

FEVER

by Renata Hopkins

She had been waiting so long. Watching the leaves turn and fall and grow again, year after year. Alone, all alone, now that the others had gone. To help pass the time, she sang softly to herself:

*One for sorrow, two for joy,
three for a girl, four for a boy,
five for silver, six for gold,
seven for a secret never to be told.*

They came straight away, a message in black and white, just for her. Magpies – one, two, three of them – swooping through the pines to land on the seventh branch of the tallest tree. Three for a girl, and seven for a secret. She had waited so very long to share her secrets.

Spooky stories were big that term. The one about the babysitter. The one about the hitchhiker. The ones about monsters and maniacs and ghosts. At the end of a story, someone would hold out their arm to show the hairs standing on end, as if the hairs wanted to run away. Someone else might say “That’s not even scary. Anyway, I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Carly would agree. “Me neither.” And during the day, she almost meant it.

But at night, lying rigid in bed, she’d feel like all the ghosts in the world were coming to prove her wrong. The branch outside her window would tap the glass like a finger. *Let me in.* Her uncle had once told her that dogs can smell fear. That’s how it was with ghosts. That’s how they would find her.

Then Ms Ross had announced where they were going for school camp. It was to a working farm, and they’d get to milk a cow and feed lambs with a bottle.

“My sister went there on camp last year,” Luca Brajkovic had volunteered. “It used to be a hospital. It’s full of the ghosts of all the people who got sent there to die. True. Look it up.”

Ms Ross thanked Luca for his “contribution” before explaining that the camp was originally a sanatorium for people with tuberculosis.

“Did they really get sent there to die?” Carly asked. What she really wanted to ask was “Is it true about the ghosts?”

“No, of course not,” said Ms Ross. “The staff at the sanatorium tried to cure the patients, but fresh air, rest, and exercise were their only hope. There weren’t antibiotics back then. We’re very lucky.”

Carly didn't feel lucky going to a camp where people had died – maybe even in the room she'd be sleeping in. And how many people? Twenty? A hundred? More? She wondered if any of them had been children.

The night before camp, Carly went to bed with a sore throat. She fell asleep straight away, but her throat still hurt when she woke up. She didn't say anything to Mum or Dad in case they made her stay home. Despite everything, she still really wanted to go to camp and learn how to milk a cow. And anyway, ghosts weren't real – they weren't, they weren't real ...

On the bus, her throat got worse. By the time they reached the camp, she could hardly swallow. The bus pulled in to a long driveway, and she could see a large building at the top of a hill. The old hospital. Carly thought about all of those people – in the days of her grandmother's grandmother – arriving full of hope that they would get well. And then she thought about the ones who reached the point when hope failed them. When they knew they would never leave.

From the orchard, she watched the children get off the bus. She could see the life radiate from them in a shimmering haze. Was the girl among them?

Warm hands, warm.

The men have gone to plough.

*If you want to warm your hands,
warm your hands now.*

Her mother's voice came to her then, sing-singing the old rhyme. But the feeling of warmth – she could not remember that at all.



The morning passed quickly. At lunch, Carly began to feel seriously bad. Two seats down, Luca was hatching a plan for a midnight ghost hunt, but his voice seemed to come from far away. Her body felt slow and clumsy. Raising a glass of water to her mouth required a huge effort.

After lunch, they went to milk the cows. Carly tried to watch as the farmer showed them how to position their thumb and fingers around a teat, but her head pounded, and her neck ached from holding it up. She went and sat down on a bench.

Ms Ross saw and came over. "Is everything OK, Carly?" she asked.

Carly shook her head. Ms Ross put a cool hand on Carly's forehead and frowned. "Poor thing, I think you're coming down with something. You're very warm."

But Carly felt frozen. As she followed Ms Ross back to the house, she barely heard what her teacher was saying. Her attention was caught by three magpies swooping through the pine trees.

The light hurt her eyes. All she wanted to do was close them.

Then she was alone in a room, in a bed. Time stretched – and she didn't know if she was asleep or awake. The bed seemed to be floating, and the room was huge and then tiny. Carly was freezing and sweating, and someone was singing.

*Can you keep a secret? I do believe you can.
You mustn't laugh. You mustn't cry.
Just do the best you can.*

The voice didn't sound like Ms Ross's. Carly forced her eyes open. A girl was standing at the end of the bed. She was wearing an old-fashioned nightgown. Her face was thin and pale, and she had dark shadows under her eyes. She was staring at Carly.

Carly lay completely still. She was sick – or dreaming – and this wasn't real and it would stop. The girl would go away. She closed her eyes and counted.

"One, two, three ..."

She heard footsteps, coming closer.

When Carly opened her eyes, the girl was leaning over the bed. Her face shone in triumph. "I knew I would find you."

Carly's teeth began to chatter and click. When she spoke, it was as if she were trying to bite the words. "What do you want?"

"Everything," the girl said, "and now you are here to help me. I knew you would come. The others have all found someone. I'm the very last."

"I don't understand."

The pale-faced girl smiled. "Of course not. But you will. Listen."

Then the ghost bent forward until her long hair fell like a curtain around Carly's pillow. She whispered a hundred years' worth of secrets into Carly's ear.



When her mother arrived later that evening, Carly was asleep, and they decided not to wake her. By morning, the fever had broken, and Carly was well enough to be bundled up and helped out to the waiting car. Carly's mother supposed she must be disappointed to be leaving camp early. "I know you were looking forward to milking a cow," she said.

"No. I've done it before."

Carly's mother, unlocking the car, was struck by the sound of her daughter's voice. It must be the sore throat, she thought – but for a moment, it hadn't sounded like Carly at all.

"Are you sure? I don't think I remember that. Anyway, another time." She helped Carly into the back seat and tucked her sleeping bag around her. "There you go, sweetheart. Are you feeling all right?"

Carly nodded. Her throat still hurt, but it was nothing. Not compared with the powerful, steady beat of her heart; to her lungs breathing in the sweet, spring air.

There was nothing to be afraid of now.



illustrations by Gus Hunter

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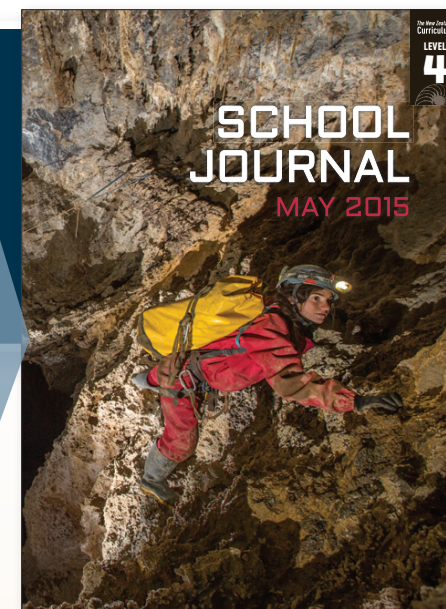
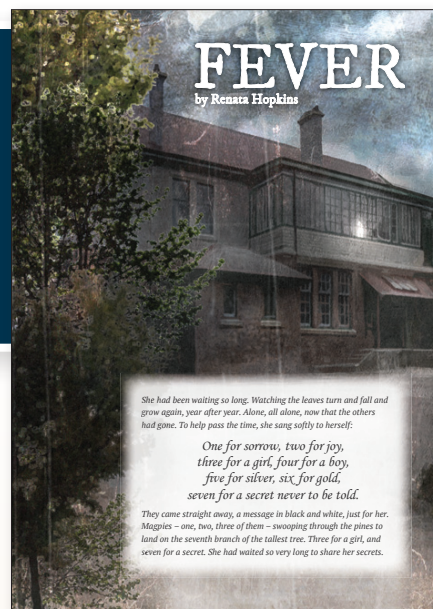
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