

"Ding-dong-bell, kitty's in the well!"

"Robbie, don't, stop it!"

"Don't stop it? Okay . . . here goes!"

"Stop it! Let her go!"

Tears blurred her eyes, but Megan could still see Robbie, and the squalling calico furball in his hands.

"You want me to let her go?"

Peaches yowled and spat.

"On the *ground!* Put her on the *ground*, Robbie!"

"Are you suuuure?" he asked, drawing out the final word into a taunt.

Peaches flailed with her forepaws, but those claws had been taken out by the vet. Her hind legs were gripped in Robbie's hand. His other hand was closed in the loose fur of her scruff.

Megan threw herself at Robbie as he backed around the curved stone wall of the well. Her fists and kicking feet struck out wildly. He dropped the cat. Peaches streaked across the yard without looking back.

"You're mean, Robbie, you're mean, I hate you!"

She smacked him in the face, almost by accident. He shoved her, and she tripped and fell in the grass. She banged her elbow on the well-stones, skinning it with sudden stinging pain.

"Quit hitting me, you brat," Robbie said. He snatched a big handful of her hair.

"Ow!" She lashed out and missed.

Robbie pulled Megan to her feet. His face was a furious red. His frown was horrible. He looked just like his daddy.

"Maybe I should throw *you* down the well. Huh? Is that what you want?"

He pushed her until her head and shoulders were bent over the drop. She could feel cool, damp air blowing up from the bottom. The water smelled moldy.

She struggled, but he was bigger, stronger. "I'll tell, Robbie, I really will, I'll tell!"

Terror had dried her tears. She could see better than she wanted to. The round hole was like a stony throat. The walls were slimy. The water at the bottom was black, with dead leaves floating on top. It was a long way down.

"Up and over!" Robbie, still holding her hair with one hand, grabbed the back of her pants with the other.

Her feet left the ground. Megan shrieked. She clutched at the sides. The top of her head hit the thick rope that held the bucket, setting it to swinging.

"Mommy!" Megan screamed, as loud as she could. "Mommy, somebody, help!"

Her voice bounced around in the damp dark. A startled frog leapt from a crevice and tumbled into the water.

"While you're down there, you can fish out all the money at the bottom," Robbie said. "Then you can give it to me and I'll leave your dumb cat alone."

"Please, Robbie, don't let me fall in!"

Megan caught hold of the rope. It was soggy, squishing in her fist. She thought it might come apart like wet paper, and first the bucket would plunge into the black, followed by her.

"You're lots bigger than a penny or even a quarter! Maybe I'll wish for a TV for my room, or that I won't have to go back to school again ever."

Robbie lifted, and Megan knew he was going to do it, really going to heave her headfirst into the well. Her scream hurt her throat and her ears.

"Jeez, what a baby." He set her down.

She collapsed to her knees, hair hanging in her face, sobbing.

"I was only kidding," Robbie said. "But if you tattle on me, my dad won't believe you anyway. And your mom does whatever he tells her to."

He laughed and walked away. Megan stayed huddled where she was.

The well was in a little park that nobody came to

anymore. Not since they'd opened a new one nearer the school, a neat park with baseball diamonds and a tennis court and a playground with all sorts of fancy equipment. This one only had a weed-grown sandbox, a rusty one-swing swingset, and a crooked slide. The drinking fountain didn't work, and the bathroom was locked and covered with graffiti.

Still, this park was close to the house. Megan had always liked it before. She liked not having a bunch of other kids around, shouting and fighting. She even liked the well. At least, she had until today.

Like a picture of a wishing well from a book, with its wooden roof like a little pointy hat, and the winch on the side to raise and lower the bucket. Even the icky smell wafting up from it hadn't bothered her.

When they'd first moved in with Bob, Robbie's daddy, Megan's mother made her promise-cross-your-heart to be careful at the park. Look out for strangers, broken glass, and snakes. Most of all, be careful around the well. Mommy said it was dangerous, that the city should have taken it out or put a covering over it a long time ago.

Someone could fall in. Someone could get trapped down there, unable to climb out on the slippery rocks. Someone could drown, and die.

Megan got up, sniffing and wiping her eyes. Maybe Robbie had just been joking. Maybe he wouldn't really have dropped poor Peaches down it.

Then again, maybe he would have. He'd flushed Megan's goldfish even though it was still alive. He'd taped firecrackers to her dolls and blown them apart.

Once, when his daddy was cutting the lawn, Robbie had taken Panda-La-La and tossed it into the lawnmower's path. His daddy hadn't been able to stop in time – Megan wondered if he had even tried – and there'd been an awful munching sound and then Panda-La-La was sprayed out in a mess of black and white fluff.

If Robbie was mean enough to do that, maybe he was mean enough to hurt Peaches.

Megan leaned over and peered down the well. The bucket was still swaying. It had a few inches of nasty

water in it, under a layer of leaves and dead bugs.

She put her hand in her pocket and found a nickel.

Maybe she should wish that Mommy had never met Bob. Or that her real father would come home, saying he'd made a big mistake and wanted them back.

It was only a nickel. For wishes like that, she'd need to put a hundred dollars in there. What kind of a wish could a person get for a nickel?

The black water rippled.

A face was looking up at her.

She gasped. The nickel squirted out of her grasp and landed in the grass.

The face was tinged green-black by the water. Shifting and rippling and weird, it seemed to float in the middle of a swampy cloud of hair. The eyes were large and bulgy and yellow. Like a frog's.

Megan blinked, shook her head, and rubbed her own eyes. All she could see now were dead leaves and a brighter patch of reflected sky, and herself as a wavery shadow-mirror shape against it.

She bent and rooted around until she found the nickel.

"I wish Robbie would stop bothering me," Megan said, flicking the coin off her thumbnail like she was flipping it heads-or-tails. "I wish Bob wasn't so mean, and Mommy didn't have to be married to him anymore."

The nickel spun and flashed, over and over. It plunked into the water with a faint splash. She could see it, a silvery receding glint, and then it was gone.

Nothing happened. She wasn't sure what, if anything, she had been expecting, but she realized she was holding her breath and released it in a sigh.

Her hair hurt where Robbie had yanked it. Her scraped elbow hurt, too. It was time to go home.

She trudged back to the house. It sat back behind hedges like it was hiding. The shades were all half-drawn, the windows like hooded eyes.

Mommy was in the kitchen, breasting chicken to

go in the oven. Megan might have gone to her and told her what Robbie had done, showed her the scrape and everything, but Bob was in the kitchen too. He sat on one of the stools at the counter, reading the newspaper.

Megan hunted around for Peaches instead, calling the cat's name and rattling the bag of dry cat food in the laundry room off the garage. Peaches didn't come. Robbie had really scared her, this time.

As she climbed to the second floor, she saw her door standing open. She was sure she'd closed it. But maybe she hadn't shut it all the way, maybe Peaches had gone in there and was way back in the closet or something.

She got two steps inside and stopped short with her mouth hanging open.

Her room had been clean when she'd gone out to play. Now toys were everywhere, the books were pulled off the shelves, and the puzzle she'd been working on was all over the floor.

Robbie!

Panda-La-La's replacement, Floppy Dog, usually sat on her pillow. But Floppy Dog was nowhere to be found.

She rushed to the window, lifting the shade, and was just in time to see Robbie's baseball cap over the hedge. Headed for the park.

With a small, frustrated cry, she dashed back down the stairs.

"Quit that stomping around!"

Bob's bellow made her jump, but she couldn't stop to apologize. Not if she was going to save Floppy Dog. She ran outside.

It was almost dinnertime and the light was fading from the sky. The shadows grew long and creepy in the park.

"Robbie?" she called. "Give me back Floppy Dog. That's not funny."

He didn't answer. Not even a "Come and get him, then, stupid baby!"

She kept going toward the well, her steps slowing, slowing, until she was dragging her feet through the grass. The moldy smell was worse than ever.

A spot of color caught her eye. Sunny gold, out of place in the gloom . . . Floppy Dog! He was at the base of the curved wall of well-stones, tipped over so that his glassy-button gaze fixed curiously on Megan.

Expecting Robbie to leap out at her and yell "Boo!", she crept closer.

The grass around the well was all wet and mashed flat. A low creaking noise came from the old rope as the bucket swung lazily in a circle.

"Robbie?" Her voice sounded too loud in the evening hush. Too afraid. She strained her ears, now actually hoping for his teasing laughter.

Nothing, nothing but the creaking rope and an airplane buzzing by high overhead.

Something else was in the matted-down grass. Robbie's baseball cap. Streaked with green sludge.

"He fell in," Megan said in a choked whisper. "Oh, gosh, he fell in the well."

She took another step, her stomach feeling like a sinking weight, the back of her neck crawling like it was covered with spiders. She picked the cap up tweezed between her thumb and finger. Her nose wrinkled at the yucky smell, which made her think of a fish tank that needed to be cleaned.

It took every bit of her courage to stick her head over the rim and look down. The surface of the water was a pool of night-black.

"Robbie?"

Leaning over like that, she was suddenly sure he was sneaking up behind her. *Now* he'd yell, or push her.

She whipped around fast and saw only the empty park. Floppy Dog was within reach so she bent and seized him and hugged him to her chest with one arm. The other held Robbie's stinky cap out at an angle.

No Robbie. No anybody.

She saw what looked like a trail of bent grass heading out of the park. It didn't lead the usual way, to the street, but toward the drainage ditch that ran behind the houses.

Relief burst in her like a firework. Robbie *had* fallen in, but he'd climbed out. Gone home the back way, so that no one would see him all wet and gross. A grim sort of satisfaction – serves him right! – mixed with her relief.

Hoping to catch up with him, hoping even more that he got in trouble from his daddy for tracking well-muck through the house, Megan trotted along the trampled-down trail.

She imagined the look on his face when she gave him back his hat. She'd smile, all sweet, but he'd know where she found it. He'd know that *she* knew what had happened.

The ditch was dark and muddy, bordered by backyard fences. Heaps of trash were piled along its sloped sides. A shopping cart lay on its side like a weird dead animal.

The gate in their backyard was halfway open. A smeary handprint stood out on the whitewashed wood. Megan snickered. The finger-marks were long drags. Robbie must just be *coated* with icky slime.

She slipped through and used her foot to push the gate shut behind her.

Inside, somebody yelled. Megan hurried. A singsong chant – Robbie's in trouble! Robbie's in trouble! – rang merrily through her mind.

Crash as a piece of furniture or something went over. And then a screech, a really awful scream.

Megan stopped on the back porch. It felt like she had a big wad of dry bread stuck in her throat all of a sudden.

Bob must really be mad, and she hadn't ever, *ever* heard Robbie scream like that. How bad did a spanking get to make an almost-teenager sound that way?

The sliding glass door was open. She smelled chicken cooking and something burning. And that nasty aquarium-stink, too.

Mommy wasn't in the kitchen. A pot of noodles was boiling over. The stool Bob had been sitting on was overturned. His beer can was on the floor. A puddle of beer was on the tile. So were long sloppy marks of black gunk.

Everything was quiet.

Too quiet. Creepily quiet. Like the park had been.

Megan opened her mouth to call for her mother, but changed her mind. She hung Robbie's hat on the doorknob that led from the kitchen into the laundry room. She tucked Floppy Dog into a cupboard for safekeeping and turned off the stove under the noodles.

The aquarium-smell was everywhere, so thick she could taste it. Like rotted fish sticks and spinach.

As she went into the hall, she went tip-toeing and holding her breath.

Something was at the bottom of the stairs. Something big.

It was Bob.

Had Robbie knocked his own daddy down the stairs?

She tip-toed closer, eyes wide and agog.

Bob was sprawled on his back like he was trying to make a snow angel on the hall carpet. He was covered with green and black goo. And red stuff. Dark red, runny stuff. It came out of holes in his neck and face.

Megan knew dead from TV and from the movies. But this was *dead-dead*, for-keeps dead.

There were pennies on his eyelids. Old, nasty pennies. And shiny stuff in his slack mouth. Coins. More pennies, nickels, dimes, maybe even quarters. Stuffed in his mouth like he was a gumball machine.

A shriek built and built in Megan. She could have been a cartoon steam whistle, quivering and turning purple just before the long, loud blast.

But the shriek couldn't get past the bread-wad in her throat.

The trail of sludge and slime led upstairs. Megan followed it, trying not to step in any, walking on the sides of the stairs so they didn't squeak. More coins

were stuck to the carpet.

Her mouth made the word 'mommy,' but she couldn't make any sound. She could hardly breathe.

She heard a squishing noise, like someone walking in wet shoes. Coming closer.

Megan ducked into her bedroom and shut the door all but a teeny crack.

Robbie had gone bonkers. Like on the TV shows. He'd gone bonkers and killed Bob. Maybe Mommy, too. If he found her, he'd finish the job.

A shadow fell over her peeping eye. A shape slouched past, squish-squish-squish and a blast of dead-fish stink so strong that she gagged. It was past and gone too fast for her to tell if it was Robbie or not. Though it had to be . . . who else could it be?

She wanted to hide under her bed, or way back in the closet. Just hide, and close her eyes, and wait for everything to be okay again.

Instead, she opened her door as she heard the thing squeelching down the stairs. She ran on fleet little feet to the end of the hall, and into Mommy and Bob's room.

Mommy wasn't in the bedroom. Or the bathroom. Or under the bed, or in the closet.

But there was red on the floor. Red like what had been coming out of Bob. Lots of it, a big splotch and then a streak. As if a trash bag full of spaghetti sauce had been dragged, leaking.

She followed it to the top of the stairs and looked down. Bob was gone, leaving another big splotch where he'd been and another leaky red drag mark headed back for the kitchen.

Megan ran down the stairs, forgetting all about being quiet and sneaky now.

Back through the kitchen. Back across the yard and into the drainage ditch. Back to the park.

Her side had a deep, hurting stitch in it by the time she got there. She heard an echoing splash and made for the well.

It was full nighttime, and the streetlights didn't shine very far through the trees and bushes. There

was enough light for her to see the shape at the edge of the well, and Mommy on the grass.

Mommy had pennies on her eyelids, too. They stayed there as if glued when the dark shape picked her up and teetered her over the lip of the well-stones.

"No! Mommy!" The words exploded out of her.

The shape jumped, startled. Mommy dropped limply into the well. Splash.

It whipped around to face Megan, and what little light there was fell on it.

Megan's feet tangled together. She went down hard, a real bellyflop, scraping the heels of her hands as she flung them out to break her fall.

The thing at the well wasn't Robbie.

Its skin was green-black, glistening with ooze. It was shaped almost like a person, but with a hunched back and no neck and long squirmy claw-tipped tentacles where fingers and toes should have been.

As it moved, parts of it sparkled in the dim light. Coins. Embedded in its skin like scales. Most were pennies, turned green.

Stringy, mossy hair was plastered wetly to a head that bulged squat like the head of a frog. It had the wide split of a mouth and the bulbous yellow eyes of a frog, too, but the rest of its features were almost human.

The frog-thing-well-monster inflated skin under its chin in a huge swelling bag. Its mouth gaped wide and Megan saw its teeth. Rows and rows of sharp, sharky teeth.

It croaked a belching bullfrog's croak. An outrush of breath worse than any of the other awful smells blew back her hair.

Megan cringed and cowered on the ground. She couldn't run, knew that even if she tried she wouldn't get three steps before it was on her.

It came closer. It moved with a rocking, waddling gait that looked clumsy but was quick. She could see its yellowish underside, and mildewy wrappings that might have been clothes.

The monster uncurled one long, splay-fingered hand. It had black suckers along its fingers. They slurped and smacked with a disgusting life of their own.

It held out a nickel. Bright and silvery-new.

She stared.

“Muh . . . my nickel?” Megan whispered. “My wish!”

The suckery squid fingers wrapped around the coin again. The creature hitched itself up and squatted on the rim of the well.

“I didn’t mean it,” Megan said. “This isn’t what I wanted, I didn’t want anybody to get hurt, please!”

A smile curved the frog-thing’s toothy mouth. It rolled backward into the well the way scuba divers on TV rolled off the sides of boats. A split second later, Megan heard a thick splash.

She shot to her feet and ran to the edge. “I take it back! I didn’t mean it! I take it back!”

Below, the darkness rippled and rippled.

“I take it back!”

The ripples slowed.

“Please! I take it back!”

The water was still.

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