

Scarlett's Discovery

I felt the footsteps before I heard them: little wet feet slapping against the weathered planks of the dock, shaking me out of my reverie. I groaned to myself, knowing that now that my secret place had been found out, it would be secret no more.

In the past few weeks the old dock had become my home base — a place away from Scarlett's whining, from Bo and his mean comments, but mostly away from the lodge, where Mimi's disappointment hung over everything like fog. It was where I spent my free time: reading, fishing and sunning myself. I let the sunshine burn away my worries, and when I got too hot, I slipped into the lake to cool off. I was getting to be quite the angler, bringing my catch of sunfish and small bass back to Elsa to clean and prepare. Fish you catch yourself always taste better.

But fishing was about luck, and so far I hadn't had a single bite all morning. Instead, I lay flat on my back, dozing with my feet hanging off the dock. The sun was as moody as a teenager, sulking behind heavy clouds, then making brief,

glaring appearances. Even the water was agitated, stirred up by a needling wind.

The feet came to a stop by my head.

“Reenie, I’m hungry,” Scarlett said.

“Go tell Mimi,” I muttered, not even opening my eyes.

“I can’t find her.”

“Did you look in the office?”

“She’s not there.”

“In the kitchen?”

“She’s not there, either.”

“Maybe she went to help Daddy.”

“Daddy went into town. He was by himself; I saw him leave.”

I opened my eyes and pulled myself up to rest on my elbows. “Did you check the bedroom?”

Scarlett nodded. “Yes, but she’s not there.”

“She must be checking on a cottage,” I said, even though that was unlikely. It was Monday morning; all the cottages were full of new guests that had driven up over the weekend. Saturday was the day we cleaned the cottages. “Did you check all of them?”

Scarlett hesitated. “Not all of them,” she admitted.

“Well, then. She’s probably in the one you didn’t check.”

Scarlett wandered off again.

I tried to settle back down and find that drowsy, lazy place I had been dozing in before she’d interrupted, but the sun had vanished as quickly as it had appeared, clouds darkening the afternoon, and thoughts of Mimi darkening my mood.

When my brother Bo was little, he’d started calling our mother Mimi instead of Mama. She’d loved it, adopting the name instead of Mom, because “Mom makes me feel old.”

I've never called her anything else, and neither has Bo or our little sister, Scarlett.

I can't imagine calling her Mom or Mommy, but when she laughs or greets visitors at the check-in desk, I can picture her on stage. "Your mother always wanted to be a star," Daddy liked to say. "That's why she married me."

He meant a star like in the movies, not Mrs. Dorothy Starr, his wife. It's a Starr family joke, although sometimes it feels too true to be funny.

Lately Mimi had lost a bit of her starry sheen, lapsing instead into long, dark silences. Last night at dinner she'd sat mutely at the table, staring at her food, as if she were trying to remember what to do with it. Bo and Daddy had tried to prod a response out of her by telling the kind of off-colour jokes she normally frowned upon. But after a while they gave up and continued on as if nothing were wrong. Scarlett couldn't bear it. Even though she's five years old, she'd started sucking her thumb and peppered Mimi with question after question, like a toddler. Mimi didn't seem to notice until Scarlett slid from her seat and went to sit on her lap. Mimi pet Scarlett's hair absently for a while, then stood up and muttered something about a headache. She went upstairs and shut herself in her room for the rest of the evening.

Like so many other times, Daddy had picked Scarlett up, given her a squeeze and run through every excuse he could think of: Mimi's tired, she has a headache, she isn't herself right now. But there were only so many times you could hear an excuse before it started to feel flimsy.

As the sky grew even darker, I sighed and figured that I should go see where Mimi was. As I made my way down the dock, up the dunes, across the street and toward the lodge, raindrops as big and hard as marbles fell from the sky.

Sandy Shores isn't the fanciest summer resort around, but I can't imagine another place as beautiful. My grandfather bought the land and built the lodge in 1898. By the time he died in 1944, Sandy Shores had grown to include five rental cottages. By 1960, we were up to nine cottages, a playground, four rental boats and the nicest beach on the lake.

On rainy days, most guests would hole up in their cottages, reading or napping the afternoon away. Sometimes they'd come to the dining hall to order drinks, sit around the radio and play cards until the sky cleared. And that's where I found Scarlett, sitting at the bar, stabbing maraschino cherries with a little plastic sword meant for the fancy drinks served at cocktail hour.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, as Scarlett slid a row of four sticky cherries into her mouth at once.

"I told you, I'm hungry," Scarlett said, cheeks puffing out like a chipmunk.

"Those are for the drinks," I said, whisking the jar away from her. "Not for lunch."

"I didn't know what else to eat," she whimpered.

"Come on," I sighed. "I'll make you a sandwich."

The kitchen was steamy and smelled delicious and, sure enough, when I peeked into the oven, I saw a large cut of beef roasting in its own juices. My stomach started to rumble. I was rooting through the cupboards, looking for bread, when a pair of warm, sweaty hands grabbed me lightly at the scruff of the neck.

"Aha! Mystery solved!" Elsa said. "Here I was thinking we had mice, but no, we have little girls stealing from my pantry!"

I laughed. Elsa had been at Sandy Shores ever since Daddy was a boy. Grandpa Starr had kept her on during the war, even though she was a German.

“Elsa is a Canadian who just happened to be born in Germany,” Daddy explained.

She was a big woman with an even bigger voice, but I knew she was as soft as the pastries she made, before she slid them in the oven to bake. Her hair, white as the flour she baked with, was swept back in an elegant bun, and her cheeks were rosy from working over a hot stove.

“What’s this,” she asked, dropping her grasp on our necks to take Scarlett’s messy chin in her hand. “Is *kleine* wearing lipstick already?”

Scarlett giggled and licked the sticky red syrup from her lips.

“No, it’s from the cherries!”

“Cherries? For lunch?” Elsa said. “It’s a wonder your teeth don’t fall out!”

“We’re just looking for bread,” I explained. “Then we’ll be out of your hair.”

“How can such sweet children be in my hair?” Elsa said, pinching my cheek between her thumb and forefinger. “Besides, I wear the hairnet!” Elsa snapped the elastic of her hairnet against her forehead and laughed her big, jolly, Santa-sized laugh. I rolled my eyes.

“Elsa, have you seen Mimi?” Scarlett asked, digging a knife into a jar of peanut butter.

“No, *kleine*, I have not. Perhaps she is with your father.”

I gave Scarlett a hard look. “Are you *sure* she wasn’t in the car?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” Scarlett said, but she didn’t look convinced.

“Now, get!” Elsa said, shooing us toward the kitchen door. “I have dinner to prepare and those men playing cards are going to want sandwiches soon, you wait and see if I’m wrong.”

“You’re never wrong, Elsa,” I said with a grin, grabbing a

loaf of bread and a handful of oatmeal cookies on the way out.

Scarlett and I ate peanut butter sandwiches and oatmeal cookies for lunch, washed down with tall glasses of milk that Elsa brought out for us. The rain was coming down in sheets so thick we could barely see the lake. It was cozy and smelled like roast beef in the dining hall, so we found a table in the corner far away from the card players and their cigarettes and I taught Scarlett to play Old Maid and Rummy until she got tired, curled up in her chair and fell asleep.

Around three, the servers started to arrive. I waved to Matthew and James in their crisp white shirts and black slacks, noting that it had been ages since I'd seen Fred or any of the other servers. I wondered if they'd been let go, and if that was why Mimi was so sad. It had been her idea to turn our modest dining hall into a proper restaurant this summer. She'd hoped to not only impress our guests, but draw in locals and passersby for the kind of fancy dinners she remembered from the city. She was always thinking of ways to give Sandy Shores a touch of sophistication, to scrub us up for our big-city guests. Before she'd met my father, Mimi had lived in the city, hoping to make it as an actress. She did a little modelling and was a chorus girl once, but it was wartime and there wasn't very much work. So she'd ended up pulling on a pair of overalls and working at a factory, like so many other girls, just to pay the rent. Then she met my father, fell in love and the rest is Sandy Shores history.

Sadly, the restaurant wasn't taking off like Mimi had hoped. At first she'd buzzed about, planning menus with Elsa, picking out new dishware and laughing while she folded napkins into complicated shapes every afternoon. She flirted with the serving staff, complimenting their uni-

forms, and she even stood behind the bar and helped mix drinks on occasion. But the crowds never really grew, and in a few weeks she went from greeting the dinner guests every evening in her best dresses, to hiding out in her bedroom during the supper hour.

“You have to give it time, Dorrie,” Daddy had said, but she’d just stared at him like he was a stranger, her eyes as flat as coins. Looking around the room now, empty save for Scarlett and me and card players, I had to admit that the whole thing had been a bust. A dining hall was one thing: it was a place for people to get a quick bite when they were too hot or tired to cook. But a fancy restaurant, with servers in cummerbunds and menu items Scarlett couldn’t pronounce, was too much.

I thought Sandy Shores was as close to perfect as it could be. Why couldn’t Mimi see that?