

Sparky

June Lalen

It was one of those days when everything seems to go wrong. A feeling of disgust had been increasing all day until, now as she sat in front of the fireplace, Jerry was completely unhappy. Everyone and everything was against her, she decided.

She had been so sure that she would get a part in the school play, probably even the leading role. She had even pictured herself taking bows before the curtain amidst bursts of applause. She could see the notices which stated: "The beautiful and talented little redhead, Jerry Haines, performed magnificently in last night's production. Hollywood will be proud to claim her as the discovery of the year."

When the names of the cast had been read in assembly on Tuesday, she had thought at first that she must have misunderstood, but then as she was able to realize that she had not even been chosen to play the maid, all of her dreams were shattered.

She had felt so weak and queer that she could hardly remember walking into algebra class the following period. Then had come the second major blow of the day. Test papers from the day before were returned, and as she unfolded her paper a big red F jumped out and hit her in the face.

In literature class she could not seem to hear what the teacher was saying. The voice had sounded so far-away and the words so unimportant. As she awoke with a start at the sound of the final bell, she heard Mrs. Holmes remind the class that book reports were due the next day and that any student who did not hand one in would fail the course. Ordinarily she would not have minded doing the book report. She would even have enjoyed it. But not today. She felt as if she could not write a book report again as long as she lived, or work an algebra problem, or do any of the million and one things that she must do that evening.

By some miracle she was able to make her feet carry both her and her heavy heart home. There had been none of the usual enthusiasm as she entered the living-room and slumped into the big chair in front of the fireplace, where she was now trying to forget the world and all of its inhabitants.

No matter how hard she tried to forget, the catastrophes of the day and the book report which must be written chased

each other around and around in her head until she became dizzy and thoroughly miserable.

"Oh! Why does everything have to happen to me?" she moaned. "I wish I had never been born. Oh, how I wish I had never been born."

The room grew warmer and warmer and the clock ticked fainter and fainter. When she looked into the fireplace, there suddenly appeared a little red creature dancing merrily about from flame to flame. She blinked her eyes and looked again. As she did this, he gave a leap and was standing on the floor in front of her chair. He looked just like the leprechauns she had seen in pictures, except that he was dressed in a bright red suit and was carrying a tiny red-and-white-striped peppermint candy cane.

"I'm Sparky," he said. "I have my home among the flames in your fireplace."

"But I've never seen you there before," she said doubtfully.

"Oh, very few people ever see me," he said. "I heard your wish and I've come to grant it. Is it true that you wish you had never been born?" he asked.

"Why, yes," she said.

"Well, all you have to do is close your eyes very tightly, take a small bite of this peppermint stick, and swallow it. Then the whole world will be exactly as if you had never been born."

Without stopping to think, she quickly closed her eyes, bit off a piece of the candy, and let it slide down her throat. Then she noticed that Sparky had vanished, and she was still holding the remaining part of the tiny peppermint stick.

Just as she dropped it into her pocket, she heard the front door open. Like a gust of wind, her little brother, Tommy, blew in with dirt on his face and mischief in his eyes. From force of habit, she voiced a loud, "Hi, Tommy." But there was no answer. He did not even seem to see her.

"Oh boy! Hot ginger cookies," he exclaimed as he disappeared into the kitchen. Then she realized what had happened. He could not see her because she was really not there. She had never been born.

Anxious to see if this were really true, she jumped up and ran to the kitchen. There was Tommy helping Mother set the table for supper.

"I'll help," she blurted out as she remembered how Tommy hated to help in the kitchen. But nobody said anything.

Nobody even turned his head to speak to her. Now she knew it was true. Sparky had been right.

"I am now the happiest girl in the world," she told herself. "I have no worries at all. All I have to do is to watch other people live."

Since she could no longer be seen, she decided to go to the school and watch the cast practice for the play. When she got there, the auditorium was dark and empty. "Where are they?" she wondered. Then she saw the principal, Mr. Dailey, and the play sponsor, Miss Lines, coming down the hall.

"I'll ask them," she thought. "Maybe they've changed the room for practice."

As she was just about to speak, she heard Mr. Bailey say, "Yes, I regret that we won't be having a school play this year. But none of the students handed in one that would be appropriate for the school to present."

"Couldn't we forget the custom of having a student write the play for just once?" Miss Lines suggested.

"I'm afraid not," he answered, and then he went on to explain the tradition of the school and what it meant.

"That's strange," Jerry thought. "Why, my sister wrote the play." She could recall how it had been chosen and the high praise it had received from Mr. Dailey and from all of the faculty members who had read it. She remembered how proud her family had been when Susan told them the wonderful news and how they had teased her and called her "The Great Miss Playwright of 1952."

"But, Mr. Dailey," she interrupted. He went right on talking as if she were not there. And then she remembered. She wasn't there at all. "This is hard to get used to," she told herself.

She then decided that she must go find Susan and ask what had happened to the play. She hurried down the street to the corner drugstore where most of the gang gathered after school. Susan would be there drinking a chocolate malted, she thought. When she walked through the door of the drugstore, she heard the juke-box playing her song, hers and Bill's. As she looked around, her glance landed on Bill. He was sitting at a table with Mary Jane. She noticed that Mary Jane was wearing his class ring.

"That's impossible," she reasoned as she quickly glanced down at her finger to make sure that the ring was there. It was not. No, how could it be? She had never lived.

Why, Bill did not even know her. None of her friends did. There was Betty, her best girl friend, and sitting with her were all of the members of their own special club, the Lucky Thirteen. But there were thirteen members seated at the table. She counted them. With a start, she realized that she didn't belong. She tried to talk to them, but no one answered. She wanted desperately to be a part of their fun, but she couldn't. She could only watch the others live. It was what she had wanted. Now it was what she had.

Susan, her sister, was nowhere to be seen. Jerry saw all of Susan's friends, but no Susan. "Maybe she has gone home by now," Jerry decided. She ran home as fast as her feet would carry her. When she arrived there, the family was sitting at the table eating supper, but Susan was not there. There was not even a place set for her. There were Mother, Father, and Tommy, but what had happened to Susan?

Feeling a slight tap on her foot, she looked down to see Sparky standing beside her. "Are you looking for someone?" he asked. She explained the strange situation to him, and he was not puzzled in the least. "Why, don't you remember, Jerry?"

"Remember what?" she asked.

"Don't you remember the day when you were eight years old and Susan was six. You came home from school to find her standing at the edge of the fishpond in the front yard. Just as you came up the walk, she fell in. Remember? And do you remember how you pulled her out and how the pond was filled in so that there would never be the same danger again?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with Susan now?" she asked impatiently.

"A great deal," Sparky answered. "You've forgotten something, Jerry. You were never born. Susan fell into the pond, but you were not there to save her. Susan drowned that day because you were not there"

This struck her like a sharp pain. Yes, that was right. Susan had not grown up and had not written the play, and it was all because she had never been born.

"How awful," she sobbed. "If only I had not wished that I had never been born. If only I had been satisfied. If only I could be back again with Mother, and with Father and Susan and Tommy. If only I could have all my friends again." Her sobs were mixed with so many "if onlys" that Sparky knew she had learned her lesson.

"Oh, Sparky, what can I do?" she cried frantically.

"Just take a bite of the candy cane and everything will be as it was before," he told her.

She could hardly wait for the transformation. She was even more anxious than she had been to take the first bite. Her eyes closed, she took a bite, and swallowed.

"Jerry, Jerry, aren't you coming to supper?" she heard a voice beside her ask.

She opened her eyes quickly and saw Susan standing beside her chair. "Susan!" she cried in amazement.

"Whom did you expect?" Susan asked with a perplexed expression.

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I must have been dreaming. Yes, that's what it was. Just a dream."

When she sat down at the table, she looked around and felt warm inside. "It's great to be alive," she said.

"Then you got the part in the school play. How nice," her mother concluded.

"Oh, no. I'm not even in it," she said with sincere gaiety. "But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all."

She smiled as she fingered the tiny piece of peppermint cane in her pocket.

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Simple Living

Bruce Hamman

There is in each of us, to some degree, a desire to recapture a simple way of life. When complexities and confusions become oppressive, many of us escape to a memory we cherish of natural living. My favorite place of remembrance is a lake cottage which I am allowed the use of by a generous uncle.

My uncle's cottage is not large. The rafters underneath are uncovered and there are only four windows. The windows are hinged to swing open toward the inside of the cottage; were they to open to the outside, they might be broken by falling branches. Built into one wall of the cottage is a fireplace which draws well, except when the wind blows from the