**At the Edge of the Forest, Close to Home**

**By Deborah-Anne Tunney**

**Usually they’d bring** their mother pussy willows or bulrushes from the field not far from their home, the place where the streets of houses ended and the scruffy, weed-infested land began. This was in the late 1950s, when they were still children, brother and sister. They’d often walk through those fields, their calves scratched by the stubborn wild grass, on their way to the creek. They’d search for toads and pollywogs there, leaning over the brook to watch the gentle braiding of sun into water.

It was to be the last season the sister and brother would be friends, digging in the mud side by side, riding bicycles through the neighborhood, or walking through the fields. Their interests would diverge, and they’d meet friends who would replace the close companionship they once shared. In the decades that followed, the sister would think back to this season as the time when the family was most perfectly in tune.

Their mother often could be heard humming in the kitchen, and she’d greet her children with jokes and nicknames, leaning down to give each a hug. Their father, a quiet, thoughtful man who seldom raised his voice, was a calm presence in the living room or sitting at the head of the dining room table, where he’d project an air of solid fairness, the kind of understanding that gave his opinions gravitas, the weight of benevolence. At least that was how the girl would remember him.

**One day early** that summer, when she was eight and her brother ten, as they were walking home from the creek, her brother came upon a bush of pussy willows and said, “Mother would like these.” He bent the boughs back and forth so they’d break.

“Don’t you think that’s enough, Stevie?” the sister, July, said. He answered, “Just one more.” He continued bending the boughs, moving along the trail, and she walked alongside, swatting at the high grass with a branch. They drifted farther and farther away from the path they usually followed.

Beyond the grassland where they stood, hot and isolated in the sun, was a larger field with old, dying trees, where the paths were worn to earth. She stood in the heat looking toward these trails that forked and led away from them, waiting for her brother, and thought she heard animals baying.

“Wait for me,” Steve said as she moved away from him, toward the sound.

The path was dry and meandered down a steep incline through a large, untended area of grass and weeds, where oak, birch, and maple trees towered over sycamore bushes, saplings, and an array of wild shrubs and flowers. When they reached the spot where the path veered to follow the fence, they saw a squat building at the farthest edge of the field. Although they were far from it, they were able to see a pen where about twenty steers were making a mournful noise. The brother and sister stopped walking at the same instant and, without speaking, crouched down by the wire fence that separated the path from the open field and distant building.

Men were milling about, some on the loading dock, some among the animals, dressed in dark, heavy clothing unsuited to the afternoon’s heat. They moved through crowded pens, a space dense with the smell of manure and sweat, and the clamoring of men and machinery.

“Let’s go home,” the brother said. He was holding the bouquet of pussy willows, switching hands to wipe the sweat on his trousers. “I don’t like this.”

**To reach their** home, they had a fifteen-minute walk through fields of wild bushes. They followed an unfamiliar path that wandered into a scruffy patch of forest where it was dark, instantly cool, and moist from a waterfall they could hear but not see. They passed the burnt remnants of fires, proof that there had been people huddled there when it was dark. They entered the street where they lived through a backyard with a fence bent to allow access, and reached their home porch, where their mother waited for them. She was dressed in a floral housedress, her dark hair pulled up with a ribbon. “There you are. I was starting to worry.”

“Look, Mom,” the boy said, “pussy willows, like you love.”

Their father was in the living room. He was reading, which was his habit before dinner, and when they came into the vestibule, he looked over the newspaper at them. “Hey, where were you guys?”

Steve said, “We went to the creek.”

“You’ve been going there quite a bit lately.”

“Yeah.” Steve was untying his running shoes, and after the mother left the living room for the kitchen, he added, “We saw a building today with cows outside, but it’s not a farm. I don’t think so, anyway.”

The father dropped the newspaper to his lap. “Where?” His expression darkened.

**Their father wore** alligator shoes. Years later July wrote a poem about the shoes, the authority they conveyed, the vulnerable feet encased in them. She also wrote a story about a woman hiding under a bed to escape the threat of an intruder wearing such shoes and filling her with a fear so fierce she was unable to breathe.

**“Not far from** the creek,” the brother continued, “closer to the river.”

“You’re not to go there,” the father said, leaning toward them. “Do you understand?” His concern leaned toward them too, filling the room with an unnerving energy, bordering, or so July thought, on anger. Both children stopped and watched him; there was something in his tone that was steady and sure. “You must not go there. Do you understand?”

“But why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to go there.” The father’s answer was curt, which made July take a step back. The tone was unusual, for he was a kind man, sympathetic, a man July had never heard curse, who encouraged his children to speak and always listened when they did.

“What’s wrong?” the mother called from the kitchen when she heard her husband’s raised voice.

“They’ve been over to the field by Waverley’s,” he said, without moving his gaze from them.

She came into the doorway and said, “Oh no, kids, you can’t do that.”

The father’s tone softened as he watched them, as it always would, for he was deeply touched by his children, by their common vulnerability, by the way they stood silent and contrite before him on this day. “Look, guys, it’s just not a nice place. Go to the creek, but don’t go there. Okay?” He stood and crossed the room, bending to look each of them in the face.

“All right, Dad,” the brother said.

“Promise me. No more going there.”

“I promise,” the brother said.

“And you, Missy?”

July had not spoken and felt she might cry if she tried, so she looked down and mumbled, “Okay.”

But even as July agreed she knew she would return. She would debate it and then decide she had to see it for herself at least one more time. The impulse was born of a stubbornness as pervasive as the sense she held of herself in the world or as the cowlick that made her hair unruly and incapable of being tamed by barrettes or hairpins.

**“What do you** think they do there?” July said. It was a hot day, with a hazy heat suspended over the fields, a week after they’d promised their father they would not return.

“I don’t know, but we told Dad we wouldn’t come here.”

They were behind the chain-link fence, looking toward the low building made of gray bricks, with a flat roof, and surrounded by cypress bushes and small, dusty shrubs. The pen was empty, and in the clearing the building looked desolate, so that coming upon it they felt they’d discovered an illusionary place.

As they watched, a man came out to the loading bay, stretched, and looked around. The children were submerged in the line of wild shrubs by the fence, and he couldn’t see them. He sat on one of the large freight boxes that lined the loading dock and took out a cigarette, lit it, and stared out over the field into the wide summer sky. Shortly another man joined him, and the children could hear the faint sound of their talk and laughter. Both were big men. Gradually their conversation slowed so that they were left smoking in silence, looking out to the matted land and relentlessly blue sky.

“I’m going to the creek,” the brother said, but the sister knew that nothing by the creek could interest her as much as the two men sitting on the loading dock. During the past few months the creek had narrowed; it wasn’t much wider than a ditch, a thin flow of water sinewing its way through the muddy trail and grasses to join the river not far from the clearing where the building stood. The brother would bring large mason jars that had held pickles or homemade relishes and jams, hoping to capture a toad or pollywog. Once he had in fact caught a large tadpole, and they had both watched it trying to climb the glass of the jar, the attempt so pathetic that without saying anything, the boy had let the creature go. And yet every time he’d come to the creek he’d bring a jar, sometimes passing it through the stream so that he’d end up with clay and silt and muddy water from the bed of the creek.

“I don’t want to go there,” she said. “It’s too hot.”

“Well, I want to go. It’s boring here.”

“Go, then, go.”

He stood up from his bent position and left without speaking, following the path behind her while she stayed crouched until the men went back into the building. By then she was slow and sleepy from the heat, a heat that brought with it a stillness not only of the air but also of time. With the men gone and everything silent, pasted in place, she leaned against the boulder, stretched her legs into the long weeds, and looked up at the solid sky far above her. Propped against the rock, sleepy and pensive, she succumbed to the day’s miasmic rhythm, to its isolating heat.

**In the second** week of August a new family moved onto the street where July and Steve lived. Through the living room window that day, July saw the moving van parked in front of the house where the new family would live and thought it had the disconcerting appearance of a foreign object, like a spaceship that had landed during the night while the neighborhood slept. An assortment of children raced about it; one of the boys looked to be the same age as July’s brother. He had sandy brown hair and was wearing faded jeans and a black T-shirt. He had a way of leaning on one leg while he stood, tilting his head as if he didn’t believe whatever he was being told, an attitude that later would cause July’s mother to call him a “smart aleck.” His name was Rory, a name July thought fitting, for he seemed to always be surrounded by a roar of voices and sounds. By the end of the summer he and Steve had become inseparable. July would hear them playing games and laughing in Steve’s room, and when she went to the creek she often went alone, wandering the meadows, discovering new trails and roaming the scraggy land. At times she walked by the field with the gray building, but she never again saw animals in the outer pen, and the men whom she’d seen sitting by the docking doors began to seem sad to her. And it wasn’t only those men who seemed to exude sadness. She saw it in the men who lived in her neighborhood as they came home from work, walking from the bus stop, gazing down at their work boots. She saw it in their wives, who sat on the steps of their veranda in the afternoon, drinking tea and looking tired.

**One day near** the end of summer, July walked alone to the hidden field where the building stood. She was thinking of the approaching September days, thinking she soon would not be able to come here. It was an uncommonly hot day, one of the last truly hot days of the year, and she sat on the boulder, her usual spot to observe the building, the air full of the sounds of heat and the humid wind moving the branches of the trees and shrubs close by. She was stuck in the hallucinatory slowness of the afternoon, in a drowsiness that was only later disturbed by the sound of someone approaching.

After what seemed like mere seconds, she opened her eyes. She was aware that her leg was itchy and that grass was scratching her thigh, and she slapped it instinctively. The weeds and matted underbrush about her were dry and bleached, and she slowly realized that someone was standing close by, that the sound of this person approaching through the weeds had entered the lyrical quiet of her sleep, disturbing and waking her. As she grew more aware, remembering how she had grown drowsy and slipped from the boulder, leaning against it, she realized a man was standing over her not more than four feet away. She could not make out his face because he stood between her and the sun, which created a halo around his head. He bent toward her. He was wearing one of the aprons the men who worked in the building wore. “I thought I saw something in the bush,” he said. She propped herself up on one arm, raising her other to shield her eyes, trying to see more clearly who was speaking.

For an instant she was shocked by the recognition that the man before her was her father. It made her stop moving and gape. But how could her father be there, dressed like that, like one of the men who sat watching the monotony of the scene on the loading dock, or waist deep in animals, herding them without expression? But when the man came closer so that July was able to make out his face, she realized with another shock that he was not her father. He was almost over her now and smiled down with muddy teeth. “What are you doing here?” How could she have thought it was her father? The man’s face was leathery, and he was much older and shorter than her father, his eyes shadowed by a heavy brow. “Hey, did you fall asleep here, little girl?”

She backed away from him but the boulder behind her blocked her retreat. He came closer still and she could smell something off him, a raw smell mixed with cigarette smoke, coffee, and the essence of closed spaces. There was a moment of utter stillness as they watched each other like tense animals, a moment that hardened their stance, neither of them knowing what would happen next.

Then he grabbed her arm, twisting it, and she jumped, balancing herself on the rock. “Hey, little girl, not so fast.” His touch, the roughness of his grip, frightened her and she jerked her arm from him. Stumbling, but finding her footing on the path, she pushed him away and ran. “Hey,” he said again, and then his voice was lost in the wind.

She ran, breathing heavily by the time she reached her street. There she saw Steve and Rory on their bikes. They were riding in circles, trying to see how small they could make them before the bikes would fall. “Where were you?” Steve said.

“Just walking.”

“Not by that building, I hope. Dad’ll kill you.”

“What building?” Rory said.

“There’s a building, about twenty minutes from here, in a field,” Steve said.

“The slaughterhouse?” Rory said.

“What’s a slaughterhouse?” July said.

“They kill animals there.”

“No,” July said.

“Yep. They kill animals there, and then we eat them. That’s where meat comes from.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

As soon as Rory said what a slaughterhouse was, July knew it was true. She hated Rory for that.

**It was said** that the fire that destroyed the slaughterhouse had been set deliberately, but it was never proved. July was ten on the night of the fire. She was in the backyard, sitting on the swing, when Rory and her brother came along and told her about the fire. She hadn’t been to the field near the slaughterhouse since the afternoon the man had found her.

The boys were flushed and excited. “You should see it, July, the flames were high into the sky.” They all rode their bikes back to the scene, discarding them in the high grasses before joining the group of people milling around near the building. The heat was extreme, scalding July’s face and hands. She moved close to the fence, away from the crowd, watching the flames flow from the windows into the sky. She watched the glow of red on the earth by her feet. Above her, the trees blew with a frantic hot energy. Closer to the building, ash moved on the breeze.

“Hey, July, over here,” Steve yelled, and she turned to watch him and Rory hit and jostle each other good-naturedly. The glow turned everything in sight—the shrubs along the ditch; the fence posts and wire; and the laughing, squinted faces of her brother and his friend—a deep, fiery red.