

A Short Story

A DANGEROUS PLACE

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STUART R. DENIKE

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by
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Sally leaped over the broken step and landed hard onto the back porch. Opening the screen door, she could hear her mother talking on the phone.

"Yes, I'll be there as soon as I can. Yes, goodbye. Oh Sally, I'm glad you're here. I'm heading into town, so you have to take care of Ryan."

"Mommmmm! We were going exploring. I even worked extra hard to finish my chores early."

"Well, you can explore later; I've got to leave."

"But Tom will go without me."

"Sally, it's important I get into town right now, and - - -"

"But what if he gets sick? What if something happens?"

"Ryan is perfectly healthy. Nothing is going to happen as long as you keep him out of trouble. That's your job. You are nine years old now, and it's about time you took on more responsibility."

"But I don't want to!"

"Stamping your foot and whining will get you nowhere young lady. It's hard enough working the farm, but not doing your share and complaining about it like a two-year-old really tries my patience. Just do as you are told."

When upset, her mother was often quick with a hand and Sally could see that another word would mean risking a swat. "It's not fair," she muttered as she went to collect Ryan.

"Don't mope, and don't take it out on Ryan," called her mother after her.

It had promised to be a special morning. What a dismal day now, the girl thought as she turned the corner and bumped into her brother. He was big, two years older and nice for a brother.

"Heads up, sis. Hey, why so gloomy?" Tom asked. "Well, what's your problem?" he called as she pushed past and disappeared into her little brother's room.

Minutes later the three children stood at the side of the road while their mother climbed into the car.

"Now Sally remember, Ryan is still a toddler and has to be watched constantly."

As the old green station wagon rattled away in a cloud of dust, Tom said, "Come on, let's go!"

"But I can't. I'm supposed to watch Ryan."

"Well, can't you watch him just as well there? I'll help too, so he will be watched twice as much."

Sally thought for a moment. She was sure her mother would not approve. Feeling that she was somehow making a big mistake, she reluctantly agreed.

Not far into the wood they found a thicket of sticker bushes.

"Kind of a hollow in there. I bet I can get in on my hands and knees," she said. Crawling carefully, Sally reached the middle of the thicket and found an old well.

The old well was no longer used. Often the bottom was only mud covered by a few inches of smelly, stagnant water. During a heavy rain, however, the well would fill. The stones, loose and crumbly in many sections of the wall, were green and slimy. They were covered with a moss that grew in the well's damp air. It was a dangerous place, and so had been closed. That was done many years ago. Now it was a dangerous place again. The top of the well was level with the ground. Wood had rotted where the boards lay in the dirt.

"Tom," she called, "look at this."

By the time Tom, pushing Ryan ahead of him, reached Sally, she had moved one end of a board.

"What is it?" he asked

"An old well. Listen," Sally said as she dropped a stone through the crack. "There's water, but not much of a splash. It doesn't look too safe _
- - - Ryan, NO!"

The boy had wriggled his hand out of hers, and as so many times before, he began to run away. It was giggles turned to screams as the boards he was crossing gave out. Sally snatched at the toddler's shirt, but lost her grip. There was another splash, louder this time.

"Mommy, Mommy!" His screams terrified Sally. Tom calmly talked to Ryan and after a few minutes the child stopped crying.

"Are you hurt?"

"Wet, 'code'; Mommy!"

"You're OK Ryan," said Tom. Sally, I'm going for help. You - - -"

"Oh Tom, it's all my fault. What if he's hurt, broken a leg. What'll I do?"
She could feel herself trembling and was afraid she was going to start crying.

"Stay here and talk to Ryan and I'll - - -"

"NO, I can't. Please."

"All right, come on!"

Soon yells brought their father out of the barn and they quickly told him what had happened.

"Is there water in the well?"

"Yes, but not very much, He can't drown, Dad."

"Not yet!"

Storm clouds had been gathering for the last half hour, and now it was starting to rain.

"Tom, get a couple of those two-by-fours and the hatchet. I'll get the ropes and flash light. Sally, go in the house and grab some blankets."

They all scurried off. As Sally ran back through the kitchen, she saw a bag of cookies on the table, and on impulse, she snatched them up.

By the time they had chopped through the thickets, the rain was a steady downpour. Surprisingly, Ryan's crying was now a low and monotonous singing.

"One of you should have stayed with him," their father said as he placed the 2x4's across the well.

Sally was ashamed.

"I'll be there soon Ryan, it's OK baby, it's OK," as he tied the rope to the cross pieces of lumber.

But there was a new problem. The old boards had jammed together partway down the well. The opening was too small for either Tom or their dad.

"Sally," her father said, "I don't want you to do this, but you are our only hope of getting Ryan out. The water is rising. We don't have much time. and you must be careful those old boards don't fall. Can you do it? Sally?"

As she looked up at her father the tears were as heavy as the rain.

"Daddy, I'm scared!"

"I know, and that's all right, It takes courage when you're scared to do something yet do it anyway. That's being brave."

With a loop of rope under her arms, Sally was lowered into the dark well. The tiny beam of the flash light did not cheer her.

"Easy, slow and easy Sally," called her father.

The boards had tangled together and wedged tight. While squeezing past, a rotten end broke off. Sally held it from falling. Would the other boards hold? Can I get through? What if they fall? Oh, what do I do? Sally thought with anguish.

"Saayee."

"Is he *ever* going to pronounce L's and say my name right?" she muttered, annoyed. And then Sally knew a decision had to be made. It seemed an eternity until the numbing touch of the icy cold water made her gasp. "I made it!" she shouted triumphantly, and quickly fitted a second rope around Ryan. Sally saw that the water was already up to his waist.

"Now Ryan, be very still while Daddy pulls you up. Don't move!" she instructed.

Sally waited while her little brother was slowly hoisted up. It was dark, cold, wet, smelly, creepy and scary at the bottom of the well. Strange, she should be frightened, but with Ryan safe she wasn't. She wondered why as her turn came and she was hauled up.

Ryan sat wrapped in a blanket eating the cookies she had thought to bring along. Sally, Tom and their father stood in the rain staring at each other. Suddenly she was being held hard against her father's chest.

"Daddy are you laughing or crying?"

"Both baby, both."

It was a long, wet, cold walk home. Sally also felt the added cold of guilt, shame and dread. What could she possibly say to her mother. She had been irresponsible. She expected anger and blame. She deserved it. But then it would be over, forgiven and maybe forgotten. She, however, would not forget; for there in that dangerous place she discovered something strong and a little special within herself. Sally looked at Ryan, bundled in a blanket, warm and happy. As he smiled and waved a cookie at her, as if to say "thank you", she felt a sudden inner warmth herself. She vowed never to be so selfish and irresponsible again. And Sally began to whistle a happy little tune.