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The Cherry Tree

F*Francis!*" shouted his stepfather, "*will* you behave yourself! Leave your little sister alone! It's crazy, a boy your size!"

Francis gulped down his mouthful and started the usual argument.

"I tell you, Dad, she kicked me first—she always does, and you always think—"

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I didn't."

"Francis, hold your tongue! Can't you see how you're upsetting your mother and bringing on her headache? Don't you *care*?"

"Well, I'm only telling you—"

"You just stop telling us then. Take your lunch and finish it in your bedroom and stay there till I call you. I'm dead sick of all this quarreling. Anyone would think you were a baby!"

Francis seized his plate, snatched a jam tart from the middle of the table, set it down in the middle of his gravy, aimed a last deadly kick at Wendy's shins, and made for the door. Her yells followed him down the hall. But he did not go up to his bedroom. He sneaked through the living room, stuffed his *Star Wars* comic down his jersey, and streaked out the back door into the yard. He must not walk in front of the kitchen window, where they were finishing lunch, so he tiptoed round the house and made a run for the hedge. Stooping low, he crept through the long grass behind the apple trees and reached the cherry tree at the very end of the yard in safety.

Nobody quite knew who the cherry tree belonged to, for its roots were half in Francis's yard and half in old Mrs. Glengarry's next door. That imparted an exciting trespassing sort of feeling to begin with. It was fun to peer over into other dangerous territory and pretend he must not be seen, although Mrs. Glengarry had long ago noticed the dangling legs; and when Francis's sandal had once dropped into her lavender bushes, she had come out and handed it back. She rather liked the dangling legs; they reminded her of something she had lost many years ago.

But nobody from his own house had yet discovered Francis's hiding place in the cherry tree, for it was hidden by an evergreen and was not easy to climb. In fact, climbing was impossible with a plate, so he finished his dinner crouched in the bushes, squashed his tart into his pocket, and jumped for the lowest bough. He kicked up his legs to catch hold of

it and hauled himself up and over. Then, hand over hand, he climbed to a big fork in the trunk where there was a kind of seat and a hollow large enough to contain a tin box.

Francis settled himself comfortably and checked the contents of the tin box. It was all there—three dinky cars, fifty football cards, and a bag of mints. He ate up the crumbs of his tart and started to think over his position.

He did not mind being sent away from the table. In fact, when Dad was in a temper and Mum had a headache and Wendy was in a bad mood, it was far pleasanter to have lunch in the cherry tree. Nevertheless his heart was sore. Wendy *had* kicked first—she always did—and Dad always blamed him because he was the oldest, and it was not fair. If he had been Dad's son, Dad would have liked him as much as Wendy and Debby, and it was not true that he did not care about Mum's headaches. He did care, and he would do anything for his mother, but somehow he never got a chance to tell her so. *And Dad said I was naughty, and Mum always believed him, and it wasn't fair—Wendy kicked first, and they never said Wendy was naughty. Dad always blames me.*

His thoughts were going round and round in the same old circle, back to the same place. *It wasn't fair—it wasn't fair.* He said it to himself in bed at night, so that he sometimes would not sleep, and he said it himself in class so he could not listen to what the teacher was saying, and she had said on his last report that he was inattentive. Then Dad had been cross and said he was naughty again, and Mum had believed him. *And it wasn't fair.*

But here in the cherry tree it was easier than anywhere else to forget that it was not fair, because there were so many things to look at. He could see Mrs. Glengarry coming out, wrapped in shawls, to feed her cats, and Mrs. Rose, two doors away, hanging out her dish towels. He could spy on everyone's backyard and on beyond the yards to where cars and trucks roared along the main street and on to where the woods began and little hills rose behind with warm acres of pink Warwickshire soil, farms, and pastures, and somewhere, between two dips in the hills, the river. It was March and the end of a wet winter. The river would be flooding its banks in parts and nearly reaching the bridges.

Then he looked round on his own yard. The crocuses were ragged and dying, but the daffodil spears were pushing through the grass. It was very quiet except for the birds, and he wondered what they were all doing. Mum would have gone to bed with her headache, and Dad would be with Wendy and Debby because it was Saturday afternoon. He would probably take them to ride their bicycles in the park and buy them ice cream. And, no doubt, he would soon go up to Francis's bedroom to tell him that if he would behave and say sorry to his little sister he could come too. Francis had to admit that Dad quite often tried to be kind.

But he did not want anyone's kindness, and he was not going to say sorry to Wendy or ride his bicycle with little girls, and he had enough money in his pocket to buy himself ice cream. Spring was in the air, and he would go off by himself and have

an adventure. He would go to the river, and Mum would not worry because she would be asleep, and Dad would probably be only too glad to get rid of him. He pocketed the mints and scrambled cautiously down the tree, peering through the evergreen to make sure the coast was clear. His bicycle was in the toolshed and not hard to get at. Another few moments and he was out the gate pedaling madly and breathing hard. He had made it!

Francis had a vague idea of getting to the river, but he had never been so far by himself, and by the time he had reached the bottom of his road, he was beginning to wonder whether an adventure by himself would be much fun. He even found himself thinking longingly of Dad, Wendy, and the park and half hoped the others would catch up.

But they were nowhere in sight, and he suddenly realized that he was standing at the bottom of a street where the houses were smaller than those on his road and that down this street lived Ram, a boy from India who went to his school. He had never taken much notice of Ram. Nobody did, because he was very shy and small for his age, and he could not speak much English. But Ram had a bicycle and would be someone to share an adventure with. Francis pedaled to number 8 and knocked on the door.

Ram's mother came to the door, wearing a deep blue sari, her hair hanging in a braid down her back, and a tiny girl on her hip. She did not know much English either and looked rather frightened. She called Ram, who came running out and

introduced everybody. His little sister was called Tara, and she stared solemnly at Francis with huge, unwinking black eyes. Francis decided that he liked her much better than Debby.

Ram's mother seemed pleased that Francis had come to invite Ram to go for a bicycle ride, because no other child had visited, and her little boy was lonely here in England where they found it so hard to communicate. While Ram pumped up his bicycle tires, she prepared them a little picnic. Francis sat and waited in a room that smelled pleasantly of curry, and tried, unsuccessfully, to make Tara smile at him.

Then they were off, pedaling along the grassy edge of the great main road that led southward from the city and out toward the open country. Francis knew the way for he had been there once or twice with his stepfather.

“Where are we going?” asked Ram, his black eyes sparkling.

“To the river,” shouted Francis, forging ahead.

The River

They turned off the main road after about a mile and coasted along a country lane toward a picturesque village with old beamed cottages and a blacksmith's shop on a small village green. They stopped to buy pop and then cycled across the bridge to find a nice place for a picnic. The big river had risen almost to flood level, but there was a smaller tributary farther on, away from the village, where they could amuse themselves privately. Francis was not quite sure how to reach it, but he pedaled on and Ram followed trustfully. They turned into a gate that did not say Private, hid their bicycles behind the hedge, and trotted up a path that led to the top of a hill.

"I think the river is down the other side," said Francis. "Hurry up, Ram."

It was a lovely place. Great beeches with gray forked boughs arched the path, perfect for climbing. The leaves were not yet sprouting, but catkins pranced above the undergrowth, and

the birds were already chattering and trilling about mating and nesting. The air was full of sunshine, life, and pollen, and Francis flung out his arms like the wings of a plane and made off down the hill as fast as he could run.

“There’s the river,” he shouted. “I told you so! Race me down to the bridge, Ram.”

But Ram was not used to steep muddy paths. He caught his foot in a rabbit hole and fell on his nose. Being a brave and polite little boy he got up and apologized, but he was plainly worried about the mud on his trousers. “We go home soon?” he inquired hopefully.

“Home!” yelled Francis. “Not on your life! Look, I told you I knew where the river was. Come on, Ram. Step on it!”

“Why go river?” protested Ram. “De water cold and I no swim.” But he followed obediently toward the bridge. They sat on a log and ate their picnic while the golden water, at flood level, hurried past, swirling round the trunks of the alders. Francis munched his sandwich and thought that this was the most wonderful afternoon he had ever experienced. Wendy and his stepfather seemed very far away and unimportant. He was free to do what he liked and to go where he pleased, and the river itself was only the beginning of adventure.

He looked around. Behind him was a sloping field where black and white cows grazed. Beyond it was a farmhouse with a barn and other buildings, and beyond that, light soil sowed with young wheat and a spring sky with white clouds scudding across it. Then he turned to look at the river, and as

he did so, the sun came out, sparkling on the celandines and coltsfoot on the bank and glistening on the water.

He jumped up and ran to an alder whose trunk sloped out far over the river. His next adventure would be to scramble up it and look down on the current, but when he reached the roots he suddenly saw another adventure so dangerous and exciting that he gave a little cry of mingled fear and joy. Ram got up and came and stood beside him.

They were looking down at a little inlet, roofed over and well hidden, where a small boat had been beached and tied to a post. But the flood had lifted it so that it rocked on a backwater—a shabby little dinghy waiting for its spring coat of paint. Francis was down the bank in a moment and sitting in it. The oars had been removed and there was no rudder. It was just a little toy craft for children to jump in and out of on a hot summer day. But to Francis it was an adventure to end all adventures. He was already working at the knots and shouting at Ram to get in.

Ram stood in the mud, tense with fear and indecision. He realized at once that to launch the little boat was exceedingly dangerous, but he knew, too, that he was quite incapable of controlling Francis, and that he could not desert him. He made one last appeal.

“No, Francis,” he cried, spreading out his hands in supplication. “Come back—not good—I no swim—*Francis!*”

For the last knot had slipped, and the boat, caught on a sideways swirl of water, was heading for the main river. Ram,

who dreaded being left alone more than anything else, made a jump for it and landed in the boat beside Francis. It rocked alarmingly but held to its course. In another moment they had left the backwater behind them and were launched suddenly into midstream.

Francis fell silent, and his face grew rather pale. He had never dreamed of anything like this happening. He had imagined himself holding on to the boughs of trees at the edge of the river and going for a nice little ride, but the boat was now completely out of control. It pitched along through the foaming current. Ram behind him was sobbing and muttering, sure that his last hour had come, and Francis rather thought it had too. He clung to the side and tried to think, but the boat was moving so fast that he could not think at all. If only he could steer it shoreward and catch hold of a branch or bump into a reed island—but he could not do anything, only cling.

Then above the rush of water he heard shouting—loud frightened shouting—from the bank. He glanced round and saw a man—a very large, angry man—running as fast as he could with two little boys running behind, followed by a furiously barking sheep dog.

“The dam’s just ahead, you little idiots,” yelled the angry man. “Turn the boat in! Trail your coats on the right side.”

He was running faster than the boat and had gotten well ahead of them. Then the smaller boy clasped the hand of the older boy, who clung to some rope or belt tied around the middle of the angry man, who plunged into the river in all his clothes, reminding Francis of a furious hippopotamus.

“Can you swim?” bellowed the angry man.

“I can—he can’t,” yelled Francis.

“Then jump,” shouted the angry man, thrashing the water with his arms. “The dam’s just ahead. *Jump*, I tell you.”

Francis glanced ahead and, sure enough, the river seemed to disappear with a roar. Ram saw it too, gave a loud squeal, and jumped. The angry man caught him and held him fast.

“Pull,” he shouted to the boys on the bank. “And you—hang on.”

There was a great splash and a struggle. Francis seemed to swallow the river and go down to the bottom. Then he surfaced and found his hands being guided onto the dog leash, and he was being pulled ashore. The angry man was already struggling out of the water with Ram in his arms, and a moment later Francis was picked up like a drowned puppy and thrown on the grass, soaked, frozen, and sobbing.

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