

Hazel^{and}_{the} Snails

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ANNUALink

*For
Matthew and Emma
with love*



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Lasagne

Hazel was in the garden looking for snails. She was collecting them. There were already six in a shoebox under her bed. She'd punched holes in the lid so they could breathe. She wanted ten altogether.

It was a good morning for snails because the ground was moist after the rain. Moist ground brought out the snails in droves.

'These damn lasagnes are arriving in droves,' Hazel's father had said last night. There were so many lasagnes there was hardly room for anything else in the kitchen. They made her father feel tired and cross and go to bed in the daytime. 'Throw them out,' he said.

'People are just being kind,' said Mum.

Hazel didn't need snails in droves. Just four more. Four snails plus six snails would make ten snails. Ten was the magic number.

Hazel wore her red gumboots, her red-brimmed sunhat, her comfortable red shorts, and her new red-and-white striped t-shirt. She liked her clothes to match. She liked red too.

Hazel held a bucket. She swung it high over her head and down again. 'Snail-pail,' she said, smiling at the rhyme. 'Pale snail.'

Baby snails were paler than adult snails. Hazel didn't like picking them up because their shells were soft and easy to squash. It was terrible when that happened. The baby snails started to foam and froth because they were dying.

Hazel screwed up her eyes and watched the colours come and go behind her eyelids. 'Red, yellow, blue, indigo,' she chanted. She hadn't really seen indigo, but indigo was a new word. 'Indigo.' She liked the way it sounded.

Hazel's mother listened to the Indigo Girls. She danced around the kitchen and tried to make Hazel dance too. Dancing was all right but hopping was better. Hazel did a few experimental hops now. They sounded rubbery in her gumboots.

There was a large, fat snail on the drive. Hazel pulled at the shell, and the snail came away with a small sucking sound and a tiny pop.



‘In you go, big snail,’ she said, putting the snail in her bucket.

The next three snails were easy to find because Hazel was clever. She was a sleuth. A super snail sleuth. She should have a badge. She knew where the snails would be and that’s where they were — in the vegetable garden, making long silver trails on the cabbages.

One, two, three. She put the snails in the bucket and watched them salute her with a friendly wave of their feelers. Hazel waved back. She wiped her fingers on the sides of her shorts and ran back into the house.

‘Gumboots off,’ whispered Mum, ‘and go quietly.’

Hazel crept down the hall. Her father’s door was still shut, so she tiptoed past very softly.

‘What’s in the bucket, Haze?’

Hazel jumped. ‘Snails,’ she said.

It was Henry, Hazel’s brother. He often appeared out of nowhere like that and gave her a big fright.

‘What do you want them for?’

‘Nothing.’

Henry followed Hazel into her bedroom and flopped down on the bed. He watched her drop the four snails into the shoebox with the others, but he

didn't say anything. That was the good thing about Henry. When Hazel said 'nothing', he didn't keep asking. Not like Mum and Gran and Sue.

Hazel climbed onto the bed beside Henry and peered at his ear.

'You've made another hole,' she said. There were four silver skulls in his left ear now. 'Your ear looks like a snail shell. And you've got a lot of earwax.' Hazel poked at it with her finger.

'Don't,' said Henry. He flipped off her sunhat and pushed her away.

The sun came through the window onto the bed and warmed Hazel's legs. Far away down the road, she could hear Gordon Melville mowing his lawns. The motor sounded like Sue's cat, Christine, when she purred.

Hazel snuggled up next to Henry. He smelt of sweat and last night's vegetable lasagne.

All at once, Hazel felt a sick feeling come from somewhere deep inside her. She thought she might be hungry. She looked at Henry. He was gazing at the ceiling.

He might be hungry, too.



Sunshine

Hazel and her father were hanging out the washing.

‘You are my sunshine,’ sang Dad.

‘My only sunshine,’ sang Hazel.

‘You make me haa-pee.’

‘When skies are grey.’

It was a lovely day. No grey sky anywhere. ‘A good day for drying washing,’ said Dad.

Hazel handed her father the pegs. She liked handing the red pegs best. Dad clipped the pegs onto the corners of the towels. He moved very slowly. Like a sloth, thought Hazel. She had seen sloths on television. They hung upside down from tree branches. They had sleepy faces. The opposite of sleuths.

‘Watch me,’ said Hazel. She did a roly-poly on the grass. Her father clapped. Hazel did another roly-poly on the grass. Her father clapped again.

She was about to do a third roly-poly, but Dad said, 'Let's go and sit down.' He had sweat on his upper lip. It glistened in the sun like a snail trail.

They sat down together in the shade of the ash tree. It was still and green under the tree, like a secret.

'What shall we do now?' whispered Hazel.

'How about I close my eyes,' suggested Dad, lying back on the grass, 'and you tell me a story.'

Hazel looked up at the tree. 'Once upon a time,' she began, 'there was a baby sloth that lived in a tree. One day, it fell out of the tree and hurt its leg. But a girl saved it and it was all right the end,' she said, finishing in a rush.

'Is that it?' asked Dad.

'Yes,' said Hazel. 'Can I have an ice block?'

'There might be some in the freezer,' said Dad. 'Get me one, too.'

Hazel came back with two ice blocks. A raspberry one for herself and lemonade for Dad. They lay back under the tree to eat them. Dad took bites of his, but it hurt Hazel's teeth to do that. She had to lick fast to keep up with the drips.

'Your tongue's gone red,' said Dad.

Hazel waggled it at him. Ice-block juice trickled stickily down her neck. Her last bit fell on the grass.



Hazel picked it up and put it in her mouth.

‘Tell me a story now,’ she said, rolling onto her stomach.

Her father hoisted himself up on his elbows.

‘Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Haley who was lying under a tree. All of a sudden, a baby sloth fell out of the tree and landed on her head. Haley’s head got such a bump it swelled up, and Haley had to walk around with a big fat head forever and ever and ever. The end.’

Hazel laughed. ‘Poor little Haley,’ she said. She rested her own ordinary-sized head on Dad’s legs.

‘There was an old lady who swallowed a fly,’ sang her father. ‘I don’t know why she swallowed the fly. Perhaps she’ll die.’

‘That’s not a story, that’s a song,’ said Hazel.

‘A song can be a story,’ said Dad.

‘I know an old lady who swallowed a spider,’ he continued, ‘that wriggled and jiggled and tickled inside her. She swallowed a spider to catch the fly. I don’t know why she swallowed the fly.’ Dad stopped to let Hazel join in.

‘Perhaps she’ll die,’ they finished together.

‘I don’t like that story,’ said Hazel firmly.

‘I don’t like it much either,’ said Dad.

Hazel's mother came out of the house to see what they were doing. 'There you are,' she said. She flopped down on the grass next to them. 'It's so hot.'

Mum wore a singlet top, and Hazel could see her brown arms and the sea-horse tattoo that Gran called her folly. Hazel knew the story of the sea-horse tattoo. Mum's best friend, Barbara, had one too. They were sixteen and had been protesting against a pet shop selling sea horses. They walked up and down outside the shop, waving signs and making the owner very cross. Then they got small green sea horses tattooed on their shoulders. 'Very foolish,' said Gran.

But Dad loved Mum's sea horse. Even more, he said, he loved the sort of person who protested on behalf of sea horses.

Mum stroked Dad's knee. 'Pinwheels for lunch,' she said. 'Cheese and bacon.'

'We'd better come in then,' said Dad.

Hazel raced ahead and got to the kitchen first. She hid under the table, waiting to surprise them. And they were surprised, but not really because Hazel could tell they were thinking about something else. Probably the electricity bill.

Mum put the plate of pinwheels and a jug of cucumber water on the table.



‘A feast!’ exclaimed Dad. ‘Delicious!’

Hazel sat up next to Dad and chose a scone. ‘I’ve got some snails,’ she said, licking her buttery fingers.

‘Snails? Where?’

‘In my bedroom.’

‘Good Lord!’ said Dad, putting a crumb in his mouth. ‘Show me after lunch.’

But after lunch he forgot Hazel and her snails. He went straight down the hallway to his bedroom. Hazel stood in the dim light of the doorway, peering in.

