

Parish picnic by Nicole Gouda

‘Twenty-seven, twenty-eight...’ The barn door creaks open. She can’t see his face because of the low sun streaming through the open door, but Penny knows it is Father Kelly. She can see his dark pants and shoes between the cracks of her fingers. Even though she is certain the other children have left the barn to hide outside on Mister Dowell’s farm, she has placed her hands over her eyes. It isn’t right to cheat, even if you don’t mean to.

‘Hello, Penny,’ he says walking slowly towards her. ‘I’m looking for Adam and Johnny and the others. Have you seen them? We’re going to play cricket.’

‘They’re hiding outside, Father,’ Penny says removing her hands from her face. ‘I’m in. It’s up to one hundred.’

‘How about I count with you?’ he says, closing the door and making his way to where she sits on a small pile of hay beside the rusty tractor. ‘Then we can go and find the boys together. You like cricket too, don’t you?’

She nods. ‘Thirty-one, thirty-two...’

He hitches his trousers and lowers himself onto his haunches beside her. ‘That hay must be prickly on your legs in that dress. Here, why don’t you sit on my lap while we finish counting?’

Penny is not sure what to say. She hasn’t sat on anyone’s lap before except Mum’s, but Father is already sitting on the ground, his back against the barn wall. She feels her legs go floppy as he reaches for her and lifts her onto his lap.

‘There. Much better,’ he says. ‘No more prickly hay.’

Father is right. His lap is more comfortable than the hay, but somehow not.

‘Forty-eight, forty-nine...’ Her words are hesitant as his arms go further around her waist. He pulls her gently towards him till her back leans on his chest. She feels strange, especially in her tummy. The numbers stick in her throat and she stumbles, ‘Forty-nine...’

Father lets out a long sigh and she feels his warm breath on her neck, catches a faint whiff of beer. ‘Keep counting now, Penny. Nice and slow,’ he encourages in a low whisper.

His hands move upwards and she feels them touch her chest, her heart beating fast inside it. Her armpits are tingly with sweat. Lower, in the region of her buttocks, something swells ever so slowly beneath his belt buckle and pushes upwards into the skirt of her dress.

‘Sixty-four, sixty-five. Good, Penny. Don’t stop.’ His voice is insistent, his breathing quickens.

The swelling down below fixates her. She knows that boys are made differently—she saw her brother a couple of times by accident—but this is not the same. She fastens her gaze on the barn door, tries to concentrate on the counting. ‘Eighty-one—’ It is little more than a tiny noise at the back of her throat.

He is counting loudly now, each number followed by a whoosh of air that hits her ear. Glancing down at her hands, she sees they are shaking, wills them to stop. She squeezes her eyes shut.

‘One hundred.’ The words explode from his mouth. She hears them echo in her head. Father’s body is limp now, his hands by his side. She gets up slowly, doesn’t turn around to look at him.

‘Time...time to find the others Penny, there’s a good girl,’ he says to her back as she walks silently towards the door.

Even before she leaves the barn, she knows she won’t tell.