

CLEARING GLADDER'S

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IT WASN'T GOING to be much of a holiday. Mum and Dad were too busy to get away — again. Auntie Bub was sick, so I couldn't go and stay with her at the beach. Looked like I'd have to stay at home for the whole holidays. Boring!

It didn't used to be so bad staying at home for the holidays when old Mr Gladder was alive. He used to keep the vacant area between the backs of all our houses spick and span, mowing the grass, cutting back the trees when they got too bushy and cleaning out the pond that sat right in the middle of this little park.

All the kids from the houses that backed onto the park used to play there then. The big boys used to bring their cricket bats and balls and the little boys used to catch tadpoles in the pond. The big girls giggled and played on the swings that old Mr Gladder had put up one summer, and us little girls played with dolls under the trees. I was much younger then, of course.

Just look at it now, I thought, as I leaned over the back fence. What a mess! Nobody played there any more. The grass was long and straggly, and Mr Gladder's swings had fallen over ages ago. There



POND



were branches that had been blown down during the storm we'd had a couple of nights before, and the pond itself . . . Well!

The water was scummy and smelly and stagnant. Weeds grew all along the edges and people had dumped bottles and other rubbish in the pond itself. An abandoned shopping trolley lay, wheels up, right in the middle.

Poor old Mr Gladder would have been so sad to see how neglected it all was. He'd loved this little area and had taken great pride in keeping it nice for all our families to enjoy.

Somebody should do something about it!

Without even thinking, I went out the back gate and down towards the pond. Rotten mozzies! I slapped at my legs. They must be breeding in the pond. The place was becoming a health hazard!

I began to pick up some of the fallen branches and dragged them into a pile.

"What're you doing, Amy?" Connor Jones stuck his head over his back fence, and a moment later his twin brother Brett also appeared. The twins were tall and thin and freckly with big front teeth. They'd been playing cricket in their back yard. The back yards around here are really too small for cricket, and the twins had already been in trouble with their mum for breaking the lounge-room window.

"I dunno," I said. "I just thought if we could clean this place up a bit we could all play here like we used to when old Mr Gladder was alive. But it's a big job — just look at it!"

"We could mow it," Brett said.

"We'll ask Mum if we can use the mower," added Connor, and they both disappeared.

I went on stacking up branches. Soon I had a big pile, almost up to my waist.

“Hey, Amy!” The two dark-haired kids who live in the big brick house on the opposite side came out of their back yard. I hadn’t seen them for ages.

“Can we help?” Ryan Verdi caught hold of one end of the big branch I was dragging over to the pile, and Shauna began picking up rubbish. The Jones boys arrived with the mower’s engine roaring, and the pile of branches and sticks grew higher and higher.

By lunchtime we’d done quite a bit. The twins had mowed half the area, and Ryan and I had dragged all but the very biggest branches to the pile. Shauna had a rubbish bag half full of bottles and empty cans.

“Our dad’s got a chainsaw,” Ryan said.

“I’ll ask him to come and cut up those big branches for us when he gets home from work. Then tomorrow we can stack them up.”

Mr Verdi not only cut up the branches, he got out his ride-on mower and slashed down the really high grass that the Joneses’ push mower couldn’t handle.

Mr Jones came out to see what was going on. When he saw the big pile of branches we’d stacked up, he got out his car and trailer and carted them to the dump.

“Well, what’s next, Amy?” Mr Verdi said. “What’s the game plan for tomorrow?”

They were all looking at me. I felt really funny, telling people — grown-up people — what to do.



“Well,” I said slowly, “I think we need to drain the pond. Old Mr Gladder made a sort of an outlet at the lower end there that he used to let the water drain out through. It’s a bit overgrown now. We’ll have to get all those weeds out of the way first — then we can let out the water and clean up the rubbish.”

“Tell you what,” said the twins’ dad. “You kids clear the weeds away from there and tomorrow afternoon I’ll see if I can get home a bit early and we’ll let the water out and see just how bad it is.”

“What’ll happen when we let the water out?” Connor wanted to know. “Won’t the pond dry up?”

“No.” I shook my head. “There’s a little spring at this end that seeps into it all the time. Mr Gladder used to clear the pond fairly often. Then he’d block the outlet and the pond’d fill up again.”

“You know,” my mum said, coming to join us, “once you get rid of all those weeds along the edge we could plant some flowering ground-cover plants. They’d look nice and they’d help keep the weeds down. I’ll call in and see Rani at the nursery on the way to work in the morning and ask her what would be the best sort.”

All next day we attacked the weeds around the edges and on the outlet end of the pond. It was pretty yucky working alongside that stinky, scummy water, being attacked by mosquitoes all the time. By the time Mr Jones got home from work we were all hot and sweaty and hungry. We hadn’t even stopped for lunch — just snacked on some cordial and a big bag of chips I’d found in our pantry.



“Hey! You kids! Ryan! Shauna!” Mrs Verdi was calling us from her back gate. “Come and have something to eat. Come on, you must be starving.”

She spread a red and green checked rug out on the newly mown grass under the trees, and we all sat on it and wolfed down juice and sandwiches.

Just as we finished eating Mr Jones came whistling out of his back yard, pulling on a pair of leather gloves. “OK, team,” he said. “Let’s go!”

“Wow!” he said when he reached the pond. “You kids really have been hard at it! Yes, I can see how this outlet works now. Might be a bit hard to get it open, though. Now let me see.”

He stood there scratching his head and thinking about it.

“Need a hand?” Mr Verdi suddenly appeared. “Hmm,” he said thoughtfully. “You’re going to need a mallet for that, Bob. Hang on. I’ll go and get one.”

The next thing, my mum and dad were there too. “Came over to see if we could help,” Dad said.

Soon we were all hard at it again, mums and dads and kids. Mr Jones gave one great whack with the mallet and the outlet flew open. You should have seen us spring out of the way when all that smelly, scummy water came cascading out!

“Whew!” Brett and Connor held their noses. “Boy, what a pong! Who’s going to get that trolley out of there? Ee-yuk!”

“I’ll do it.” Mr Verdi waded out through the mud. “Just as well I’ve got these gum-boots on! I’ll bet there’s miles of broken glass in here. We’ll have to rake it all up. Oh crikey, just look!” He pointed to all the tin cans, bottles and other rubbish that were appearing as the water drained away.

“I’ll get a bin!” I raced over to our back yard and brought out the big wheelie. “Faugh! That smells rank!”

“We’ll hose the trolley off,” said Shauna and Ryan, “and wheel it up the road to the supermarket.”

Mrs Jones popped her head over her back fence. “It’s getting on towards dinner time,” she said. “What do you say to a sausage sizzle? I’ve got loads of sausages in the fridge.”

“Good idea,” said my mum. “I’ll bring the bread and butter and tomato sauce.”

“And I’ll make some salad,” Mrs Verdi said.

We had a great sausage sizzle, out under the trees. It was pretty cool, really. Usually everyone just sat around inside at night, watching telly or playing computer games, and here we all were, running around playing in the soft twilight while the mums and dads sat back in their folding chairs and had a big yak.





That night it rained again, but next morning the sun came out bright and clear. The pond had had a good wash-out overnight and looked better already.

Straight after breakfast I started planting some of the ground cover Mum had bought at the nursery. Soon Connor and Brett came out and started helping me; then Ryan and Shauna appeared with some plants out of their garden.

We had been working for about half an hour when a short, tubby man with a round face and glasses got out of his car and came towards us.

"Hello, kids!" he said. "What're you up to?"

We looked at one another. We'd never seen this man around here before. He had a notebook in his hand and a camera case slung over one shoulder.

I spoke up. "We're clearing the pond

and this open area so we'll have somewhere to play. Old Mr Gladder used to keep it lovely, but since he died it's got into a horrible mess. The pond was full of rubbish and mosquito wrigglers. Even a supermarket trolley. We decided to do something about it."

Brett Jones spoke up. "Amy started it. Then we came to help."

"So did we," Ryan and Shauna chimed in.

"Well, good on you," said the man. "I'm Joe Best," he went on, handing me a small white card with his name on it. "I work for the *Daily Sun*. Someone gave me a call and told me about you kids. I think it's great what you've done. I'd like to take some photos of you working on the pond to go along with an article." He grinned at us. "How'd you like to be in the paper?"

We loved it! “Children Clean Up Mosquito-Ridden Eyesore,” ran the headline. The story went on, “Miss Amy Brownlow” — that’s me — “organised a working bee of her friends and their parents to clean up this once pretty area so that she and her friends would have somewhere to play.” The article mentioned Mr Gladder, too, which I was pleased about.

After that, we were just about famous! For a few days, anyway. People stopped by to see what we were doing and stayed to help. Even the mayor turned up.

“You’ve done a really good job here,” she told us. “From now on I’ll see that the City Parks and Gardens people maintain the area.”

That was really good, but what was even better was when they brought in playground equipment, and a sign saying “Gladder’s Pond Park.” Old Mr Gladder would have liked that.

So it turned out that my holiday wasn’t boring after all. Every day Connor and Brett and Ryan and Shauna and I played in Gladder’s Pond Park or worked on the gardens. At night our parents often had a barbecue or just brought our food outdoors.

Lots of mothers and babies come for morning walks to Gladder’s Pond Park now, and there are boys and girls playing cricket every weekend. Little girls play with dolls under the trees and there are tadpoles in the pond again.

