

I The Accident

Katrin Taylor was a week past her fifteenth birthday when her world changed forever.

Katrin was tall, with long dark hair that flowed around her shoulders. She had dark eyes and a habit of letting a mischievous smile play around her face. She was also opinionated and more than a little rebellious.

It was the summer vacation, but the newfound freedom of the days in late May at the beginning of vacation had long ago become the long, torpid weeks of hot midsummer lingering boredom.

To make matters worse, Katrin's best friend, Jane Newman, had moved away at the beginning of the vacation and now lived fifteen miles from Dayville on a sprawling ten-acre piece of land in the country.

For several weeks, Jane and Katrin had been needling their parents to let them go away together to backpack and camp in the Springfield Hills near Jane's new home for a few days. Katrin and Jane were keen to explore the area.

Jane's parents had expressed reservations but eventually had given their permission "providing it's all right with Katrin's parents."

But it was *not* all right with Katrin's parents. At least twice a day for the past week she had asked them, but always the same answer had come back: a firm, unyielding No.

As the days had passed, Katrin had become more and more sullen, until, eventually, her father had proposed a compromise.

"Look, we can't have you and Jane going out camping by yourselves in the hills. But if Jane will put up with you, how about if you go and stay with her for a week? You can go exploring during the day, and camp out on the Newmans' property at night."

At first, Katrin had been reluctant to accept the compromise, but at last she realized that it was the most she was likely to be offered. The girls agreed to the plan.

And so the day for the start of the trip had arrived. The sun shone in a clear blue sky and the thermometer rose steadily from its early morning 70°F to stand at 85°F by mid morning. By ten thirty Katrin's backpack was filled with food and clothes and flung carelessly into the back of the Taylors' station wagon.

They arrived at the Newmans' sprawling property shortly after eleven. Jane was out in the meadow riding her horse; Mrs. Taylor embraced Katrin and gave her an embarrassing peck on the cheek. "Take care of yourself, dear," she reminded her daughter for the hundredth time.

Katrin's gaze went heavenward in exasperation. "Yes, Mom."

She left her mother to have coffee with Mrs. Newman while she went to greet Jane.

When the girls came in an hour later, flushed and breathless, Katrin's mother had left.

Jane's mother prepared a salad as the girls discussed their plans over the kitchen table. As Mrs. Newman handed over the heaped plates, she noticed that Katrin was looking rather pale.

"Are you all right, Katrin?" she asked.

The reply was several seconds in coming. Katrin looked up at Jane's mother, then at the salad piled high on her plate. "I don't know...."

Then, in a single hurried motion, she covered her mouth with her hand and raced for the bathroom.

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She returned three minutes later, her pale face dotted with sweat and her steps unsteady. Reaching the table, she leant against a chair for support.

“Sorry about that,” she said weakly.

Then her legs folded under her.

Katrin felt herself being moved and then lowered on to a couch.

“What do you think, Mom?” she heard Jane ask.

“I don’t know. But you two certainly aren’t going anywhere with Katrin like this. Give Katrin’s mother a call while I take her temperature.”

Katrin opened her eyes, and found herself in the living room, bright sunlight streaming into the room through French windows. The light hurt her eyes, so she closed them again. Then she shivered.

A thermometer was inserted between her lips. After an age there was beeping sound and the thermometer was removed.

“A hundred and two,” Jane’s mother said. Then, after a few seconds, she asked, “Katrin, are you awake?”

Katrin opened her eyes painfully and nodded.

“How were you feeling earlier? All right?” Mrs. Newman asked.

Katrin nodded once more. She spoke weakly: “Do you think you could close the drapes?”

“Oh, of course.”

Jane’s mother stepped across the room and heavy drapes swished almost noiselessly across the windows and darkened the room. Katrin sighed with relief.

Jane entered the room. “I told her mother. She wants to talk to you.” Together, mother and daughter returned to the kitchen.

Katrin lay back, suddenly exhausted, the distant sound of conversation passing meaninglessly over her head. By the time that they returned, she was asleep.

She slept fitfully all afternoon, finally awaking at nearly five o’clock.

Mrs. Newman took her temperature again. "Ninety nine; much better," she said. "How are you feeling?"

Katrin took stock. Eventually, she said: "Weak, but much better."

"Would you like a glass of juice?"

"Yes, please."

"OK. I'll get one for you."

Mrs. Newman was gone for several minutes. Katrin sat and then stood up. She was on the point of making for the kitchen when Jane and her mother returned.

"Oh, you're up. Good," said Mrs. Newman. "Here's your juice. I was just talking with your mother. She's coming over to fetch you. You can come back tomorrow if you're feeling up to it, but we both thought that it was best for you to go home this evening."

Normally, Katrin would have protested, but she had no energy for an argument. She began to drink the juice gratefully.

Jane began to talk once more about the hills and the exploring they would do as soon as Katrin felt better, but it was impossible for Katrin to concentrate on her friend's torrent of words. All she really wanted to do was to lie down and go to sleep again.

The doorbell rang, there was a clatter of footsteps and, in a few moments, Katrin's mother entered the room.

Her mother looked sympathetically at her daughter. "Hello, darling. I'm awfully sorry you're feeling this way. Do you think you can make it to the car all right?"

"I'll try," replied Katrin. Her mother came to her side and helped her to stand. The room swung unsteadily for a moment, then stabilized.

Katrin nodded. "Yes," she said, "I think I'll be OK."

"Good. Just hold my hand and we'll get you to the car."

Katrin and her mother made their way to the car in the driveway, followed by Jane and her mother.

"Would you rather sit in the front or lie down in the back?" Mrs. Taylor asked.

"I'm very tired, Mom," said Katrin. "Maybe I'd better lie down on the back seat."

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“OK. We won’t be able to strap you in, but I’ll drive carefully and I’m sure we’ll be all right.”

With some help from her mother and Mrs. Newman, Katrin maneuvered herself so that she was lying on the back seat.

She felt so tired.

Vaguely, she heard the sounds of goodbyes being said and then felt the comforting throb as the engine started. The car was not a hundred yards down the road before she was asleep.

The man responsible for the accident was drunk, even at this early hour of a summer Saturday evening.

The journey between the two houses was nearly half over when Mrs. Taylor approached the narrow bridge over the river. Over the bridge came a car travelling towards her, moving slowly, on the opposite side of the road. Suddenly, out of nowhere, another car appeared from behind the approaching car, moving out on to Mrs. Taylor’s side of the road, trying to overtake the slower-moving vehicle.

There was no time to think. Instinctively, Katrin’s mother swung the wheel to one side, jamming her foot on the brake. The car spun off the road, bumping down the steep bank towards the river.

The car hit a tree, and then a boulder; the car’s two occupants were thrown first this way and then that. The car reached the very edge of the bank, the river running three feet below. The car hesitated for a fraction of a second as the wheels on the left side hung over the edge of the bank.

The car hung, half suspended; then it toppled over on one side and fell into the river.

No one knew how long Katrin was without air, but the best guess was about eight minutes. One thing the doctors were certain of was that her head struck the metal of the side of the car as the car rammed into the boulder before slipping into the murky

waters of the rapidly moving river. She was unconscious before the water closed over the car.

Katrin's head was thrust deep into the crack between the seat and its back, and air was unable to filter its way through the plastic of the rear seat as she lay, helpless and unconscious, with the water rising around her. Mrs. Taylor lay unconscious in the front seat.

The first rescuer was the driver of a passing car. He dived into the stream and, after two unsuccessful attempts, forced Mrs. Taylor's door open, pulled her free of her seat belt, and brought her to the surface. But he couldn't see far in the dirty water, and didn't realize that there was a second occupant in the car. Precious minutes passed before Mrs. Taylor regained consciousness and spoke her first words: "Where's Katrin? Is she OK?"

Her rescuer realized that someone else must be in the car. He dived back into the swirling waters.

The doctors were not hopeful. They explained to Mr. and Mrs. Taylor that their daughter had sustained a serious head injury. That in itself might not have greatly affected their child. But she had also been deprived of life-giving oxygen for at least several minutes. When she arrived at the hospital, her body functions were apparently intact and she had no broken bones apart from a fractured skull; but the electrical activity in her brain was depressingly low.

After two weeks in a coma, a recording of the electrical activity in Katrin's brain was sent to a specialist in a nearby city. He was not sanguine: it was his professional opinion that Katrin's brain activity was impaired to such an extent that she would never regain consciousness. Even if she did, there was no chance that she would ever be more than a vegetable, responding to only the most basic stimuli. Her centers of high-level thought dis-

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played no activity whatsoever; she would never recognize friends or relatives, never speak, never walk again.

From a purely physical point of view, he informed the parents, Katrin was still alive and her body was fully functional; as long as they provided food through a hospital feeding tube and removed the wastes from her body, she would stay alive until some organ failed, probably many decades hence. But for all practical purposes their daughter was dead, and they must not permit themselves to hope that that prognosis would ever change, because it would not.

At first, Katrin's parents could not accept what they were told. Every day they prayed and hoped desperately for a change in Katrin's condition. But the days went by, and then the weeks, and nothing changed.

Eventually, three months had passed, and Katrin was in exactly the same state as she had been when she was first wheeled into the hospital, except that the bone in her skull which had been fractured in the accident was now almost completely healed. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor began to lose hope.

Then came the day when the doctor in charge of Katrin's care called them into his office and presented a shocking proposal.

"You must understand that the decision is yours. I would not exert any pressure over you even if I could. But I feel that in order to fulfil my professional duty, I must point out the option. It is the opinion of all the specialists who have examined Katrin's case that it's impossible that there will ever be a change in her mental condition. As such, I think that you must consider the possibility of authorizing the hospital to remove the feeding tube."

Katrin's parents looked at one another, shock covering their faces.

Mr. Taylor spoke. "You mean, let her die?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes. As I say, the decision is entirely yours. But I do think you ought to consider it. I certainly wouldn't advocate a hasty decision. It's only been three months so far. But I just want to mention it as a possibility so that

after a few more months, if there is no change, then you might want to think about it some more.”

Three floors above, a strange thing was happening in Katrin's room. A ripple passed through the room; a ripple as if one was observing, not the hospital room itself but, rather, a reflection of the room in a pool, and it was as if someone had dropped a pebble into the pool some distance away; a single ripple crossed the room, from window to door.

As the ripple passed out of the room, the room was different in two ways. The second hand of the clock on the wall opposite Katrin's bed had ceased to move; and Katrin was no longer the only occupant of the room. Near the door, as if he had entered by that way (although, in fact, the door had remained closed) an old man stood, looking at Katrin.

The man carried a stick that looked old, even older than the man himself. With the aid of the stick, he walked slowly towards the bed.

It was hard to say just how old the man might be. Everything about him seemed indeterminately ancient. Even his clothes, which might once have been a cheery green, now appeared faded and not a little dirty, as if he had spent a hundred years working in full sun in a garden. His hair was gray-white and covered the top of his head; much of the man's face was hidden behind a full gray beard: the beard was unkempt, as if he could not be bothered to take good care of it. The man's eyes, though, looked startlingly bright and alive for one so old.

The man's gait as he moved towards the bed was not so much infirm as slow and measured. Indeed, if one watched only the way in which he walked, one might easily conclude that this was a man of such supreme confidence and power that he knew that nothing of importance could ever happen at a place until he arrived there — and therefore there was never any need to hurry to arrive anywhere.

He moved nearer the bed, the clock on the wall betraying that each step, apparently so slow, took no time at all. He reached

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Katrin's side, where he could easily have stretched out his hand and touched her; but he did not do so.

Instead, he simply stared into her face. For what seemed like minutes, although the clock maintained its steadfast stillness, he looked at the face of the young woman, behind which there was a mind that no longer functioned. His eyes betrayed no expression, although their twinkle seemed subdued.

At length, he stretched out his hand towards Katrin. Her hands were above the bedclothes and, as his hand touched hers, the man spoke, in a voice that seemed older than the earth itself, and yet which seemed to have seeds of new life sprinkled in the words.

“Come, my child,” the man said. “It is time.”

Another ripple passed through the room, as silently and as unnoticed as the first. As it passed, the second hand on the clock on the wall began to move once more. And the old man was gone. Katrin was once again alone.

And for the first time in three months, Katrin's head moved slightly and a noise — a quiet, almost inaudible moan — came from her throat.