

Three strangers walked across the park.

Oblivious to their approach Myrtle took Audrey's hand and traced her forefinger in a circle on her daughter's palm. Her light touch sent tingles through the child's body.

Myrtle chanted: "Can you keep a secret... Can you keep a secret...? I don't suppose you can. You mustn't laugh; you mustn't smile, but... do the best you can."

As Myrtle finished the last sentence she quickly ran her hand along Audrey's arm up to her armpit. Throughout her mother's chanting Audrey had managed to keep a solemn face but at the moment her mother tickled her under the arm she burst into peals of laughter. Myrtle also shook with laughter, suddenly realising it was the first time she had laughed in a long time. The feeling of wellbeing that resulted took her by surprise.

Noel lay on the picnic rug trying to eat his rattle but the rattle's round head was too large for his tiny mouth. Bertie sat on the edge of the rug and picked a yellow, black centred daisy. He picked another one and started to make a chain the way Myrtle had shown him, his fingers clumsily twining the stems around each other. Then with confidence and authority he proceeded to demonstrate the skill of making a daisy chain to his sister. Audrey, a willing and compliant student, followed her brother's instructions. Myrtle's heart swelled with pride as she watched.

Three shadows fell across their picnic rug before they were aware of the strangers. Myrtle looked up. A stern faced woman in a navy suit flanked by two uniformed policemen towered over them. Myrtle's smile slowly receded. The children seemed to sense danger. Bertie moved closer to his mother and sat on her thigh. Audrey buried her head in her mother's lap. The cold blue eyes in the stern face stared down at Myrtle.

"Are you Myrtle Millicent Bishop, wife of Henry James Bishop?"

Myrtle was taken aback. Amid her confusion her senses seemed to be alert for threat yet her mind could not grasp the possibility of danger.

“Yes,” she said.

The stern faced woman in the navy suit continued. “A case has been brought against you in the court, Mrs Bishop. You failed to attend. I am here to tell you that a ruling was made against you.”

“Against me?”

“You have been judged an unfit mother.”

Fear gripped Myrtle’s body. She lifted Noel up and circled her arms tightly around him.

“We have an order here,” the stern faced woman continued, thrusting a piece of paper in Myrtle’s face, “giving us the authority to take the children and place them where they will receive proper care and attention.”

Myrtle could not believe what she was hearing. What was this woman talking about? Proper care and attention? She looked up at the policemen. They stood with arms folded, faces expressionless, eyes averted. Myrtle gathered Bertie and Audrey into her arms with Noel and hugged the children close. Strong hands pulled at her shoulders. She tightened her arms around the children, shaking her head in protest.

“You can’t take them,” she screamed. “They’re my children.”

Audrey began to cry.

“You’ll only upset the children, Mrs Bishop. Don’t make it harder on them.”

But Myrtle knew only that she had to hold tight to her children. She felt Bertie being pulled out of her grasp—saw him being swept up in the arms of the policeman. Her hand clutched his shoe. He called to her; fear in his voice.

“Mummy.”

Myrtle released her grip, afraid of hurting him. The policeman gathered him up and turned away from her. Above Audrey’s screams she heard Bertie call again.

“Mummy.”

The other policeman bent over and took hold of Audrey. Myrtle felt the child being pulled from her grasp.

“Nooo!!!” she cried. “No! No!”

Still holding Noel to her chest with one arm she reached out in vain with the other, at the same time trying to rise to her feet. The stern faced woman gripped her arm and pulled Noel away from her. Myrtle fell back onto the rug. The woman backed away with Noel in her arms. “We’re just doing our job, Mrs Bishop.”

Myrtle stood up and lunged at the woman. “Leave my baby alone,” she screamed.

“It’s an order from the court. We have no choice.”

The woman turned and quickly followed the two policemen to the parked police car. Myrtle ran toward the vehicle, tears streaming down her face. The children had already been put inside before she reached it. The woman restrained Audrey and Noel in the back seat. One of the policemen nursed Bertie in the front passenger seat. The other policeman walked around the front of the car to the driver’s side door. Myrtle ran to him, clutching his sleeve as he made to slide in behind the wheel. He prised her fingers open and released her grip on his shirt.

“Let go, love,” he said. “Your kids’ll be looked after, don’t worry. We’ll let you know where they are.”

Myrtle begged helplessly as the policeman took his seat behind the wheel.

“Please... Please.”

“I’m sorry, love. They’ll be all right. I promise.”

The police car moved slowly away. Bertie pressed his tearful face up against the window. Myrtle ran alongside the car, clawing at the glass, calling out.

“My babies. My babies.”

When the car turned onto the open road and picked up speed she fell back, but ran and stumbled until the vehicle was far ahead. With faltering steps she walked in the direction the car had taken, sobbing, calling the children’s names. Several miles down the road her footsteps slowed. Perspiration dripped from her face. With dragging feet she wandered off the road into the bush, mindless of twigs and undergrowth. Finally exhaustion overcame her and she fell to the ground. Her body convulsed by sobs, she lay in a crumpled heap under a tree.