

Ninth Picture

Izzy's Cake

I have this drawing folded carefully in my backpack. We're sitting at the table on the porch, the river in front of us, a summer rain drilling the roof above us, soaking us all that last Saturday, muddying the road, greening the grass, puckering the river.

In the picture Izzy is backing out of the screen door, balancing the cake plate in her hands. The cake was vanilla, and Izzy had gathered blue forget-me-nots to circle it.

I used the sharpest pencil (Strawberry Pink) to write the words on top of the cake: WELCOME TO THE FAMILY, HOLLY.

Izzy frowned. "I wanted to get your whole name in, but there wasn't enough room."

The Old Man's eyes sparkled. A moment before I framed the picture in my mind, he patted my shoulder. "Hollis Woods, with us forever."

Steven sat on the other side. I'd drawn pages of animal tracks for him, raccoon and deer, rabbit and possum ... and birds, even a loon that had come up out of the water to sun itself on a rock.

"I'll probably keep them forever, Sister Loon," he said, full of himself. "Get it?" He pointed to the loon tracks on the side of the page, nudging me under the table like a six-year-old, rattling the glasses, the cake plates.

"Steven, please." The Old Man hadn't been happy with him all week. Nothing gigantic; little stuff. Steven had left the shed door open, so a raccoon had nested inside ... probably the one whose toes were marching all over Steven's paper. Steven had left the house door open, so a bat had flown around the living room Wednesday night. He'd lost the Old Man's fishing knife, and one of the reels was probably sunk under the water somewhere downstream.

"Why don't you just try with him?" I had asked Steven the day before as we rowed around looking for it.

I could see the anger in his eyes. "You're good enough for both of us," he had said. "That's what Pop would say."

I leaned forward. "Is it me?" I asked. "My fault?"

He had laughed then. "Don't be silly."

Still, I wasn't sure. I opened my mouth to tell him about me, a mountain of trouble, but before I could, he tapped my arm. "Hey." His eyes were earnest behind his glasses. "You don't have to look like that." He broke off a piece of holly and handed it to me. "Peace, Hollis. It's just like you. Prickly, but not bad to look at."

I had tried to hide my smile.

Now Izzy put the cake in the center of the table. "Should we have candles?" she asked.

"Sure." Steven grinned at me. "The works."

"Why not?" I leaned back. I was full of myself too, thinking about calling the Old Man Pop, and Izzy Mom.

Izzy went inside to rummage through the table drawers for the candles, and Steven turned to me, saying we might walk up on the mountain after supper.

The Old Man looked at him sharply. "In the rain?"

"Don't worry." I knew I could make the Old Man smile. "We're tougher than the rain."

"I'm not talking about going all the way to the top," Steven said.

We ate the cake then, the icing melting on my tongue, and I was feeling guilty because I was really the one who wanted to go up on the mountaintop.

The end of the old Hollis. Hey, world, here comes the new one.

And I wanted to go alone.