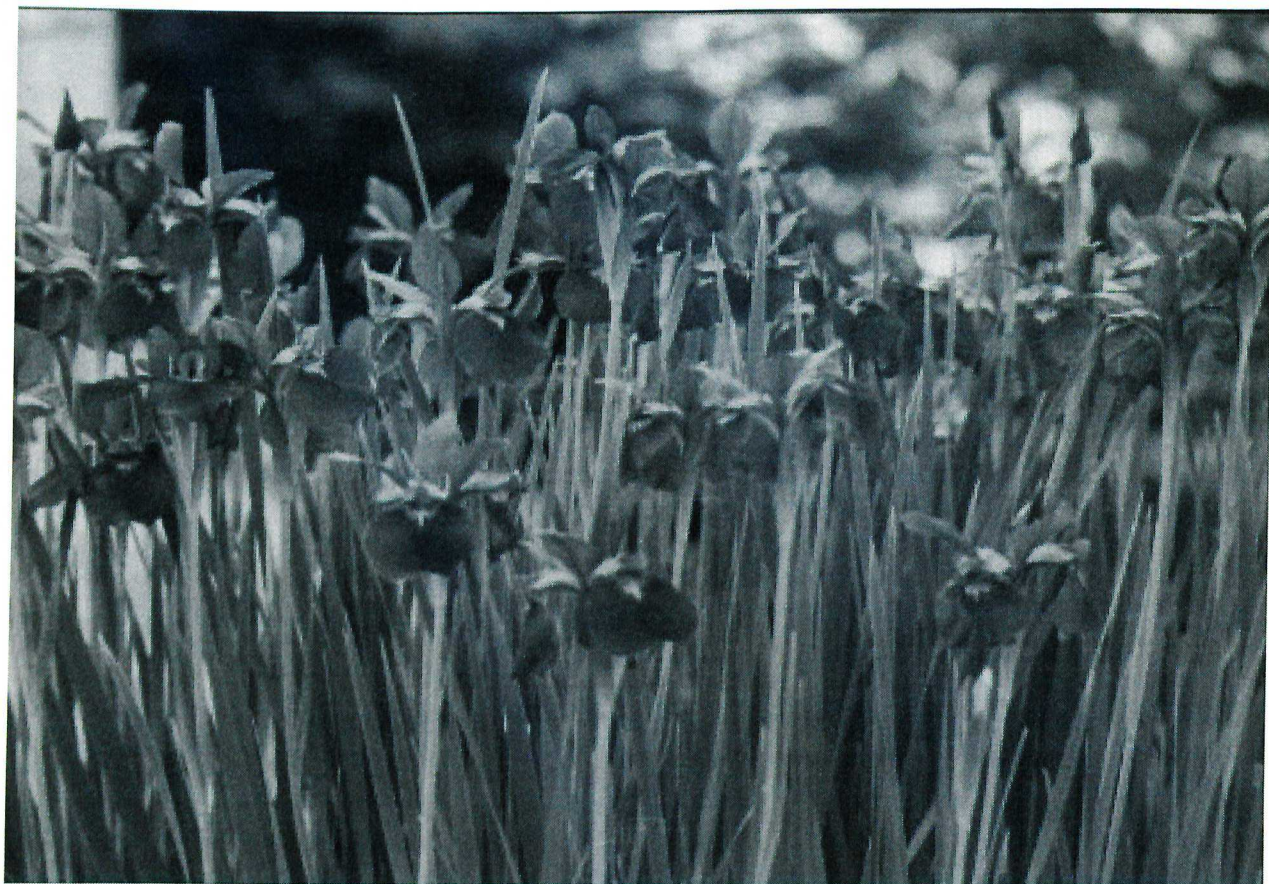

The Silly Little Girl

The door leading into the antique-white parlor swung open on its hinges and Annabelle, in her finest dressing gown, floated through the room. She plopped down on an empty, high-backed chair, launching a tiny army of airborne dust mites from the red, velvet seat cushion into the stale air. She watched, in amazement, as the dust cloud danced dangerously close to the untarnished tablecloth. A giggle slipped from her half-moon mouth as the tiny creatures landed gently upon the white handkerchief draped across the lap of Harry Ketchum, the town's ballroom dance instructor. Even though it was empty, Annabelle dropped two lumps of sugar into the blue and cream teacup and she laughed again. The clanking sound of the rigid sugar cubes meeting the fine china reminder her of the time little Davey Griggley bit into a crisp apple and his front tooth stuck into it, briefly, before plummeting into his emptied soup bowl. Her face turned a faint shade of rouge and then returned eggshell white. The young, timid maidservant rushed to fill Annabelle's teacup from the bronze teakettle she held in her frail, soft hands. She filled the lonely cup with steaming Earl Gray, mindful not to waste a drop to the beloved tablecloth. Annabelle took up the soup spoon and submerged it into the teacup, leading the tea in a counterclockwise stir. Careful not to let the soup spoon hit the teacup, Annabelle withdrew the spoon from the hot tea and watched a tiny spot of caramel colored foam chase the swirling brew. Steam hung desperately to the shiny, misused soup spoon. Annabelle let the spoon fall from her fingers onto the saucer and the ballroom dance instructor glanced her way. He thought the silly little girl had broken the saucer. Annabelle paid no mind to the spoon and lifted the teacup to her full-bodied lips, and took in a small, delightful sip. Her eyes closed and a devilish grin stretched to the folds of her rosy cheeks. "Two lumps have always been just enough," she announced to the guests of her mother's dinner party. Setting the teacup down next to the saucer and soup spoon, Annabelle rose from her seat and patted Harry Ketchum upon his head. She chuckled as the curly, rub-red mass became bedsprings under the weight of her smallish hand. Taking the curtsey of a princess, Annabelle sashayed delightfully through the parlor, skipping across in the breeze that had moments earlier blown her into the room.



- Amanda Hase

He was my fifth grade math partner. I hated him; he hated me. It worked out well. Everyday when we went into class, we sat down beside each other and glared. He usually tried to ignore me and talk to the boy who sat behind me. I pretended that I didn't notice, but I did. To be honest, I don't even remember why we hated each other. Maybe it was because he was a boy, and I was a girl—that seemed like enough back then.

I remember that he had lots and lots of freckles. So many, that when we were forced to work together, I would spend all of my time playing connect-the-dots with the freckles on his arm. He didn't know I was doing it, of course—I did it all in my head. I think that if he had ever realized what I was doing, he probably would have hit me.

He did that a lot—hit people, I mean. He was a bully. All of the kids were afraid of him, and that meant that he didn't have many friends. It's hard to have friends if people try to avoid you. But I wasn't afraid of him. He didn't scare me. I was just mad at Mrs. Stricker for assigning us to work together. I think she did it on purpose, actually. She knew that most of the boys in the class were too afraid to even talk to Dennis—that was his name. And most of the girls were too concerned with writing notes to their friends to even think of sitting beside him. So that left Dennis and me.

We had been partners for about a month when my mom got sick. This wasn't the kind of sick that you can just go to the doctor and get medicine for. This was a bad sick. Cancer was what they called it. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew that it meant that my mom couldn't do things with me anymore—like take me to the park, or watch me at my soccer games. She spent most of her time in bed, or sitting on the couch. Everyday when I came home from school, she was waiting for me, but most of the time she was asleep. So, I would just climb up beside her and lay my head on her lap and put my hand on top of her hand. My mom had beautiful hands. Even when she was really sick, she painted her nails a pretty pink color—like cotton candy. I always hoped that I would grow up and have hands like mom. Angel hands, I called them.

Mom wasn't getting any better, and it was getting close to my birthday. I told her that I wanted to stay home with her, but she made me go to school anyway. She even told me that I should be nice to Dennis. She said that it was impossible to hate someone you didn't really even know, but she had never met him. She didn't know how mean he was. She didn't see him at school picking on the younger kids everyday, and she didn't have to try and sit through class and be ignored.

A week before my birthday, Mom had to go stay at the hospital. She had lots of machines around her. I was scared to go visit her there—it was so quiet. It was like being in the library, only without all the books. We were working on fractions in math class, and I brought my paper in to show her. I had gotten the highest grade in the class. I even got a sticker. I told her that Dennis got an F on his, so not only was he mean, he was dumb. She said that wasn't a very nice thing to say, and that some people just don't understand things right away. She told me I should try to help him. Me help Dennis? He would probably just stare at me, or even worse, make fun of me and tell all the kids I was a teacher's pet. There was no way I could help him. I left my paper for my mom, and she hung it up on the wall. That was the last time I visited her before she died.

We had a funeral for my mom. Everyone that I knew was there: grandma and grandpa, all my aunts and uncles, even some of my teachers and the kids from school. There were flowers everywhere. I wish my mom could have seen them. She loved flowers. Dad took me up to say goodbye to Mom. She was lying down, and she looked like she was sleeping. I kept waiting for her to open her eyes and smile at me. She never did. I didn't want my mom to be dead—I needed her. Who was going to wait for me after school, and who was going to braid my hair for my soccer games? I started to cry. Why did my mommy have to die? What was I going to do without her? My dad started to take me back to our seat, but I cried out to him to wait. I took my mom's hand in mine for the last time, and memorized what it looked like. Pink nail polish. Smooth skin, pale from all the months she had to spend inside. But it was still the most beautiful hand I had ever seen. An angel's hand.

I didn't go back to school for awhile after that. My dad and I stayed home together. We looked at some of Mom's things and thought about her a lot. We cried a lot too. I never wanted to go back. I just wanted to sit in my room with my stuffed animals. Eventually, though, Dad said I needed to go back to school. He said that I would get behind if I didn't. I cried a lot and told him I couldn't do it—not without Mom. He said I had to. Mom would want me to. He let me wear her nail polish on the first day back. That way, every time that I looked down, a part of her was with me. I felt special with cotton candy nails like my mom had. Everyone was really nice to me at school, and all of my teachers spent time with me. Then, at the end of the day, it was time for math class—and that meant I had to

work with Dennis. I almost cried thinking about it. He would probably make fun of me because I didn't have a mom anymore. I wanted to go home. I sat in my desk and looked at my book. I pretended I didn't even know he was there, even though I felt him looking at me. Why was he looking at me? He never paid attention to me. Then he started talking. For a minute I didn't even look up—then I realized he was talking to me. He said, "Hi," and asked how I was doing. I just stared at him. Then he looked at me, and without so much as a snicker or a mean glare, he told me that he liked my nail polish. That it made my hands look pretty. That was the first day that I ever smiled at Dennis.

- Jenny Duguid