

Inky Went Down to the Well

K.S. PHILLIPS

None of us knew how pure Inky was until we drank her. Sadly, our awareness came three summers too late. We had long since forgotten (if we ever really knew) what it was that made her so special. For all of us she was nothing but a strange little girl, a delightful pest, an infuriating charmer. We loved her, we loved her all her short life, but we never appreciated her, until we started to drink her.

The men of the family took her loss the hardest. Dad remembered all the things he wanted to say to her: how proud of her he was, how much he loved her. James despised himself for treating her like a big brother, even though Inky loved him for it. But in time they grew to love her death almost as much as they loved her life.

This was thanks to Inky's spirit and three good seasons of rain.

Inky often went down to the well and no one ever thought twice about it but, in retrospect, the entire family remembered how excited she was that she had found a clutch of snake eggs around the rim. We all remembered, as vividly as we remembered the position of the purple sun behind the silo, the excuses we made for not going down there with her.

But before we remembered, we forgot. Inky went missing for three long years before the memories started trickling back. And then all the wondrous things started to happen.

No one in the family knows exactly what happened to Inky on that fateful August day, but I have a pretty good guess. After all, I was her big sister. I knew her the best.

It was the kind of perfect summer that Inky dreamed of in December; she was always such a warm weather girl. School was two weeks away so she could still pretend that the summer was spooling out its long days and warm nights. Everything was as she wanted it to be. Days of blue skies and butterflies, nights of bright stars and fireflies. And, most importantly, no school to get in the way.

It wasn't that Inky hated school – she was the star pupil after all – but she never liked being indoors. By the end of each school day she felt like she was bursting out of prison. There was so much to see and do around our farm that her glossy, plasticky text books held few surprises. She liked her teachers just fine and they liked her, but her classmates invariably grew to resent her. She was the smartest and most considerate student in school. She wasn't very popular.

She never let on that this bothered her but, from my adjoining room, I could often hear her crying herself to sleep. In the weeks following her disappearance I often cried myself to sleep too, more because I never once went to her those nights than because she was gone. I don't know why I was reluctant to comfort her. Maybe I thought it was Mom's role, or that Inky would think it was Mom's role and not mine. Maybe I didn't want the responsibility. Either way I know what it meant. Inky was sad she never had friends.

Of course, none of us was really friendly to her. Mom and Dad merely tolerated her flights of youthful imagination. James thought she was immature for his age and therefore teased her mercilessly.

He always held her up to the standards of behavior of a seventeen-year-old boy, not an eight-year-old girl. It wasn't fair, but I suppose that is what big brothers do. If only she had known what I know, that James treated her the way he did because he was insecure and maybe jealous, she would never have gotten upset by it. Chloe and Carey were really too young to be her friends, and I, well as I said, I never quite knew what role I was supposed to have. I was ten years older than Inky when she was alive; I wasn't quite a mother, too far from a sister. It was my fault I suppose.

As time passes, we are getting older, all of us, except for Inky. But it doesn't matter. We feel closer to her than ever before. This might seem a terrible thing to say: "We love her more because she's dead," but it's true. And it's the greatest thing that ever happened.

Inky got up early that morning, like she always did, and got herself some cereal. She sat at the kitchen table, big bowl gathered in her little hands, slurping quietly lest she startle the baby orioles nesting in the willow by the back door. That's when James came downstairs and started making fun of her for getting up so early. "Ooh, Miss Competitive, always gotta be up earliest. It's the summer, you're supposed to be sleeping until twelve like all your other classmates. It's no wonder everybody hates you." These are the kinds of things James regretted terribly when Inky disappeared.

Inky probably responded, "You're up early too. Does everybody hate you?" James would have pointed at her and said, "Don't get smart with me young lady," and then gone out into the garage and started his car. Because he had an early curfew in the evening, he spent most summer mornings at his girlfriend's apartment. I think he

was afraid of Mom and Dad. If they got up at 8 a.m. and found him already gone, he could claim he was just going into work early. K-Mart. Another reason why he was the way he was with his little sister.

I usually got up as soon as James' LTD pulled onto the street beneath my window and sped away. Mom and Dad would be next, as if they knew their son was safely off. They usually let the girls sleep for another half hour before rousting them and plunking them in front of the TV. It's funny how I never really noticed the family's wake-up sequence before I started writing this. And the more I think of it the more it never ever changed. We were a pretty consistent family. For a while there anyway.

I suppose I should mention Inky's name before I go on. Her real name was Elizabeth, but we all decided it didn't really fit her. It was too royal, too polished. Inky was somewhat of a tomboy. She was a thinker, a dreamer. She couldn't be bothered to live up to her name. She also couldn't be bothered to remove the pens from her pockets when she sat in school all day. As a result all her pants were ink-stained. The nickname just sort of set in.

After Inky disappeared Mom gathered up her pants, cut out each stained part, and then made a collage out of them. She framed it and hung it on the wall in the living room. As bizarre as it was, we all found it perfectly appropriate. It not only kept Inky's memory alive, it also kept her alive. Each blot of ink has changed a thousand times since Mom first hung it up. Some days, all the blots are dogs. Other days I see cats or wheat stalks or presidents' faces or those ice cream bars on the Candyland board. It is so like Inky, a living, breathing piece of art, a beautiful mystery.

On her last living day, Inky, our little ink-stained scholar girl, ate breakfast alone, and perfectly at peace, with the orioles. After James sped off to be with Angeline (or whoever it was that day), the rest of us got up. We gathered so loudly around the kitchen table I actually remember a flurry of orange and black as the mother and father orioles broke away from the willow green and took to the sky. Chloe and Carey flew away into the living room to watch *Blues Clues*. Inky finished washing her bowl and then sat down with us to see if anybody had anything exciting planned for the day.

This was where Dad dominated the morning. On that day he came up with cleaning the gutters, mowing the tall weeds around the corn field, mowing the lawn, weeding the gardens, and finally, and as a reward, relaxing down at the swimming hole. Unfortunately he had so many plans we never got to the good ones. Only Inky was as excited about all this as Dad. She loved working outdoors. Dad, for his part, admitted later that he was always proud of his little helper girl, but he never once told her that.

Mom never really saw a point to all the yard work, but she always did what Dad told her, no matter how fanatical he got about it. In fact, she could never contradict him in any way. She never once reprimanded him for almost losing the station to the EPA inspectors, and she never quarreled about his drinking. She'd let him spend five or six hours straight trying to fix a busted lawnmower just to prove to himself that he could control something. If he failed, he'd pout and drink in the barn until dark. In reality there was little he could control, except us and Mom, and we usually let him.

"So," he said on that day. "Let's get moving while the day's still in

it." Mom put a smile on her face and her mug in the sink, on her way to get the girls ready.

"Where'd you get that one?" Inky asked. "From a movie or something?" She was already standing up, ready to go.

"Yeah. What? I don't know. Can't stand around here all day trying to figure it out. Roust-a-muffin. Let's go, let's go, let's go!" Clapping his hands. Dad's little rah rah stuff always got Inky going. I, on the other hand, cringed each time his callused hands banged together. It was the sound of spankings, the sound of work. Fortunately that morning was the last morning for inspirational yard work speeches. Ever. That was also the last time I remember him clapping for any reason.

Inky was the first one out, I was the last; as always I tried to delay the inevitable. Outside, by the barn, Dad assigned the duties. Mom and the girls were to do the weeding in the gardens around the house. Dad would mow around the cornfield. I would mow the yard. Inky was to go around picking up the big twigs and such that might get caught up in the mowers. James, well James he would deal with later, K-Mart or no K-Mart. Someone had to do the gutters.

On a Connecticut summer morning all the possibilities of the day, all the possibilities of life, seem boundless, no matter what chores lie ahead. Perhaps I'm being a bit too sentimental given that it was just another day of yard work, but I still remember the purple martins poking their heads out of the stilted martin house in the center of the yard. I still remember the whirligigs spinning, spinning through the soft blue light of morning. I remember hawks swirling overhead, squirrels scrambling in the trees. And most of all, I remember the way

Inky reached up, grabbed a single leaf from the big willow by the kitchen door, and pulled it off, the whole tree bowing over almost to the ground. She tossed it into the air and tracked its progress in the slight wind. As it blew back toward the house she proclaimed, to no one in particular, "There's gonna be a big storm later."

And damned if she wasn't right.

We all set about our chores. Inky disappeared through the hedgerow, diligently scouring the ground for twigs and stones. I, on the other hand, barely kept my mower in lines, cutting only those patches I deemed worthy of trimming. I didn't see Daddy's little helper again until after lunch.

Inky passed through the hedges that separated the "civilized" part of the yard from the "uncivilized" part (as Dad called it). From there, the property swooped down like a kestrel into a small, dry valley. It was a tangled mess of stalks and grass and wildflowers. Inky shoved her way through, chucking twigs and stones into the wild weeds.

The forest began just beyond our property line. None of us knew exactly who owned it, but it never stopped us from going down there. In fact, our well was dug right at forest's edge, so it could catch some of the run off from the tree-covered hills. Inky sat on the bricks, looked down the well, chucked a pebble or two in. The hollow, wet echo probably met her as she walked around the outside of the well, looking for worms or burrow holes, or anything that would have made the well seem even more magical.

That's when she discovered the clutch of snake eggs. Small, leathery, off-white things all gathered up and covered by a faint veil of dry scrub. Inky may have known what kind of snake they were

from, but she never told us. My guess was Eastern King snake, although I have nothing to base that on except a documentary I once saw. Or was it a book I read in school? It doesn't matter; it was a pretty cool find.

After lunch, Mom, Dad and I were sweaty and exhausted. Chloe and Carey had long given up their weeding chores and were off harassing the miniature wildlife around the yard: butterflies, squirrels, and spiders. Inky ran up, full of energy, and announced that she had found a clutch of snake eggs around the well.

Mom said, "That's wonderful honey. You're always such a little scientist!"

Inky frowned and turned to Dad and me.

Dad nodded, wiped his brow, and went to fix his mower. I tried to sound interested, but Inky sighed, shrugged her shoulders and disappeared through the hedges again.

It was the last time any of us saw her. And none of us remembered where she said she was going. I only remembered the way her hair swished against her back like a horse's tail as she bounded away, straight through the bushes.

Of course we all scoured the property like mad just before nightfall, screaming her name frantically, but then the storm came and we had to seek refuge indoors. James was back by now, but he had no better idea than the rest of us where she could have gone.

It was a long and terrible night. The storm menaced before it hit, the sky roiling black, electric currents flickering from the distant airfield to our house and beyond. In this charged atmosphere we all searched for Inky, with an increasing desperation and tension. The

girls stayed around the house calling out for their sister, their high, sweet voices running ever thinner into the growing wind. James' face stayed hard through the whole search, but his eyes were wet long before the first rains came. I tried to think of all of Inky's favorite hiding places, but I didn't even know if she had any.

By ten o'clock we all realized we weren't going to find her. Not tonight, not before the storm. And then it hit. It wasn't a particularly furious storm for a Connecticut summer, but it was bad enough under the circumstances to give us all a reason to call off the search. Mom was the last one to give up. Standing in the foyer dripping wet, her wide, panicked eyes burning with tears and lightning, she looked like a crazed piece of the storm blown into the house itself.

Dad immediately called the police down in Woodbury. James got some blankets out for the girls, and Mom and I sat on the couch looking out the window. Each shot of lighting, each boom of thunder was like the answer to some unspoken question. The rain brushed across the window making not one second of our view of the yard clear.

For an excruciating hour, the worst part of the storm, we waited for the police. Carey and Chloe had finally drifted off when the first sparkle of red and blue played over the window. I know we all imagined the crinkle of the police cruiser's tires on the drive and the barking of the dogs in the barn, even though all we could hear was the wind and rain.

Mom and Dad rushed out the door, all hunched over and tense, as if the cold, wet hands of night were gripping their shoulders. James and I shuddered where we were. A tall man in a shiny dark coat hurried from the car to the porch. With the door open, the stack

of newspapers near the fireplace blew one by one into the kitchen. Little paper ghosts. Living thrown away things. The assorted key rings and curios hanging on the wall by the door jingled and jangled. The girls were still asleep.

Lieutenant Parner appeared in the doorway. He was much taller than I imagined, having only ever seen him sitting in his cruiser with his radar gun pointed at out-of-state cars. He towered over Dad. But we all knew he was a good man, and we were relieved. Mom and Dad ushered him into the living room. The girls woke up, blinked their eyes, huddled together under their blanket.

Even before Lieutenant Parner started to speak Mom became hysterical. She was crying and howling worse than the wind. Things like, "My baby! My God, my baby's out there!," between her tears, her sobs. I still cringe when I remember the fear in her voice. Dad did everything short of telling her to shut up. He put his arm around her, told her to go comfort the girls, make some tea. She finally sobbed off into the kitchen and got the kettle going.

"I know this is a trying time for you all, but let's keep it together," the lieutenant first said. "Inky is a resourceful girl. I'm sure she's just got herself off to somewhere." Just then the thunder boomed, making his words seem weak and whispery. "When did you last see her?" He looked at all of us, one by one, but nobody was sure. Dad thought around five. I thought it was later, darker. Mom couldn't think of anything at the moment. And the girls just said it was late and left it at that.

"OK," Mr. Parner said without the slightest trace of impatience. "So, let's just say, sometime before dark, probably soon before." We all

nodded. I saw new tears glistening in Mom's eyes, the storm building up again. I choked back a few myself. I wanted to be strong for the girls. "Now, you all searched most of your property?"

Dad rubbed his eyes, cleared his throat and said, "All. All. We went over the whole thing." He sighed and slumped into a kitchen chair. I had never seen him so resigned, never seen his hair such a mess, his eyes so hollow. Except maybe when the IRS came for the last time. But this was ten times worse.

Lieutenant Parner went through his list of questions. Does she have any friends? Neighbors to go to? Did she mention where she was going? Does she have any hiding spots? Is there anyplace to go to wait out a storm? He got no answers from us.

Mom offered him tea, he declined. He asked a few more questions then put his coat back on and disappeared outside. The storm was still raging. An hour later he returned, his rain slicker clinging to his chest like a lost little girl, his hair pulled wild as if by the same child's desperate fingers. But he was a calming presence. He told us Inky was probably waiting it out. He didn't see any sign of her, but that was a good thing. It would be dawn in a few hours and we could all resume the search then. If she wasn't back in the morning he'd file the missing persons and get the whole department on it. But, as it was, he didn't think that would be necessary. At all.

That "At all" got us through the next few hours pretty well, except for one minor episode when Mom was getting the girls to brush their teeth for bed. Often in a storm, the first time we run the sink it gurgles out muddy for a few seconds. This time it was kind of red and gloopy, before it turned pure. Mom got frustrated, threw

Carey's brush into the sink and stomped out of the bathroom. I got the girls all brushed up and put in bed. James and Dad calmed her down. We reminded her of the "At all," and then we waited for dawn.

Dawn came, and then noon, and then night, and still no sign of Inky. The lieutenant was back with a squadron of officers. They combed the yard, searched the property. They went from house to house asking our neighbors if they'd seen her. No one had. Just before dark the forensics people were out looking for footprints, fingerprints, broken twigs, flattened grasses. The storm had erased everything.

The morning after that Mom went up to Inky's room, took a pair of panties from her drawer and gave them to the bloodhound search unit. The man took them for several hours and then returned them, smelling like dog, and with his apologies that they hadn't turned up anything.

Lieutenant Parner was around almost as much as we were. He never slept and he never complained, he just went about his job with an unflinching hope. We were all thankful for his diligence even if he never turned up anything.

A few more days passed. Only the girls seemed to be getting on fine. They still watched their cartoons and played with their toys, little hands and hearts busy with future adventures. The rest of us sat around a lot, drinking tea from trembling mugs and trying not to dwell on the past.

James and Dad fared worse than Mom, which was a surprise to me. Their faces grew hairier and more gaunt, as if they had spent so much time imagining Inky covered over with dirt and wasting away somewhere that their own skin was starting to look just as hideous.

Their tempers were short. Their self-loathing long. The rest of us tried to avoid them as much as possible, even as we understood their pain.

In less than a week all of Woodbury, Southbury, and Danbury knew about Inky's disappearance. Everyone got involved, putting up posters, handing out fliers, searching woods, setting up command posts. The media got involved too and turned it into a minor frenzy. Mom and I were glad for the help *and* the distractions. We could spend mornings passing out leaflets in Southbury, afternoons manning the phones at the command post. We could avoid James and Dad. We could do something.

But just as suddenly as the frenzy began, it all ended. Two or three weeks with no news and the towns' interests waned. Lieutenant Parner was still with us, and he vowed not to rest until he found something. He was a godsend.

In the lull, just after the dismantling of the last command post, we had to deal with the reality that she was probably gone. This was the hardest time of all. At the beginning there was hope, when everyone got involved there was even more hope, but now that it was quiet, we could hear what our hearts were telling us. Wherever Inky was, she was probably dead.

We still went through the motions. We ate dinner as a family, we watched TV as a family. We all even attended the poorly-timed wedding of a distant cousin. Mom bought a glass cookie jar for the newlyweds, filled with snickerdoodles she had baked. The wedding was a disaster – for us, not for the new couple. Everyone looked at us with an almost oily pity. It stuck to us, clung to us all the way home from New Jersey.

Life went on. The EPA finally closed the station, because the old pumps weren't up to code, the IRS forced Mom and Dad to take out a second mortgage on the house, and James graduated high school at the very bottom of his class. None of these things had anything to do with Inky's disappearance, but we all felt like they did.

Less than a year later Dad left. He never said where he was going or why, and we didn't question it too much. We all just assumed it had to do as much with the loss of his business as with the loss of his daughter. It was better for all of us. Even Mom.

Barely one year and a half after she lost her daughter, Mom discovered herself. She had spent all the years of my childhood running around after Dad and the rest of us. She had long since let herself go. She was always fat, as long as I knew her. She never wore makeup. She never dressed up. She never understood that she was beautiful. She also never understood that she was interesting and intelligent. She thought what Dad thought, she ate what he wanted to eat. I remember Mom once told me she had no interest in travel or museums except for the sake of her kids. It was like she was a dead sponge, soaking up everything around her without really living inside.

Just before Dad left she started to assert herself. She started to express her own thoughts. She started to make healthier, exotic meals, like poached salmon and Mie Goreng. She brought art books home from the library and devoured them in a single evening. Basically she started living for herself. How often we'd see her breeze through the kitchen, chug a big glass of ice water and then head out for hours. We never knew where she was going, but she'd come back looking somehow fuller, more radiant. She lost weight, she did every-

thing faster and with more passion.

Naturally Dad thought she was seeing someone. He grew angrier and more suspicious of his “new” wife. He accused her of all sorts of things, not least of which was that she didn’t care about her dead daughter. Mom dropped her glass in the sink that night (I can still hear it breaking, piece by piece by piece) and said, “Don’t you ever say that to me again. Ever.” She didn’t yell, she just threatened. It was a threat that worked. Dad never said it again.

For a few weeks after Dad left, Mom blamed herself for making him leave. Then, as quickly as he left, she got over it. It was like a big sigh of relief to her. The rest of us were devastated for about as long. James, fresh from his high school tragedies, and facing a lifetime of failures and regrets just like our Dad, seemed almost too giddy when he left. Chloe and Carey were crushed perhaps longer than the rest of us, not fully realizing the potentials we all might reach without him around (they were still of an age when the air between their bouncing bottoms and their Daddy’s knee was more important than how hard his knee was).

I can’t say I was glad to see him go, but I recognized the move for what it was. A change. And that’s all any of us really needed.

Mom got thinner and smarter and more beautiful without Dad around. It was as if she was preparing herself for a little romance, even though she was still married and even though her daughter’s body had never been found. James and I tried not to judge her – she had been repressed far too long – but we did think she looked a little foolish. She practically slept in full makeup just in case an emergency brought an emergency man to her door.

Lieutenant Parner still came around, but as time passed, he talked less about the “case” and more about other things. He asked about James’ new job prospects, the girls’ school, my search for a college. Since Mom had become all beautiful we tried to steer her toward Mr. Parner, but she was never interested. Maybe she still valued her marriage bond. Maybe she was hesitant around the kids. Maybe she was all flirt and no fling.

Two years after Inky went missing, six months after Dad left, I was accepted into U. Conn. James couldn’t believe it – my grades were never that good either – but he was remarkably supportive. He even threw me a party. I felt a little sad about the prospect of leaving, but Mom still had the girls and James wasn’t going anywhere.

Between the time I received my university admissions packet and the fall of my departure, Chloe and Carey developed independent personalities. Before, they had been so young and so attached we could hardly tell them apart. Now Chloe was starting to take an interest in the natural world like her big sister Inky. She gave up her passion for bashing fire flies with badminton rackets, for incinerating ants with magnifying glasses, and for devising squirrel traps. Now, she was positively PETA in her defense of all living things. Carey wasn’t nearly as radical (strange that I could even conceive of the girls in such terms!), but she was fast becoming the family’s Galileo. Her head perpetually craned at the sky, she taught us all about our little portion of the cosmos. The three stars sticking out of the top of the silo like an aerial? Orion’s Belt. The spilled milk stars above the roof of the barn? The Pleiades.

Two truly bizarre things happened in the middle of the third year

of Inky's disappearance. First of all, Lieutenant Parner gave up his post. He had spent at least one night a week up at the house for the past two or three years. He'd sit at the kitchen table with all of us gathered around, sipping ice water (that's all he ever accepted of Mom's offerings) and talking about anything but Inky. Usually he talked about his steady march toward retirement. He'd been with the Woodbury police for almost twenty years, and that was after ten down in New York. He was looking forward to retiring in a few years. Meanwhile, he'd try to just do his job with as little fanfare as possible. He'd tell us about his most bizarre or most dangerous cases, and we'd all listen like we didn't have COPS or whatever to put on the tube almost any night of the week.

But one night in mid spring he had a belt of water and then announced that he was moving out to the Cape to try his hand at painting. A tornado could have taken our farmhouse down all around us and we wouldn't have noticed. Painting? Big, strong, action lieutenant man, giving it all up for painting? He claimed that he had always harbored the dream of living a simple painter's life by the sea, but he had never thought it feasible. For some reason he had been assessing his life a lot lately – a fact which had nothing to do with losing a partner or being shot at by some Danbury thug, contrary to Chloe's repeated questions – and decided it was time to make a change. Basically he had come to say goodbye. He assured us he hadn't forgot about Inky, and then took his leave. We never saw him again.

And then, only two days later, Dad returned. Or, shall I say, a man with only a passing resemblance to the man we used to know as Dad returned. Like Mom, he too was thinner. His hair was trimmed,

his clothes were neat. He was smiling. Even before Inky's disappearance he rarely ever smiled. But here he was beaming and shining like he had just discovered a treasure chest of diamonds and gold.

Mom was distant at first, but I will give her credit for not making a scene. She let him tell his side of the story, before turning him out to a motel in town. Frustrated with his life, devastated by Inky's death, he felt he had to leave. I respected him for not saying he did it for all of us. His motives were selfish, and he didn't apologize for them. He was living in a friend's flat in Wilton wondering what to make of his life when it suddenly hit him. He had always wanted to go to Greece, so he got his passport in order, bought a one-way ticket and took off.

Our Dad, the failed businessman, the EPA's most-wanted gas station owner, had been living on the island of Crete for almost a year. He had been working as an octopus fisherman at the port of Heraklion. Even Mom laughed out loud when he told us this. But he was dead serious. He was getting paid almost nothing to dive off the pier (with his friend Angelos), wrest octopi from their hiding holes, and then smash them on the dock. "It was only a few drach a head, but it was an honest living." It was the first time in any of our lives that we remembered him being genuinely happy he was earning so little.

He spent a week in the house, enough time for spring to finally relent to summer's advance, and then he was gone. I remember those nights as vividly as I remember any of the most important nights of my life. The late night conferences around the kitchen table. The raised voices, the hushed voices. Dad sleeping on the living room floor. Bouncing the too-big girls on his knees like old times.

Dad sleeping in Mom's room at night. His old smell of sweat and grease – courtesy of daily sessions over James' car. His new smell of rotten octopus – courtesy of the dirty laundry in his travel duffel. Lastly, I remember the tears in Mom's eyes when she awoke to a note, a rose lying in a bed of goldenrod, and Dad long gone.

We never saw him again either, and we don't know why he came back in the first place. Every once in a while we got (and we still get) postcards from places like Egypt, Indonesia, and Argentina. On one, a picture of a temple in Lombok, Indonesia, he had drawn an arrow pointing at a well in the corner of the courtyard, with the words "That reminds me" written above it. No "Wish you were here." No "I miss you guys." Just "That reminds me."

As sad as I am that I don't really have him in my life anymore, I am very proud. Somehow he had taken all the mess with Inky and turned it into a change of life. A man who had never been beyond Connecticut before, a man so harried by the American small business bureaucracy, a man who had lost the only daughter he truly loved, was out there in the world living a dream.

And it was a dream we all shared. Mom's newfound beauty and smarts. James' new position as K-Mart manager, his new perspective on his limited college prospects. My impending first semester in college. Chloe and Carey's scientific awakening. And Mr. Parner's life by the sea. Somehow Inky had changed it all.

And it didn't stop there. Strange things started to happen around the house. One late June day, the girls returned from playing outside bursting with news. They had discovered something growing out of the well. "Hairy weeds," as Carey called them. They claimed the

weeds were growing all over the place, into the forest, throughout the meadow. If Dad had been around, he would have promised to get rid of them, but as it was, Mom humored the girls and promised to go take a look. I was too busy getting stuff together for college to go traipsing off to look at our stupid well. James, well James was hardly ever home.

Every day for about three weeks, Chloe and Carey came home talking about the silky, golden weeds growing out of the well. No one really listened until the strange, gnarled shoots started growing out of the kitchen faucet. Mom discovered them one day when she was peeling potatoes. She tried to dig them out with a butter knife, but they wouldn't budge. She filled a turkey baster with Drano and shot it up the faucet, but this didn't do anything either. She removed the faucet itself, but when she pulled it free she noticed the weeds or whatever ran all the way through the plumbing and out of the house.

In the morning the shoots were even longer. Two days after that there was a bramble in our kitchen sink. Mom attacked it with some pruning sheers, clipping it back to the faucet. She counted ten different shoots in all. Every morning they were back, longer than ever, sticking out of the sink. All the while, the girls prattled on about the "hairy weeds" they had found. They took horse brushes and clippers from the barn every morning and went down to the well. They invited me down there many times, but I didn't think I should be playing such childish games. I was a college girl now. I could find my own things to do.

That summer it rained almost constantly. The sky was always heavy and gray, the clouds hanging low over the farm like cow udders.

The girls continued to groom the hairy weeds even in the strongest downpour. Mom was too busy with her own life to care that her little daughters were out in the rain all day. She simply smiled whenever they talked about it and went back to her exercising or cooking or cleaning.

I spent most of my days reading or talking to James, who, I was surprised to discover, was turning into an interesting young man. He had all sorts of plans for the future – and not one of them involved his stable of town girls. In fact, he had pretty much given up on the women around Woodbury. He liked to say that he had just been through them all already, but I know he was really starting to believe he could do better than that. He continued to work (as a manager now) at K-Mart, but on his lunch breaks he read books or took walks, instead of hanging out eating Cheddar Fries and bullshitting with his co-workers. He never said he was planning to go to college someday, but I knew he was. I wasn't sure how he'd manage it with a 64 percent average in high school, but he kept on reading and writing and making a believer out of me.

I came into the kitchen one day and found Mom not only clipping back the faucet shoots but also going at them with one of her emery boards. She caught the stunned look in my eyes and quickly said, "Just because something is around all the time doesn't mean you can't make it pretty." She could as easily been talking about herself. I nodded, asked for a glass of water, and sat at the table savoring the sweet, pure taste of it while my beautiful mother stroked and tended to her sink full of weeds.

Chloe and Carey were always drenched and muddy. They'd be so

excited talking about what they had done or seen during the day that their words sounded all squishy in their mouths. Once I asked Carey how she could stand sitting out there in the rain, cutting weeds all day, and she said, "I usually brush them first. And anyway it never rains around us at the well." Thinking, "Yeah, right," I went to the kitchen window and looked outside to where Carey was pointing, so intent on proving the ridiculous point. Sure enough, the sky was gray to darkening from the airfield to our yard, all except for a perfectly carved disk of blue sky right above the well. I remarked, "That's odd," and then went and did something else. Later I told mom what I had seen and she said, "Yeah, it's amazing isn't it? It's been doing that all summer."

It was then that I decided to take the girls up on their offer to accompany them to the well. Drenched by the time we got there, we stepped into the most incredible patch of warm, golden sunlight. Sure enough the well was overflowing with what could only be described as soft, hairy weeds. The ringlets twisted and curled like yellow snakes all throughout the forest and meadow, a beautiful, serpentine circle. While it poured all the way from the house to the well, the well and its cascade of hairy weeds were perfectly dry.

Chloe and Carey parted some of the hair and then sat down amongst the thick strands, brushing away. They chattered the way little girls do, their little sun dresses drying rapidly beneath the hot sun. I confess, until then, I had never visualized what pure joy might look like.

I stepped carefully through the thick weeds, shaking out my wet hair and clothes. Little droplets of water fell upon the golden ringlets, turning rainbow colors in the sun. A family of rabbits poked their

heads up through the weeds, more curious than frightened by our intrusion, and then dove beneath the surface again. Quails and wild turkeys trampled across the waves of hair like speckled sailboats, puffed up and proud in the warm breezes, while catbirds and crows tried to out-caw each other, swooping and darting from tree to tree. A million squirrels darted in and out of the curls making the locks ruffle and squirm. And then there were the insects, drifting about in the amber air like a waterfall mist.

I sat down by the well, scooped up a handful of the curious weeds and tried to find out where they were coming from. They weren't rooted to the ground, that much I could tell. I pulled some of them away from the well's opening, but it was too choked with them to see all the way down. The rain continued to pour into the forest and all around us. We were dry while the whole world spattered.

I remained with the girls for an hour or so, calmly stroking the weedy locks in my lap. They were so soft and clean, catching up the sunlight and sparkling. I imagined my mother must have felt the same softness in her lap each and every time she held her babies close. Chloe and Carey had brushed themselves all the way to the edge of the sun patch. They sat next to the wall of rain, talking and smiling. They were in their element, I reflected, just like Inky would have been.

With great reluctance I went back to the house. Sopping wet and standing inside the kitchen door, I watched Mom as she clipped the sink twigs. "I called John today," she announced without looking at me. John was our plumber. "He's gonna come take a look for us."

"Have you actually been down to the well lately?" I asked, not really caring about John the plumber right now.

"Yes I have," she said, turning to me and smiling. "It's gorgeous, isn't it?"

I nodded, expecting her to say something more. She didn't. She just went back to her pruning. John the plumber arrived an hour later. He pulled the faucet away and rifled through the weeds, a curious expression on his big, bearded face. He ducked under the sink and unscrewed the elbow joint. He aimed his flashlight into the open pipe. As he worked, he crawled further and further inside, pulled along by the mystery. After a few minutes he came back out blinking as if he hadn't seen the light of day for a week. "These weeds continue on out the house. I think they're coming from the well. Like nothing I've ever seen," he concluded, shaking his head.

I told him about the other weeds in the well and how it was impossible to see anything down there. He said, "Well then I might have to sink a few holes around there just to check things out." Mom begged him not to break any of the shoots in the process. He swore he wouldn't. On his way out the door he turned and asked, "Have you guys been using this sink still?" We nodded. "How's the water?" Mom answered that it was better than ever. He quickly reassembled the pipes, poured himself some, and nodded as he drank it. "Yup, seems all right to me." He went to work outside.

It had just turned dark when John called it a night. He left several massive holes by the side of the well, like the work of a giant gopher. I noticed how he had carefully parted the weeds so he could work his hole digger without injuring them. Now, with the moon shining down through the clouds I, flashlight in hand, burrowed inside one of his holes, seeking answers in the dirt. The dirt was dry,

but it was cold and it feathered down around my head as I crawled. Coughing and breathing hard I scabbled toward the bottom. About halfway down I ran into Mom's kitchen shoots, ten of them, running like tendons through a gap in the piping. I touched them and they felt hard, like I imagined cockroach shells would feel.

I dug at the dirt wall where the pipe disappeared, working at it with my nails until I hit the stones of the well. I pulled enough dirt away so I could see how the pipe connected up, and then I started digging at the well wall. All I needed was one loose stone and I'd be able to manage it.

It took a good hour before I found what I was looking for: a gap in the stones, some of the golden hair growing through the cracks. I pulled some of the strands up to my face and inhaled. They were fresh and soapy. I pushed hard at the stone for a while, my back aching, and then it finally fell into the well, making a clunky splash as it did.

I turned my flashlight into the hole and looked inside. Something reflected back at me, blinding me for a moment. When my eyes cleared I saw the face of my dead sister. I lurched backwards and slid down to the bottom of John's hole. Panting and covered with dirt I crouched down, trying desperately to disbelieve what I had just seen.

My heart pounding over the night's cicadas, I crept back up to the edge of the well and flashed my light inside. Sure enough, it was Inky, looking as fresh and alive as the last day I saw her. Her image, her life, came rushing back to me, the sight of her smiling lips and golden hair just inches from me now, filling in my memories. She seemed somehow more vivid now than I ever remembered her.

I must have sat there for an hour, looking at my dead sister's

immaculate face, smelling her hair. Gradually working up the nerve, I reached through the gap in the bricks, fished through Inky's pretty curls, and touched her face. Half expecting the mirage to vanish in an instant, I was stunned to feel her petal-soft flesh, just there, beneath my dirty fingertips.

I stroked her face for a while, soothed by my unexpected recovery of the dead, and then pulled some more of the bricks away. One of Inky's hands flopped out of the hole as I began taking down the wall. The nails had grown like vines, from her fingertips all the way through the well's piping, presumably back into the kitchen sink. I held her hand, leaned over and kissed it.

Inky was pure, inviolate. Her skin was perfect, her hair clean and golden, and growing. Her three-year-old fingernails were milky white and smooth. There was a smile on her face. I reached up to her lips, parted them ever so gently, and then rubbed my finger across her wet teeth. Gums red, tongue pink.

I had never touched my sister so intimately before, and it felt strange. But it also felt right. I was reconnecting with her, retouching the girl I never really knew. After a while I left her, crawling slowly back upwards, the feel of her soft skin on my dirty hands, the taste of her on my lips, the smell of her hair in mine.

Nervously I approached Mom's room. The TV was on, but it was muted, the shifting blue lights of some late night show giving life to her sleeping face. She was snoring, unabashedly it seemed now that Dad was gone. I nudged her a couple times, whispered for her to wake up. She opened her eyes, squinted up at me, her crinkly expression at once impatient and sleepy. Then, something changed in her face.

It was as if she knew, at some deep within, cellular level, that my presence was not pesky or inconsiderate. She sat up straightway.

Without delay I said, "Mom, I found Inky," and to my surprise, she got up, got her coat and followed me from the room without a word, as if she had been waiting for me to tell her this news for the past three years.

She climbed back out of the hole, after spending two hours with her daughter, and said, "It was good to see her again." She had been crying, but she seemed strong and composed, as if she had neither been surprised, saddened, or anything else too much. "Let's go get the girls," she said softly, and then went back to the house.

We spent the night, one after the other, down in the hole with Inky. When the dawn came, it was my time. I was there when the sun's rays fingered through Inky's hair as lovingly as Chloe and Carey always did, slowly reaching around her face, burnishing it, lighting it up, casting its glowing radiance at me. I felt underwater, I felt in a dream. It was like being in the silo at dawn when we had a full store of grain, a soft amber peace flooding everything.

I have often wondered how it happened, the terror Inky must have felt, as the blue sky shrunk into a small, round disk over her head. The black enveloping her like a tube. The cold, wet air rushing past her body. Her nails, her feet frantically trying to slow her descent. All things spinning like a whirligig: breakfast, school, friends, all of us crashing down on the inner rim of the well, way down at the bottom. Maybe she died on the way down, her panicked ghost popping out of her chest and fleeing to the trees. Maybe she died when she hit the bottom. One loud pop and crack, like thunder and lightning, like

the storm she saw coming. Or maybe she didn't die right away, the water's chill slowly growing over her like a living moss, her broken body incapable of shivering, her blood turning to ice as the cold stones choked off her veins. Maybe she was happy in her final moments, maybe she was just scared. However she felt, I know now how it happened, for when I found her I discovered a snake egg still clutched in her hand, unbroken and warm, the little snake still alive inside.

None of us will ever know why Inky's body never deteriorated; we will never know if she was marked for something, or if there was something special in the well water before she fell. We know only this: we can never tell anyone we've found her. Never. It wouldn't be fair to her. It wouldn't be fair to us or Dad or Lieutenant Parner, or anyone else whose life she touched. I wouldn't be writing this if it weren't for her. I wouldn't be anything if it weren't for her. She gave me the strength to find myself.

I often think of the tears she used to cry in her room at night and how I was never there for her. Now, whenever I drink her, I go down to the well and stroke her hair or just sit near her and tell her about my classes or how beautiful the sky was last night. I am a better sister to her now than I ever was as a big brother. I write this for her as someone I never was, but could so easily have been. Not that if she knew it was only James she'd be disappointed – in fact, I'd hope she'd be proud, never having picked up a pen and all – but at least now I can be what she always wanted me to be, for however many sips it takes. □