

The Ice House

by Mary E. Martin

That's an old photograph of me taken the summer I turned nine. Squinting at the camera, I look as if I'm ready to run. Behind me, you can see a boy, several years older with dark curly hair and a pinched expression. That's my brother, Paul. You can tell from the tilt of the camera, that my older brother Pete took the picture.

We stayed in a small cottage high up on the rocks. To get to the water, we had to climb down a long rickety, staircase that arched its way among the bleached white rocks to the narrow beach below. One afternoon, coming out of the water, I felt something soft and thick on the back of my leg. I tried to brush it off.

Paul started laughing. "It's a worm, Francie!"

Pete tried to knock it off with a stick, but it wouldn't come.

I ran up the staircase as fast I could. In the cottage, I tried to stop my short, panicky sobs. Horror slowly spread across Mom's face as she tried to peel the black blob from my leg. Aunt Margaret got the salt and Dad poured it on the worm. Slowly, the creature curled smaller and dropped off. For days, I couldn't help fingering the long dent under the bandage made by the blood sucker. It seemed like a big chunk of me was missing. I wasn't allowed to go swimming for a while, but I didn't really want to.

The best part about the cottage was the ice house. Beyond the road running behind the cottage was a low building set in among the pine trees, which seemed to rise up forever. A man from the lodge would come every few days in his truck to unload the large blocks of ice for the cottagers. Made of old pine boards hammered together, the ice house kept listing dangerously to one side. The damp smell of sawdust drew you in. Waves of cold from the big blocks of ice strewn across the floor froze you solid. With the door pulled shut, the darkness inside was broken by bright knotholes of sunshine streaming in. Paul and I spent many afternoons defending the ice house with our stick rifles thrust through the knot holes. Holding our breath, we waited for the enemy attacks.

I was always liked playing with Paul, but it didn't happen often. He thought I was too little. But he had the best games, even though some of them were really strange. Because Mom was expecting the new baby late that summer, she was pretty tired and we weren't supposed to bother her. So, I hung around Paul a lot.

One afternoon, I asked Paul, "What do you think it'll be like with the new baby?"

Paul threw down his stick rifle and stared at me. "Who cares?" His face scrunched up. "Smarten up, Francie! You think it'll be like playing with your dumb dolls." With his face all pinched and angry, he started across the floor at me. "Well, it won't. Everything will be different."

He pushed me hard and I fell back against the huge iron tongs hanging on a nail by the door. He backed away. I could tell from his smile, he was thinking something up.

"You know, they torture people in here with those tongs," he said slowly. His glance forbade challenge.

"They take ice to the cottages with them." I insisted. Then, trying to sound grown up, I said, "Everyone knows that."

"Boy, are you dumb!" Paul shook his head slowly and peered out the knothole. "Everyone knows that!" he mimicked.

Then he whispered so low I could hardly hear him. "They do it out here only at night, when babies like you are asleep."

Paul pretended to concentrate on the enemy. Even though I couldn't see his face, I decided to call his bluff, which wasn't easy for me. "How do you know? Mom and Dad don't let you out here at night."

Slowly, my brother turned away from the wall. The stream of sunlight illuminated his piteous expression. He sighed deeply. "Don't you know anything? You can sneak out once dad starts snoring."

Slowly, he reached up and lifted the tongs from the nail. They were so heavy, he almost stumbled. "Listen, if you stop acting like a stupid little kid, you can come tonight at midnight." Just like Paul to throw down the challenge.

"They heat the tongs up over a fire, before they use them." he added.

"Fire?" I thought I had him now. "There aren't any fires around here at night," I said.

With a grin, Paul turned on me in the doorway. "See what I mean? That's exactly what a baby would say." Then he was off, running ahead of me toward the cottage.

That night I lay in bed waiting for midnight and thinking about what Paul had said about the baby. I was still trying to figure out how babies were made. Mom wasn't much help. Something about bees and flowers. When Aunt Margaret tried to tell me, I got even more confused.

I liked Aunt Margaret a lot. If I had any idea of myself as a grown up woman, Aunt Margaret was everything I wanted to be. She had long, dark hair which was so shiny, I always wanted to touch it. When she laughed, it was a deep, husky laugh which hinted at something I didn't understand, but wanted to imitate. Sometimes I listened to her and Mom talking. Aunt Margaret was a nurse and I heard her talking about girls getting rid of their babies, at the hospital. I didn't believe it. Babies got sick and mothers got them better. They didn't have their babies killed.

Finally, it was midnight. With the flashlight, I picked out the path through the bushes. When I crept into the ice house, it was really cold and still.

Paul's voice was harsh and tense. "Turn that thing off!" he hissed. I did. We were in darkness until my eyes adjusted. I could barely see him behind a huge box-like shape.

"Now," he whispered, "I'm going to show you how they heat up the tongs. They'll be here pretty soon."

"Who's coming?" I asked, not moving from the doorway.

"Them. All the members of the Secret Society!"

I heard a metallic click and then smelled the sick smell of lighter fluid. Paul had taken Dad's lighter. When the candle flickered, I could see. Paul's grinning face, like a skull. What had looked like a box, really was one, except it was cut out in a funny shape and looked like an altar. The tongs were laid across the top of the box. Carefully, he set the candle underneath the one end of the tongs.

Sitting back, with great satisfaction, he said, "Now we wait."

"Wait for what?" I asked.

Paul looked at me in disgust. "I shouldn't have let you come. You're just too little for this! I said they'd be here and I have to be ready with the tongs."

Paul scuffed his foot and knocked the box over. The candle tipped sideways. The box began to dance in flames. I thought it was part of the plan, but his gasp told me it wasn't. For an instant, we watched the growing flames in fascination.

Paul knocked the tongs to the ground. Spreading his arms, he grasped both ends of the burning cardboard. He ran fast with the flaming box held high. The fire seemed to die out as he neared the cottage, but then it burst out again. His screams pierced the silent woods.

He's crazy, I thought. He'll wake everyone. Then I saw his shirt was on fire.

Dad was chasing him down the lawn. Paul flung himself toward the water's edge. Dad caught him and threw him to the ground. The shrieks became a low keening sound.

Aunt Margaret backed the car onto the lawn. Mom stumbled trying to get Paul up. Climbing in the car beside him, she slammed the door shut. Her face was pale and white in the window. Paul's shrieks rose above the engine's roar as the car bounced down the lane for town.

Unable to move, I stood alone on the lawn. Aunt Margaret and Pete brought me into the cottage. I kept saying, "The candle fell over. The box caught on fire. Paul was trying to get it to the water."

"But why?" asked Aunt Margaret. "What was he trying to do?"

I searched her face for an answer. "I don't know!" I said at last. "Something to do with a secret society and torturing people. One of his stupid games."

I couldn't lie down on my own bed. Finally, curling up on the verandah cot. I fell asleep staring at the moon. When I awoke the next morning, I was lying in the exact same position.

The sky was tinted pink with red streaks in it. Slowly, I turned on my back. I heard my Aunt talking on the phone. Finally, she hung up and came out to the verandah and sat on the end of the cot.

"Dad called from the hospital, Francie." I nodded and waited. "Paul will be all right. The burns aren't too bad."

I rubbed my eyes and watched her. I knew there was more.

"Francie?" She edged toward me awkwardly. "Your mom lost the baby last night."

I lay very still. When I finally spoke, I didn't recognize my own voice. "You mean the baby died?"

"Yes." said Margaret quietly.

I wrenched myself away from her hand and buried my face in the pillow. It was Paul's fault. His stupid games! The lump in my throat was so hard, I thought my head would burst. I didn't ask Margaret what was wrong with the baby, or why it died. I just asked, "It was a girl, wasn't it?" Aunt Margaret looked at me strangely and nodded.

After awhile, I got off the cot and went to my room. Standing on a chair, I could just reach the top shelf of the closet. I found the only dress I'd brought to the cottage. Mom usually helped me with the zipper, so it took a long time to dress without her. I went out to the kitchen. Pete and Aunt Margaret were sitting at the table. They weren't talking.

Standing in the doorway, I asked, "Will this be okay for the funeral?"

"Funeral?" asked Margaret carefully.

"Yes, for the baby."

Margaret was leading me to the couch and trying not to cry. "Francie, they don't have funerals when this happens."

"Why not?"

Margaret looked at me helplessly. "They just don't. I don't know why." Tears were running down her cheeks as she tried to hold me close.

I pushed her away hard, then ran from the cottage, as fast as I could, across the road to the ice house. I sat inside for a long time with my back against the biggest block of ice I could find. The cold made me ache all over. It was all because of the fire, I thought. I hated Paul and his stupid games. Then I got an idea.

Aunt Margaret and Pete were out looking for me, so it was easy to sneak back into the cottage. At the back of Mom's closet, I found a shoe box. In my room, Annabel, my doll was propped up against the pillow. There

were lots of doll clothes in my suitcase and I went through them carefully, until I found just the right one. I took a long time dressing Annabel in her white dress. I sang to her while I combed her hair and washed her face. Then I placed her in the shoe box. She didn't look right just lying there, so I tucked the best hand towel I could find around her.

Back at the ice house, I got a shovel. I had to find the right spot. It was quiet and shady at the back. The hole was really hard to dig. The shoe box had to be buried deep enough. At last, I could make it fit.

Opening the lid for the last time, I kissed Annabel and stared at her for ages. I felt better, but the hard lump in my throat came back when I covered the box with earth.

Right away, I knew I needed a gravestone. In the bushes, I found enough stones to build one. I sat back against the wall and tried to think of the right words. I had never been to a funeral, so I had a lot of trouble.

Much later, Pete came around the back of the ice house. He looked relieved to see me, but I could tell he thought I looked really strange sitting there in my best dress, beside a bunch of stones.

I thought he would be mad, but he just said, "What are you doing, Francie? We've been hunting all over for you." He didn't look right at me.

"Can't you see? I've been having the funeral." Then I really started crying and couldn't stop. Pete sat down beside me and put his arm around my shoulder. Sitting together like that, I was glad he just waited and didn't try to make me stop and talk. When I was only sniffing, he helped me up and held my hand all the way back from the ice house.