

Tove Jansson, 'The Morning Swim' (from *The Summer Book*)

It was an early, very warm morning in July, and it had rained during the night. The bare granite steamed, the moss and crevices were drenched with moisture, and all the colours everywhere had deepened. Below the veranda, the vegetation in the morning shade was like a rainforest of lush, evil leaves and flowers, which she had to be careful not to break as she searched. She held one hand in front of her mouth and was constantly afraid of losing her balance.

"What are you doing?" asked little Sophia.

"Nothing," her grandmother answered. "That is to say," she added angrily, "I'm looking for my false teeth." The child came down from the veranda. "Where did you lose them?" she asked.

"Here," said her grandmother. "I was standing right there and they fell somewhere in the peonies." They looked together.

"Let me," Sophia said. "You can hardly walk. Move over."

She dived beneath the flowering roof of the garden and crept among green stalks and stems. It was pretty and mysterious down on the soft black earth. And there were the teeth, white and pink, a whole mouthful of old teeth.

"I've got them!" the child cried, and stood up. "Put them in."

"But you can't watch," Grandmother said. "That's private."

Sophia held the teeth behind her back.

"I want to watch," she said.

So Grandmother put the teeth in, with a smacking noise. They went in very easily. It had really hardly been worth mentioning.

"When are you going to die?" the child asked.

And Grandmother answered, "Soon. But that is not the least concern of yours."

"Why?" her grandchild asked.

She didn't answer. She walked out on the rock and on towards the ravine.

"We're not allowed out there!" Sophia screamed.

"I know," the old woman answered disdainfully. "Your father won't let either one of us go out to the ravine, but we're going anyway, because your father is asleep and he won't know."

They walked across the granite. The moss was slippery. The sun had come up a good way now, and everything was steaming. The whole island was covered with a bright haze. It was very pretty.

"Will they dig a hole?" asked the child amiably.

"Yes," she said. "A big hole." And she added, insidiously, "Big enough for all of us."

"How come?" the child asked.

They walked on towards the point.

"I've never been this far before," Sophia said. "Have you?"

"No," her grandmother said.

They walked all the way out onto the little promontory where the rock descended into the water in terraces that became fainter and fainter until there was total darkness. Each step down was edged with a light green seaweed fringe that swayed back and forth with the movement of the sea.

"I want to go swimming," the child said. She waited for opposition, but none came. So she took off her clothes, slowly and nervously. She glanced at her grandmother - you can't depend on people who just let things happen. She put her legs in the water.

"It's cold," she said.

"Of course it's cold," the old woman said, her thoughts somewhere else. "What did you expect?"

The child slid in up to her waist and waited anxiously.

"Swim," her grandmother said. "You can swim."

It's deep, Sophia thought. She forgets I've never swum in deep water unless somebody was with me. And she climbed out again and sat down on the rock.

"It's going to be a nice day today," she declared.

The sun had climbed higher. The whole island, and the sea, were glistening. The air seemed very light.

"I can dive," Sophia said. "Do you know what it feels like when you dive?"

"Of course I do," her grandmother said. "You let go of everything and get ready and just dive. You can feel the seaweed against your legs. It's brown, and the water's clear, lighter towards the top, with lots of bubbles. And you glide. You hold your breath and glide and turn and come up, let yourself rise and breathe out. And then you float. Just float."

"And all the time with your eyes open," Sophia said.

"Naturally. People don't dive with their eyes shut."

"Do you believe I can dive without me showing you?" the child asked.

"Yes, of course," Grandmother said. "Now get dressed. We can get back before he wakes up."

The first weariness came closer. When we get home, she thought, when we get back I think I'll take a little nap. And I must remember to tell him this child is still afraid of deep water.

Tove Jansson, 'The Morning Swim', in *The Summer Book*, Trans. Thomas Teal. New York: Random House, 1974; rpt. 2022, London: Sort Of Books, pp.21-24.