

The Dam

by Zenda Vecchio

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Now that she's seven, my sister Lani is a thin, ungainly little girl, all arms and legs and staring eyes. A spider, I think, and then I'm sorry, my throat starts to close up and I feel bad because Lani's all there is, all there'll ever be now and it has to be enough. And there's the other thing too, the thing that's Lani's alone. Pathos. That's my word for it. The pathos of her. All the little, helpless things; new grass after rain, the plaintive crying of a new-born lamb, the first tender leaves in spring, japonica, the blue wrens in the garden. They make my heart turn over. It isn't pity. Not exactly. But it's something like it. It's the only thing I feel now. The only thing that's real.

Joy and anger and grief. Love. Perhaps love most of all. They're just words. Perhaps that's all they ever were. I can't remember.

Except there's Lani. I've seen it in her face. Emotions. All the things I don't feel. It frightens me. I don't know why but now she's seven, I'm frightened for my sister Lani.

I'm not sure why I've started writing things in here. I've never liked writing things for school. Oh, it's all right when it's *Lord of the Flies* or *Hamlet* or even a description, *View from a Window*, I never minded that, I could write about the gums and the honeyeaters in the bottlebrush. *The banquet tree*, I wrote, *the bottlebrush outside my window is a banquet tree, all the birds come to it. This year, for the first time, I saw green musk lorikeets. Perhaps there's a drought inland . . .*

I'm in Year Twelve now. It's easier. There's not much time for creative writing, except once at the beginning of the year when Mr. Marsden made us do an autobiography. I almost didn't do it. Once I started though, I managed all right. It became a challenge.

My name is Alyssa Dixon and I'm seventeen years old. I live a fair way out of Stonyfell which means I have to catch the bus to school. Our property is called Redgums. We didn't name it. I think my grandfather did when he settled here. It sounds like

something out of Enid Blyton . . . I had to stop for a moment then. It was getting too dangerous. Enid Blyton's so cosy. All those adventures but everyone's always safe. Julian, Dick, George and Anne. And Timmy the dog, of course. Especially, Timmy the dog. He'd never let anything happen to them, not dear old Timmy . . .

I bit my lip and started quickly on a description of my room. I was calm enough then to finish. The words almost wrote themselves. *I don't know what I'm going to do next year. Sometimes I think I would like to go to university and become a teacher but then I'd have to leave Redgums. I don't want to do that. It's too soon.*

Mr. Marsden gave me a C-. I had to go and see him. He said he was disappointed in me. 'You haven't written about yourself,' he said. 'I can't get a picture of what you're like from this at all.'

I smiled then. I had to duck my head quickly so he wouldn't see. I couldn't help the smile though. He's all right, Mr. Marsden, a lot better than some of my other teachers but I can't tell him about myself. I can't tell anyone and it's not only because I don't want them to know.

It's night. I wake up and my room is full of dark shadows. Outside the wind's come up. I hate the wind. It wants to get inside. It wants to . . .

Sobbing, I turn my head on the pillow. The wall. I face the other wall instead of the window. An animal. If only the wind were an animal. A panther. A bear. Snarl of teeth and yellow eyes. I sit up. That would be better. I'd be brave then. I could face it with clenched hands, my head up . . .

But . . .but . . .

The wind's got no shape. It's in the Bible. *The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes.* Even before, I always hated it when they read that bit in church. It confused me. God and the wind. They sounded like the same thing. That's why I'm afraid of the wind now.

I don't go to church anymore.. None of us do. After Lani was born, the priest came around to make arrangements for her baptism. Mum turned her head away. 'No,'

she whispered. 'No, I don't believe in it now.' She tried to make herself smile but her eyes were still empty. 'It doesn't do any good,' she said. 'You must know that yourself. In the end it doesn't make any difference.'

Father John would have argued but my father stood up. 'Perhaps you'd better go,' he said. 'You can see how it is with us. We've had enough of God.'

Father John's face flushed. 'Enough?' he said. 'What do you mean? No-one can have enough of God.'

I can't forget that. At night when the wind hurls itself against my window, I hear his voice again. *Enough. Enough. No-one can have enough of God.* And sometimes it isn't his voice. It's theirs.

Rain's all right, hail and sleet, even mist. I remember the mist rising from the dam in autumn, it was like smoke and the water below gleamed silver, so still you'd think you could walk upon it . . . I bite down hard on the inside of my lip until my mouth is full of the taste of blood.

I throw myself back against my pillow and put my hands over my ears. I force pictures into my mind. Other pictures. Safe pictures. The fire in the grate, the little flags of flame, they dance and leap and flutter, red and orange and sunshine-yellow. Mum coming in from the kitchen with a plateful of scones dripping with butter. Lani's thin little face as she lifts her head from her book, her lips still shaping the last silent word. The firelight catches itself in her hair so it glows copper, the colour of the poplar leaves in spring. I remember them too. The poplar tree by the paddock gate. It was just coming into leaf and I ran down and called out their names. It was too late though. They wouldn't answer. They were angry with me and they wouldn't answer. Cameron and Rebecca and Miranda. Their names are in my mind. I hear them all the time but I won't let myself say them. Not now. Not now we've got Lani. When she was born, Mum said, 'Now we can begin again.' I want that too. I want that more than anything.

The wind's so loud. Even if they answered now the wind wouldn't let me hear them. 'Please,' I whisper. 'Please stop.' But the wind goes where it wants to. It doesn't care.

I've almost finished my chemistry assignment. It's due tomorrow. Lani comes in and stands by my desk. She jigs from one leg to the other. She wants to tell me something. I go on steadily with my work. When she's like this, it's best not to press her.

At last she's ready. 'I went down to the dam today,' she whispers.

My head jerks up. 'Lani . . .'

'I like it there. The water and then down by the overflow, the tamarisk trees. Pink. I never saw them like that before. All pink.'

'Lani, you know you're not allowed down there. You know . . .'

Her mouth goes stubborn. 'I don't care. I don't care what you say. I like it there.'

'Mum . . .'

'Mum won't know. Not unless you tell her.' Suddenly her face changes, is soft, cajoling. 'Look, I brought you a tamarisk feather. It's special. You can have it for your desk.' When I don't answer, she lays the piece of tamarisk on my folder and pulls at my arm. 'You won't tell on me will you, Allie? I didn't go near the edge. Honest.'

'You don't understand, Lani. It's not . . .it's not telling on you. It's . . .'

She stares at me a moment. 'I know why you don't want me to go there,' she says. 'I know everything.' Her voice doesn't sound right. It sounds triumphant. Cameron . . . for a moment I think I see Cameron standing behind her. I shudder and close my eyes. I'm not sure how it's happened but I am back there and Cameron is twisting my arm up behind my back. *'She won't tell. She won't dare tell.'* He jerks my arm harder. *'You won't tell will you. Alyssa, because if you do . . .'*

Rebecca's still not sure though. She takes a step toward me. 'Oh, please come, Alyssa. It won't be the same without you. Cameron, I want her to come. Make her come too.'

I pull myself away from my brother. I'm panting as if I've been running. 'No. No, I won't come but I won't tell either. I promise I won't tell.' Then my eyes meet Cameron's. I make myself stand very tall. *'You're stupid,' I say. 'All of you. There isn't any magic kingdom under the water. There can't be. Rebecca . . .'* But I've lost her. She catches hold of Miranda's hand and faces me, suddenly defiant. *'You're scared. You're too scared to find out. Cameron's right. You're a baby.'*

Before I can answer, Miranda interrupts. 'I'm not am I, Becky? I'm not a baby like Alyssa.'

Rebecca looks at me and her mouth twists. 'Course not, Miranda. I wish you were my twin instead of Alyssa.'

My breath catches in my throat with a sob. 'Lani,' I whisper. 'Lani, what is it you know?'

'I know about them. Cameron. Rebecca. Miranda. I know all about them.' Her lips start to quiver and to hide it she ducks her head and starts to play with the pencils on my desk. 'Why didn't you tell me about them, Alyssa? They belong to me too. Why didn't you tell me?'

For a moment my mouth is so dry I can hardly speak. 'Lani, it was a long time ago. Before you were born and . . .' I stop then. Lani's half-turned away from me. Her eyes are too big. They stare past me and I'm suddenly frightened at what they can see. Cameron . . .he said . . .But I could never understand the things he said. I thought he was making it up, the kingdom under the water. I know he was making it up. The shadows in the water. A trail of silver bubbles. A glow of light. Nothing. Nothing at all. But Rebecca and Miranda believed him. And Lani . . .Lani . . .

I jump up and grab her by the shoulders. I force her to look at me. 'Who told you?' I shout. 'Who told you about them? Come on. Tell me. Tell me the truth.'

'I . . .' She's flinching away but then her face crumples and she begins to whimper. 'I found . . .I was in the shed. The boxes there, I was looking for something to make a cloak for Princess Lobelia and . . .' She takes a choking breath and begins again. 'I found a lot of old photographs. Babies and . . . you . . .there were photos of you and some other children. They had names on the back and dates so I knew. . .and, and an old newspaper . . .it said . . .'

'I know what it said.'

Lani lifts her wet face. 'Why?' she whispers. 'Why did they drown in the dam, Alyssa? I went down there and there was nothing there except the water and the trees and the grass. And birds. I saw a lot of birds, little birds. They darted down to the water and then they . . .' She shakes her head. 'There wasn't anything else. I'm sure there wasn't. I

liked it down there, really Alyssa, but then the water . . . I saw something in the water and I wanted . . .’

I reach out and wrap my arms around her. She’s so small. A bird, I think, my little sister’s a bird, a blue wren perhaps or a little darting thornbill. ‘There isn’t anything else,’ I whisper. ‘How could there be? Oh, Lani, how could there be?’

But I’m lying. Even as I say it, I know I’m lying.

Now that Lani’s said their names, it’s like I can’t stop thinking about them. My brother. My sisters. I see them in Lani’s face. I don’t want to but they are there all the same. Cameron’s eyes. Miranda’s smile. Even Rebecca.

I run to my mirror. ‘Rebecca,’ I whisper, staring at my reflection. If Rebecca were anywhere surely it should be my face, my reflection looking back at me should be Rebecca’s because . . .because . . . Twins. We were twins . . .

‘I was scared,’ I whisper to her. ‘I was scared because I knew what would happen if you did what Cameron wanted and I . . . I was right.’

But it’s my own eyes watching me. Rebecca isn’t there. When I refused to go with them, I broke the connection between us.

‘I didn’t know,’ I whisper desperately. ‘I didn’t know I’d be so lonely.’ I grab the mirror with both hands and hold it very still. ‘Rebecca, listen to me. Lani. You’ve got to make Cameron leave Lani alone. I know he’s started on her just like he . . . Oh, Rebecca, he’s got you and Miranda. You’ve got to make him leave me Lani.’

I stare hard at my own face. I want it to be Rebecca’s as well. I want so much for her to understand.

It’s summer. At the end of the day the little walled garden at the back of the house is full of the bruised scent of roses. I shudder and put out my hand to touch a little pink half-opened bud. Lani’s got her dolls spread out on the grass. She’s telling them another story. ‘And then the Princess Lobelia said, “Bring me back a pink feather from the

tamarisk tree by the Dark Lake and it will be proof of your love.” So the prince gets on his horse . . .’

No, no, I whisper to myself, it wasn’t a tamarisk feather, it was a line of silver bubbles, they twisted and danced in the light . . .

I sigh. Something has happened to me. I’ve started to feel again. I look at Mum and Dad in case it’s happened to them too. But they’re just the same. Remote. Even when they smile, it isn’t real. It isn’t in their eyes. They’re safe still. They don’t know. They don’t know about Cameron and Lani. I do though. I watch her. I have to. Day after day I watch her go down to the dam and stand there, staring at the water.

It’ll be harder for her. She’s alone. She won’t have Miranda and Rebecca to hold her hands.

Dawn. I wake up suddenly. It’s very quiet. Outside the sky is lemon-yellow. I stand at my window watching it. The little gum tree at the edge of the lawn glows with rosy, fairy lights. ‘Christmas,’ I say smiling though I know it’s just a trick of the light and they aren’t real.

I pull on my jeans and tee-shirt and go to wake up Lani. ‘Come on,’ I say, suddenly impatient. ‘You’ve never been to the dam this early. Hurry up. I want to show you the light on the water.’

I’m surprised at my own words. Until I said them, I didn’t know that’s where we were going. ‘Cameron said there was a kingdom under the water, a magic kingdom but only the valiant-hearted could find it.’

Lani’s eyes go wide with wonder. ‘Did you see it, Alyssa? Did you see Cameron’s kingdom?’

‘No. Not then. The others could but I . . .’ For a moment my voice falters. Then I lift my head and look at her steadily. ‘Maybe today, Lani. Maybe we’ll find it today, together.’

‘Oh, I hope so. I hope so.’ She pauses, suddenly troubled. ‘But you said I wasn’t to go there. You said . . .’

‘I was wrong.’ The feeling inside me’s so strong I start to shudder with it. I wrap my arms around myself to hold myself still. In the mirror, behind Lani, I think I see Rebecca’s eyes. They’re smiling at me. After all this time, Rebecca’s smiling at me. My breath catches in my throat and I turn quickly to Lani. ‘I know why I couldn’t see it before,’ I tell her. ‘I had to wait for you.’ I feel something break inside me and my eyes sting with tears. ‘Come on. They’re waiting for us, Cameron and Rebecca and Miranda. Oh, Lani, they’re waiting for both of us.’

Lani’s eyes meet mine and she nods solemnly. Then she laughs and grabs my hand and we run together through the silent, shadowy house and into sunshine outside.

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