

## Who's to Bless and Who's to Blame

The scar on my left big toe is an inch long thin white line. It always reminds me of a July afternoon in 1936, when I was 8, Mary was 7 and Veola was 4. My sisters and I sat on the front porch, right after lunch, planning what to do until it was time to go swimming. It was too hot ride our bicycles or go jumping in the haymow. But when I said, "Let's go to the brook," my sisters agreed.

"Mommy," I called through the screen door, "we're going to the brook. To catch some minnows. And tadpoles. We'll be back to go swimming."

"All right, dear, and watch out for your sisters. Stay on the wagon road. No bothering the cows," she said, while we grabbed our pails and nets. "And close the pasture gate tight. Have a good time."

"O.K. Mommy," we called, as I stretched up to unlatch the gate post. The gate squeaked open. "Me first, then Veola, then Mary," I said, "that way Veola won't go too slow."

"But I should be second," Mary said, scuffing her sneakers in the dirt. I shoved the gate open wider and pulled Veola through.

“No. Last time she stopped and sat down. Way behind us. And Mommy heard her crying in the pasture? I got blamed,” I said, frowning. I remembered sitting on the porch that afternoon, trying to read, after my sisters waved from the back of the pickup truck on their way to Copake Lake. “And it wasn’t fair. So follow me. And stay in line.”

I squinted in the bright sunlight, gazing across the treeless pasture toward the wavy line of green willows and tall grasses bordering the brook. A thick hedgerow bordered the right side of the pasture while, off to the left, a barbed wire fence marked the boundary. Inside the wire fence, Daisy and Buttercup grazed, heads down, tails swishing. Thistles bloomed and flies buzzed over the brown cowflops while the wagon tracks led straight to the brook. I loved its damp sandy border, the trickles and eddies of the shallows, and the cool pools where we sat in the waist-high water, watching the silver minnows flash by. “C’mon, let’s hurry. We can cool off in the water,” I said, imagining the skitter of water spiders around our toes.

“It’s too hot,” Veola said.

“We’re almost there,” I said,” and you can lie in the brook.” Veola dropped her pail and started to snuffle. “I’ll pinch you if you won’t go,” I said.

“Then I’ll tell on you,” Mary said, putting her arm around Veola’s shoulder.  
“C’mon, Vee, we’ll have fun at the brook.”

“No. I’m thirsty.” Veola dropped to her knees and sat in the middle of the dusty track. I stared down at her wavy brown hair, wanting to grab a handful and yank her along. Mary crouched and patted Veola’s shoulder.

One of the cows moored. *Milk, I thought. Mommy will never find out. Just a little bit in the pail. Then we can go to the brook.* I squatted beside Veola. “I’m getting you a drink. In your pail. Milk. And it’s a secret,” I said.

“Libby, you can’t!” Mary said. “Mommy told us. Veola could get sick. And we’re not supposed to go near the cows. They could hurt us.” I stood and picked up Veola’s pail. “I’ll really tell on you,” Mary said.

“It’ll be fun. And you can have a turn. Just a couple of squirts,” I said, stepping from the track toward the cows. Mary followed, holding Veola’s hand. I called, “So bossy, so bossy,” like our tenant farmer did at milking time. Buttercup and Daisy swung their horned heads towards us. The cows’ ears stuck out sideways and their brown eyes watched us. With each step the cows got bigger. I wanted to pat Daisy’s warm neck and smell her sweet breath. “O.K. I’ll do Daisy. Then you can do Buttercup,” I said to Mary. “Wait. And keep quiet.”

I stepped toward Daisy, patted her side, and crouched at her flank, setting the tin pail in dusty weeds. I leaned forward reaching one of the teats and squeezed a stream of milk into the pail. Daisy stood still. With my head nestled into her side, I reached a second teat, adding to the little pool of milk in the pail.

Then Daisy took a step forward. Her hoof knocked over the pail and stomped on my left toes. I lurched up against Daisy, trying to push her sideways. Pain sparked from my trapped toes. “Mary! Come help! Daisy’s on my foot.”

Mary shoved. Veola started crying. Mary and I swatted Daisy’s rump. And then Buttercup mooed, moving toward the brook. Daisy’s head swung up, her tail flicked side-to-side and she followed, her hoof lifting from my foot.

I sprawled in the dirt, afraid to look at the dirty sneaker. Mary shushed Veola. Finally I wiggled the foot and stood up. “O.K. It’s time to go home. For swimming,” I said.

The first steps hurt. “My foot’s fine. See? I can walk. And we won’t tell Mommy so we can all go swimming.”

We trudged to the porch. My toes hurt only a little. Splashing in Copake Lake took away the soreness. The next day my big toe looked swollen, but I didn’t tell my mother. At breakfast on the third morning, my toe hurt too much to walk.

“Doctor Bowerhan will have to take care of this,” my mother said as she wrapped gauze around the foot. “I’ll call to tell him we’re on our way. You sit still.”

Riding home in the cab of the pickup truck, after the needles and little knife and iodine and bandages up to my ankle, and after the doctor said, “No swimming for two weeks,” I sat with clenched hands, looking out the window. *No swimming for two weeks. O why did I do it? That stupid cow. It’s Veola’s fault.* Tears dribbled down my cheeks and I began to sob.

“Oh, Mommy, I’m so sorry. I’ll stay away from the cows. And I’ll try to be good. Every day.” My mother nodded. Keeping her gaze on the road, she said, “Of course you’ll never do that again. Not after what happened. And you’ll remember to set a good example for your sisters.” She smiled and patted my hands.