

## Words Can Hurt

by Judith Horth

Outside, the caretaker is mowing the small playing field, and the regular drone of the mower lulls Marguerite, replete with liver and bacon and treacle tart, into a stupor. Her eyelids droop.

“Marguerite Tunstall!” The teacher, turning from the chalkboard, notices the girl’s nodding head and snaps out her name, startling not only Marguerite but the rest of the class too. “Wake up, child!” Her voice is softer now – it is always the same in this post-lunchtime lesson - and she moves across the room to open the white painted doors which lead out on to the field. In summer, she and her pupils are thankful for them, but it is a different matter in winter. The clean, fresh scent of cut grass wafts in, cutting across the smells of chalk dust, books and pencil shavings and breathing new life into her pupils.

“Angela and Tommy, please give everyone a copy of “The Children of the New Forest” and we’ll see what the Humphrey children are up to this week.” Passing Marguerite’s desk, she bends to whisper, “Please see me at the end of the lesson, Marguerite.”

The rest of the lesson is an agony of suspense for Marguerite. Will she be told off for falling asleep? Perhaps she will be given a detention – or, worst of all, will her mother be called in to speak to Miss Simmonds? The thought of what might follow such an interview is terrifying.

Miss Simmonds closes the door behind the last of her pupils and returns to her desk. She eyes the little girl before her, who is nervously biting her lip and has tears in her eyes. “Now, Marguerite,” she begins, but before she can finish the sentence, Marguerite sobs.

“I’m sorry, Miss Simmonds! I didn’t mean to fall to sleep!”

The teacher smiles at the childish error, and opens her desk drawer, taking out a packet of paper tissues, offering it to Marguerite. “Don’t cry, Marguerite,” she says. “It was hot – you couldn’t help it. What I wanted to talk to you about was your composition.” She reaches for the top exercise book on the pile on her desk and opens it. “I asked you to write about what you were looking forward to about the summer holidays. Now, most of the other children wrote about going on holidays or playing out with their friends – they were all looking forward to having a lovely time.” She frowns. “But your composition was quite different.”

She looks up. The little girl is staring at her, her eyes round with ...what? Fear?

“Marguerite, you wrote that you were not looking forward to the holidays. Is that true?”

Marguerite says nothing but bites her lip.

“You said that Mummy did not like you to play with other children because they might teach you bad things, and that she preferred you to sit quietly at the table with lots of extra sums and writing practice to do. Does that really happen? Every day?”

Still, there is no response.

“Marguerite, does your mummy really lock you in the cupboard under the stairs when she goes out, leaving you all by yourself in the house?”

“No, Miss Simmonds.” The girl’s voice is barely audible.

“Speak up, child. Is what you have written here true, or have you made it up?”

Marguerite realises that she has made a terrible mistake. She had simply told the truth, but it seems that her everyday experience has shocked the teacher. If Miss Simmonds asks to speak to Mummy...She can’t bear the thought.

“No, I made it all up!” The words burst out of her. “It’s like the little girl we read about in A Little Princess. I didn’t mean it.”

Miss Simmonds looks at her. The explanation does not quite ring true.

“Very well, Marguerite, but you must be more careful how you write about real people. Words are to be taken seriously – if you use them unwisely, they can be as damaging as bombs. If you are making things up – especially bad things – don’t use the names of real people. It’s called libel and can get you into serious trouble. Do you understand me?”

Marguerite nods, blushing fiercely. “Yes, Miss.”