



Tacooma!

Suddenly, as we walked, I started thinking of this one word – *Tacooma*. The past summer I had gone to a very crummy Indian camp in the mountains. I only stayed five days because I got sick, but I remember this word *Tacooma* very well. The counsellors had told us the first night we were there, having something called the Opening Powwow, that *Tacooma* was an Indian word that meant 'Help me, Brother,' and they told us that it was a rule – an iron, never-to-be-broken rule – that if anyone ever came up to you, clasped your wrist 'where

the blood flows', and said 'Tacooma!' you would have to help him. No matter what he wanted, you would have to help him. Otherwise, the old Indian legend said, the blood in your wrist would flow no more.

All the while I was at camp this worried me, because I was always afraid that someone was going to come up to me and say 'Tacooma' and I would have to do something awful like rush into the lake and pull his drowning friend from the deep, dark water by the rocks where we were not allowed to swim because of the snakes. Or at night, someone would awaken me in my bunk, clasp my wrist, say the dreaded 'Tacooma' and I would have to get up and walk down the black slippery path with him to the toilets. In my nightmares I heard the word *Tacooma* again and again.

Tonight, though, I thought that there should be a worldwide word like *Tacooma*, and you could use this word maybe three times in your whole life, and when you did use it, even a perfect stranger would have to help you, because even a perfect stranger would know that you would never, ever use one of your *Tacooma*'s unless it was a matter of vital importance. I thought how nice it would be right now if I could turn to Uncle Fred, clasp my hand around his thick hairy wrist, feel the blood pounding there, and say, 'Uncle Fred?'

Something in my voice would cause him to stop and look down at me.

'Uncle Fred, don't harm that fox.'

He would sputter, 'But that fox is making off with Millie's birds. You saw how upset she was at supper. She -'

'Uncle Fred,' I would interrupt. 'Tacooma!'

He would pause and then say in the quietest voice, 'The fox is safe. She will never be harmed here. I will explain to Millie.'

'Thank you, Uncle Fred.'

This was what I thought about all the way back to the farm. It was an awful feeling to want to help someone as badly as I wanted to help that black fox. My one hope - I decided this as we came to the house - was Hazeline.

She had gone out to the lake with Mikey on a picnic and would not be back till late, so I waited out on the porch for a while and then I went up in my room and sat in a chair by the window. All the time I was watching for the car headlights to come up the road, I was thinking about the fox. The dog was still running and I could hear his measured barks in the woods and once I thought I heard a high yapping sound like the bark of the fox.

It was almost midnight when I saw the car lights. The car stopped and Hazeline got out and ran into the house. Usually she and Mikey stayed in the car a few minutes laughing and talking, so I was glad to

see that tonight there weren't going to be any such delays.

She came up the steps very quickly, went into her room, and shut the door. I went across the hall and knocked.

'I'm getting ready for bed,' she said.

'Can I see you for just a minute, Hazeline?' I asked.

'What for?'

'I want to talk to you.'

There was a silence. I waited, then said, 'I have to talk to you.'

'Oh, come on in.'

I went in and she was lying across the bed with her face turned away. She had not started getting ready for bed at all but was still in the plaid play-suit she had worn to the picnic.

'Hazeline,' I began.

She turned around and I saw that her eyes were all red and swollen. She must have been crying for hours to get her face in such an awful condition. You could hardly even see where her eyes were.

'What's wrong, Hazeline?' I thought that if she had been soaking her whole head in hot water for four hours it wouldn't look this bad. She looked like Uncle Fred's prize pig, Rowina. 'What's wrong?'

'I'm not getting married - that's what's wrong,' she said.

'You mean you're not going to marry Mikey?'

'I mean Mikey's not going to marry *me*.' And she started to cry again.

I wanted to turn around and get out of that room as fast as I could. Only the fact that I desperately needed help for the black fox and that I thought Hazeline might know what to do kept me there. 'He'll marry you, Hazeline,' I said. I hoped Mikey had not been able to see how awful she looked with her face all swollen or he probably *wouldn't* marry her.

'No, he won't either.'

'Then you can marry someone else,' I said.

She looked up at me and stopped crying long enough to say, 'Who?' Then she waited.

'I don't know exactly who, but I know you'll get married.'

'I won't get married. I'm too *fat*!' She began to cry again. You could hardly believe that there were any tears left. I got a new respect for the tear glands then and there, because I saw that those glands could really manufacture tears when they had to. I wished that Petie were there to make up a headline. All I could think of was FARM GIRL'S EYES PRODUCE RECORD-BREAKING EIGHT HOURS OF TEARS - YOUNG FRIEND STANDS BY HELPLESSLY, which was too long.

'I don't think you're too fat,' I said finally.

'Well, Mikey thinks so. He says he's not going to marry me unless I lose twenty pounds.'

'Then just lose the twenty pounds, Hazeline. That's all you have to do and he'll marry you.'

'I can't. I just can't. I'm never going to get married. I'm going to be like old Miss Helva.'

'Who?'

'That fat old lady that was over last week, and all she comes over for is to eat. That's all. Eat, eat, eat! That's how I'm going to be. I'll be going around to people's houses hoping they've just made a cake or a pie - one time right down there in our kitchen I saw Miss Helva eat a whole berry pie!'

'Hazeline, you won't be like that. It's silly to even think so. Now, listen a minute,' I said, because it seemed to me she was quieting down. 'I need some help.'

'You need help!' She put her head down on her arm.

'Hazeline, you know that fox I've been talking about? The black fox?'

'Oh, I don't want to hear about foxes. I just want to marry Mikey and I can't lose twenty pounds. I can't.'

'Hazeline, your father is going to kill that fox.' This was the first time I had let myself actually think these words, much less say them, and I suddenly started shaking.

She turned around and looked at me, and I thought at last I had gotten through to her and she understood. I leaned forward and she said, 'Look, will you go downstairs and get me a banana?'

'What?'

'A banana. Maybe if I eat something I'll feel a little better. I couldn't hardly eat anything at the picnic I was so upset, and now I feel awful. My legs are real weak.'

I hurried down to get the banana, and Aunt Millie met me in the hall, her cotton bathrobe held in front of her. 'Are you all right?' she asked. She always did this. Hazeline had been crying very loudly for a half-hour and she hadn't even heard that, but every time I so much as tiptoed to the bathroom for a drink of water she would come out of her room and say, 'Are you all right?'

'I'm just getting a banana for Hazeline.'

'Well, you need your rest. Don't you be running errands for her all night.'

'Peel it and put some peanut butter on it,' Hazeline called down the stairs.

I took the peeled and peanut-buttered banana up to Hazeline and waited till she ate it. I would have brought her a dozen bananas if I'd thought it would raise her spirits enough to help me. When she had finished, I said again, 'Hazeline, I need your help.'

'Listen, I can't do anything about your fox! I can't do

anything about *anything*. I just feel terrible. You don't know what it's like to lose everything you want in one night.'

I went out and shut the door and walked across the hall to my room. I saw this movie on TV one time about a king who suddenly found out that in all his castle there was not one man, not *one*, who would help him fight the Red King of Crete. This king stood on his balcony, all alone, looking over his kingdom, which would soon be lost, and his face had a terrible lonely look. That was how I felt as I stood at the window looking out over the ragged line of the forest. I felt so much like that king that I thought if I put my hand up to my face, my face would feel very old and wrinkled and lonely.

I heard the sound of the hound in the woods again, and I knew that the black fox was out there now running beneath the trees. To me she was worth a hundred turkeys and hens. I wished suddenly that I had lots of money and could go down to Aunt Millie and say, 'Here! I want to buy every hen and turkey you have on behalf of the black fox. They are all to belong to her, and she may come and get them whenever she chooses.' And Aunt Millie would tuck the money in her apron pocket and say, 'The turkeys and hens are now the property of the black fox.'

I walked over and sat on my bed and I suddenly felt

worse than ever, because I remembered how that king had saved his castle from the Red King of Crete. He sent his daughter to get Hercules, who was waiting in the nearby hills, and Hercules, shining with sweat and muscles, arrived just in time to do battle and send the entire Cretan army limping back to their ships. Then the king had only to reward Hercules with the gift of his beautiful daughter, and the story came to a satisfying end while the people of the kingdom danced and sang for joy. So I was not like the lonely king after all. I had no beautiful daughter, no muscular friend waiting in the hills, and I knew that my story would not end with wild song and joyous dancing, but with a runny nose and wet eyes.