

Adrian's Bucket

by Gerry Withey

I am eight years old, and I have a crush on my best friend Margaret's brother, Adrian, who is fourteen. We all live on the same street in London, England, but you never see Adrian out on the street much. Even before he started thinking he's too old to be playing with us, we didn't see him because he has asthma and Margaret says that running around might bring on an attack.

Adrian Jones is really clever, and I think part of the reason is because he has been so sick. He spends a lot of time reading in bed. I believe many people become clever because they have to lie around and have so much time to read and think. It makes them use their imagination. At least I know it's true of people like Robert Louis Stephenson and my dad, who both had tuberculosis and had to stay in bed for years.

Adrian has a shy smile and blonde curly hair and he doesn't say much. He often sits in front of the TV with his leg slung over the side of the chair, while his mother brings him food to eat.

Mr. Jones only has one leg; the other was blown off when he was in the war. He likes to garden, and spends most of his time sitting on a chair between his rows of scarlet runner beans. On Sundays he makes tiny tarts filled with homemade lemon curd or strawberry jam, but he never offers me any. And he doesn't talk much.

Mrs. Jones is proud of Adrian because he was the only one in our street to pass the test to go to grammar school. She brags about it all the time. She doesn't dress up unless she is going to her job at the cottage hospital where she works as a nurse's aid. She likes to tell stories about illness, and I thought I heard her telling someone that there was an old lady at the cottage hospital whose leg fell off because of gangrene. I have checked my foot a lot lately, looking for black spots, because I heard her saying that you have to watch out for your flesh changing colour.

I don't like medical shows on the TV, but Mrs. Jones, my mum and I do watch Dr. Kildare. I think they're both in love with him. One show was about a man who caught smallpox, and since then I have been watching for two little blisters behind my ear, because that can be the start of it. We are moving to Canada and have to get smallpox shots before we go. I'm glad of that.

Margaret and I went to see Ben Hur at the pictures, and the good thing about it was that they showed Jesus' blood flowing through the streets and all the lepers who stepped in it were cured. They talk a lot about leprosy at Sunday school, but I don't think you can get leprosy in England - just hot countries.

I wonder if God gets to choose who dies and if he changes his mind, and why there are so many sick people in Africa.

The thing I like best about Adrian is that he smokes even though he has asthma. It's as though he is not afraid to die. He likes to go fishing and always leaves his fishing bucket by the back door. It has something soaking in it in a slimy liquid. Margaret said that we shouldn't go near it, not even sniff it because it is poisonous, but I really want to know what is in it. I like to hover around anything that is Adrian's, like his bed that has blocks of wood pushed under two of the legs, so his head is sitting higher than his feet when he sleeps so phlegm won't settle on this chest.

I sat on his bed once.

One day after school, when I am with Margaret and it has just stopped raining, I push back the cover over Adrian's bucket and smell his liquid. Margaret says right away that I am going to die, but the strange thing is that there are no fumes, it doesn't smell like anything. A quietness comes over me, like I can only hear my insides, then a heat comes up through me, then tightness, and I find it hard to breathe. I run up the wet sidewalk, past the roses. All the roses are blooming, filling most every garden, and I am running and panicking and thinking that I can't believe this is the day I am going to die and that I just want a quiet place to go. Just like my cat Tiger did when he was hit by a car.

I run past my mother to my room and I lie on my bed and I feel my breath and I feel the tightness of my insides, and I breathe deep and close my eyes. I don't want to move. I think maybe I am dying because I have done something really wrong.

When my mother comes up the stairs I am curled on my bed and I tell her I am going to die and start crying. She asks me what happened and tells me to stop being silly, but it isn't until Mrs. Jones comes in and explains that breathing in the fumes from Adrian's bucket will do nothing to me that I finally calm down.

Gradually my breathing starts slowing down and my insides don't feel so tight. I hold onto my mother and she holds me close. She strokes my hair and tells me that she loves me. She tells me everything is all right and that I shouldn't worry. And I pull in close because I really, truly, want to believe.