chalk.

“Come up here, Andrea.” Sister Mary Augustine fussed with the papers on her desk beneath the clock and the crucifix. “Andrea, can you explain why you jabbed Katherine with the scissors?”

“Her arm was on my paper.”

“Do you think that was a good reason?”

“No, Sister.” Andrea looked up. Sister was probably bald like they said. Then she dropped her eyes to the floor and followed the toe of her shoe as it traced over the squares in the floor.

“Andrea,—”

The door to the room opened slightly. “Drea, I’ve been waiting—”

“Hush, Tina.”

“Andrea will be out soon. Please close the door and wait outside.”

Tina withdrew first her dark head with its short curls, then her large brown eyes. Sister Mary Augustine waited until she heard the door-latch clack.

“Did you answer my question, Andrea?”

“No, Sister.” The pattern on the floor should have been circles—the square corners were hard to make.

“Did you have a good reason for hurting Katherine?”

“No, Sister.”

“Andrea, do you feel all right? You haven’t been like yourself all week.”

“I’m all right, Sister.” Except for that feeling in her stomach that felt like a jump-rope all tied in knots.

“Can you tell me why you were tardy this morning, or why you didn’t do your arithmetic problems, or why —”

“No, Sister.”

Sister had her hands folded. Her thumbs were crossed. “What do you think should be done with a girl like you, Andrea? Should you be punished?”

“Yes, Sister.”

Sister Mary Augustine began to turn through the pages of the green arithmetic book. Next year’s would be blue. “Here, Andrea. I want you to work some extra arithmetic problems for Monday.” Andrea nearly stuck out her tongue. “I’m also afraid that you will have to do without recess next week.”

“Yes, Sister.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“No, Sister.”

“You may go, then, Andrea.”

Andrea went back to her desk to get her arithmetic book and pencil box. She opened the door quietly to go, but let it swing shut behind her. The glass rattled.

“What did she want you for, ’Drea?”

“Nothing.” She walked very fast so that Tina had to skip down the hall to keep up with her. “Where’s your scarf, Tina?”

“In my pocket.”

“Well put it on.”

Tina put on her scarf as they left the school. Icy membranes had begun to form over the puddles left by melting snow. The air smelled of mouldy leaves. There were rain-bow pools in the street where cars had been parked.

“’Drea?” Tina was still skipping. “’Drea, was Sister Mary ’Gustine mad at you? Why did she make you stay?”

“You wouldn’t understand. You’re too little.”

Tina stopped. “I’m six!”

“So what?” Then Andrea slowed down, allowing Tina to

catch up with her. "Tina, don't you dare tell Mommy I had to stay, or I'll tell her it was you who broke her mirror."

"No, 'Drea, I won't tell. Cross my heart."

Andrea began to skip, singing in time, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back. Step on a crack, break your mother's back —" She stopped again. "Tina, wouldn't it be wonderful if there was just you and me and Mommy and Daddy in the whole wide world?"

"And Miss Muff?"

"And Miss Muff and Betsy, too, but no Sisters or school or boys or big dogs."

"'Drea?"

"What?"

"Would we have to do dishes?"

"No, silly. There would be so many dishes that we could just use them and throw them away."

"'Drea, can we have it be a secret — I mean, our world?"

"Sure." Andrea began to run toward the deep-red brick house half a block away. "Last one home is a rotten egg!" She reached the front steps far ahead of the much shorter-legged Tina.

"'Drea —"

"Tina's a rotten egg! Tina's a rotten egg!"

"'Drea —" Tina's lower lip pushed out, trembling.

"Hush, or I'll tell our secret."

"No, 'Drea —"

"Mommy?"

"Out here, my cherubs. Please don't track in any mud and hang up your coats."

Andrea went into the kitchen and slipped up behind her mother, who was dropping dough from a spoon onto a cookie sheet. Andrea dipped into the bowl with her fingers and in the same practiced gesture put her doughy fingers into her mouth.

"Andrea, how many times —"

"It's good, Mommy." Andrea put her arms about her mother's waist to hug her, and there is was, the slight flinch. She studied the big pocket on her mother's apron, thinking how it would look if it were full.

“Tina, would you please go to the cellar and get me an onion?”

Tina’s reply was inarticulated by a cookie, but she started down the cellar stairs, jumping down them one by one.

“Be careful, dear. The steps are steep.”

“Mommy?”

“What, Andrea?”

“Mommy, can old ladies have babies?”

Her mother took the sheet of unbaked cookies and put it into the oven. “Why, dear?”

“Janey’s mommy just had a baby.”

“I know, sweet, but Janey’s mommy isn’t old. She’s not any older than I am.”

“I was just wondering.”

There was a “clump, clump” coming up the cellar steps. Andrea went over to the door and flicked off the light switch beside it.

“Drea!”

Andrea started to close the door.

“Andrea, please don’t tease your sister.” Her mother wiped her hands on her apron and restored the light in the cellar. “Hurry, Tina, you’re slow as a snail.”

Andrea laughed.

“You girls run along while I start supper. Daddy won’t be home till later.”

“Why not?” Andrea liked to sit in her daddy’s lap after supper while he read the paper. It was a nice, comfortable lap and he never complained about her being hard on his supper.

“He has a meeting.”

“Can we have hamburgers?”

“Tina, you silly. It’s Friday.”

“Oh.”

“We’re having salmon loaf, Tina. You like that.”

“But I don’t.”

“Yes you do. Now run along so I can get something done.”

“C’mon, Tina.”

“Drea?” Tina whispered. “Let’s play our secret.”

“Okay. C’mon, Tina.”

Andrea tried to make herself as flat as possible so that there would be no bumps in the pink chenille bedspread. Except she would have to get out of bed when Mommy came, and say her prayers and ask Jesus to take good care of everybody and to forgive her for being bad. But Jesus was only a boy. Betsy, the doll with her eyes that open and close, lay beside her on the pillow.

“Sweet dreams, Tina.” The door shut down the hall.

Andrea had turned the overhead light off and left only the small light on. Her mother opened the door and stood briefly in the doorway, framed like the picture of a beautiful lady with long black hair. She had blue eyes. She was the only one who had blue eyes.

“Is Daddy home, yet?”

“No, dear. You’ll probably be asleep by the time he comes home. Ready to say your prayers?”

Andrea throw back the covers and knelt down beside the bed. Her mother knelt, too. “In-the-name-of-the-Father-and-the-Son-and-the Holy Ghost-amen. O my God, I am heartily sorry—” Andrea couldn’t quite think about Jesus.

The prayers concluded, Andrea climbed back into bed. She let her mother draw the covers over her and tuck them around her arms and around Betsy.

“Andrea, I have a surprise to tell you about.”

Andrea stared hard at the night light so that when she looked away, everything had spots.

“When a mommy and a daddy love each other very much, they want to share their love. That’s why they have children.”

“That’s why we have you and Tina.”

“We’re enough.” Andrea tried to press herself into the mattress as she and Tina did when they made snow angels.

“In a little while, a baby will be coming to our house.”

“We don’t want it.”

“Of course we want it. We’ll love it just like we love you and Tina. Like you love Betsy. We’ll have to take care of it like you take care of Betsy because she can’t do any-

thing. You can even sing ‘Rock-a-bye Baby’ to it like you sing to Betsy.”

“I hate Betsy.”

“That means you and Tina will have to be big girls. Especially you. You’ll have to be my big helper.” Her mother bent over and kissed her on the forehead.

“I hate Betsy.”

“You go to sleep, now. We can talk about it some more tomorrow. Do you want the night light left on?”

“Yes.”

“Sleep tight, darling, and sweet dreams.”

The door closed and the room looked fuzzy in the dim light. Andrea drew her knees up to make a big bump in the bedspread like a pink snow-drift. She could hear the TV and a baby crying and a man saying something about diaper rash.

Andrea sat up. She picked up Betsy and held her, mother-like, in her arms. Then she poked at one of the plastic eyes and pulled off the tiny nightgown. Betsy cried “mama, mama.” She threw the doll on the floor and climbed out of bed. She stood over the doll, then stomped on her, but that only made Betsy cry again. She picked the doll up and flung her against the wall. The head split open and white stuffing began to spill out. “Mama-a- - -”

Andrea turned out the light and climbed back into bed. She was sobbing. “I h-hate B-Betsy, I h-hate T-Tina, I h-hate M-Mommy, I h-hate J-Jesus —”

