

Thirteen Toadstools

He was fussy. Couldn't be stuck in an office, and sure as hell wasn't qualified enough to get a job in one. He liked the fresh air, sun and breeze and birdsong and all that. He couldn't take to factory work either. The monotonous movement of jobs that could be done by machine. He liked variation, a change of surroundings; the view and the people. But most of all, he knew she had to come first. It would be unfair to drag her into an office or factory for 8 hours a day. And even more unfair to dump her with a nanny. She was deprived of the attentions of one parent already.

Even if that parent had stuck around, she'd have been too lazy to work or to cook or to babysit so he figured his life was no harder than it would have been if she'd stayed. The small play-set kitchen in their caravan wasn't particularly inspiring but he'd watched his Ma cook pasta and soups, and barbeques were pretty straight-forward. He loved the closeness the caravan forced upon him and his daughter. Her constant chatter was more entertaining than the radios played by the other workers and her need for routine made the long picking hours go quickly.

She was a happy child, his Annie. Everybody loved her, "full of life" they said. There was no doubt that parts of their lifestyle had done her good; there wasn't a single critter that could alarm her; she knew to avoid the stingy nettles and where to look for dobbin leaves if one did get her; she was strong and fit and would soon be able to ride a two-wheeler even though she was only four and a half; she made friends easily and wasn't intimidated by adults. But she couldn't count, not even to ten. He knew it was just rote-learning but most four-year-olds could count to ten, couldn't they? And most kids knew the alphabet before they started school, didn't they? He'd tried it all, posters, bribery, games, but she still didn't get it. The other pickers said he was silly, to stop worrying, but he couldn't. They lived in a caravan for God's sake. She didn't have a nice, secure family – a mother and some siblings, she didn't have successful parents who put a different meal on the table each night, she'd grown up in Osh-Kosh hand-me-downs and gumboots. What if she didn't like school? What if she couldn't make friends or she couldn't do the work? What if he couldn't teach Annie what her mother hadn't been taught by her father?

Annie shoved her feet into her gummies, making sure the bottoms of her dungarees were tucked in like daddy had showed her. Proud of her own independence, she peddled the tricycle Sam had given her. The other pickers were nice to her like that. Sam and Ian often gave her presents, Jack let her ride around on his big shoulders, Lucy would bake her biscuits and Todd had cut an apple in half once or twice to show her the star inside. She peddled furiously to get over the arched bridge that crossed the creek - that was the hard bit. In her head, she practised her counting. Daddy had been trying to teach her for ages but she just hadn't been able to do it. But now she could. She found out this morning at breakfast. Her little bowl from Ian had bunny rabbits all around the edge and when she was bored with her weetbix she would give some to each of the bunnies. This morning she counted each rabbit as she fed it and she'd gotten all the way up to ten! She hadn't told Daddy (who always came back to get her up and get her breakfast before reassuring her that he was "just outside if she needed anything") because she wanted to practise a bit more before she showed him. As she peddled, she pretended that she was in a race and that Ian and Sam and Lucy and Todd and Jack were her fans. They all shouted and waved at her as she zoomed past, "Hi Annie!" "Hello beautiful" "Go Girl!" Ian made his monkey-face at her.

Daddy's face cracked with relief when he saw her rocketing towards the tree he was picking, "Hey Annie! What's happening?"

She grinned, "Nuffink."

"Really now. Are you okay, Bub?" He sat down in the grass beside her.

"Yup." She noticed a fairy-ring of toadstools. "Daddy, hold out your hands."

"Like this?"

"Yup." Slowly she plucked the toadstools from the ground and placed them in her father's cupped hands.

"One, two, three, four," she turned so that she was facing him. "five, six, seven." She thought of her tricycle, the other pickers, their built-in bed which made a fantastic boat for a game of pirates. "Eight. Nine. Ten." She thought of that lady - the one who didn't like cooking, or cleaning, or

Daddy. The one who was gone. “Eleven. Twelve.” And she thought of Daddy; the creases rolling off his forehead, the corners of his mouth and eyes turning up simultaneously. “Fourteen.” She said proudly.

“Oh Annie...” He thought of Leanne. Annie’s mother could never have survived in a caravan. As a child she’d had everything whilst he’d had nothing. He pulled his daughter onto his lap. Whether she’d realised it or not, when she left, Leanne had given him everything and left herself with nothing. He stroked his hand down her hair, enjoying the way her face nestled into his shoulder. “I’m so proud of you!”

“Fourteen toadstools,” Annie whispered.

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