

## **The Taunting of Miry Brook**

*by Vicki French-Sanches*

“No no no! Get off!”

“Say ‘Uncle’! Say ‘Uncle!’” says the bully, laughing at my fear.

I writhe under the weight. The bully is on top of me, on my back, torturing me as always. He’d pounced on me from behind. The splintery wood under me provides no relief. The more I struggle, the more it digs into my thighs and the side of my face, scratching my skin raw. He always thinks it’s funny to bully me, and usually when I’m just trying to get to the playground over the short-cut on the old footbridge. Problem is, the bridge is by his house, and hidden by old-growth trees and overgrown brush, so I can never see him hiding. This footbridge saves me a half mile of walking in the summer sun, so on a rotten-hot day, I’ll sometimes chance it. Only this time the bully misjudges his timing, and his heft. And soon I can’t even say “uncle” if I wanted to—can’t get enough air. I stop struggling, and go limp. And I’m not faking it. This time I’m not playing dead. I am dead.

That was a long time ago, and my stupid bully is now long-dead too. Gone to the fiery place, the one for jerks who bully kids. What I can’t figure though, is why I am still here by Miry Brook and its bridge, these many years later. I’m under, over, around the footbridge, all day, all night. All the time, and for all time. I can’t seem to move beyond, and have given up trying. I don’t need food anymore, don’t need a house. I don’t get hungry or cold anymore.

I have toys to play with, which is good because I’m mostly sort-of still a kid. A kid with a lot of time on my hands—an eternity of time, it seems. Some toys are the ones I had in my pockets that last airless, splintery day. Then there are the ones I “gather” from other kids who use the footbridge.

I have my Tonka wrecking ball, which was my favorite toy in life. I pull back the tiny metal ball, and let it fly at kids’ ankles, shins—not so it actually hurts—just startles them into dropping what they hold. Then I make a super-soft corny ghost sound to scare them into running away as fast as they can.

I've tried out different sounds: "go-o-o-awaay", and of course just, "boo." But the time-tested best is the mournful, "oooooooooooo." I can only make whispery sounds from right next to their ear, but the quieter and creepier it is, the faster the kids run. I've made an art of it.

I'd really rather play with these kids. It used to be that this footbridge was my path to fun—to the playground through those trees over there. Now I spend my days lying on the bridge in the flickering leaf-light, listening to the other kids playing there. Joyful screams, laughter and sounds of their games. "You're it!" and "Marco! Polo!"—these have stood the test of screen-time. And this short-cut to the playground has withstood even the most "helicopter" of parents. So yeah, it hurts that I can't make it over there to play too. And I know that it's the little boy part of me that made me try for that every day, for so many of my dead-days. But who'm I kidding. My body still looks small, but I'm actually super-old—nearly 30. So even if kids could see me, I'd still be creepy just by talking old. Kids can sniff out an adult in their midst.

So, the wrecking ball is my only option for fun. I keep it lame, just scaring them enough. Not bullying. I do get frustrated with this life, sometimes angry. I have trouble with those feelings. Because I don't want to turn into a bully. Even as a kid, I knew that anger and past hurt were what made my bully like that. I was angry at him for years, but now I just feel sorry for him for his sad life. How he took a wrecking ball to his own life, and kept himself off the path to happiness. He lived a damned existence, trying to keep his secret of having killed me. Just after I died, he actually talked about renting a real wrecking ball to demolish the bridge. Now that was just misplaced anger—like it was the bridge's fault. He would have smashed it up too, if my mother hadn't figured it all out and gotten him arrested. And til the day he died in jail, the bully had kept his anger going, feeding that fire. And now he burns all the time.

This footbridge is a sad, damned place too. And I'm haunted myself, by my own death. But I don't want to stay angry like a bully. So I do just enough to make myself okay. To keep myself out of the fiery place.

But that last breath I had that day. Why didn't I use it to say, "uncle!", so he would have gotten off of me and I would still be alive. I've gone over it so many times. Since I could not speak the word, "uncle" after that day either, I could not implicate my actual uncle, Hal, the mean, drunk bully. But my mother's intelligence, tenacity, and love told the story for me.

She's never moved away from this part of Danbury. And my mom comes back and back and back to me. To the footbridge. Bringing gifts for my birthdays, mostly books for the age I would be turning. She's a great reader, and had shared her love for books with me. So my mind still learns from her, and grows a bit each year, and my heart stays open. She can't see me, but I think she hears me wind-whisper to her, and maybe that's also why she comes back. But it makes her pretty sad too, to also hear the voices of kids nearby, playing happily, just beyond reach of the bridge.