

For Kate, soon

K C-H



Chapter One

'SEVEN SWANS A-SWIMMING,' sang Annie, 'six geese a-laying ...'

Annie was walking along the edge of the marsh, in no particular hurry because it was the first day of the Christmas holidays. After a while she began to practise clicking her fingers in time with the numbers. 'Three,' – CLICK! – 'three French hens, two,' – CLICK! – 'two turtle doves ...'



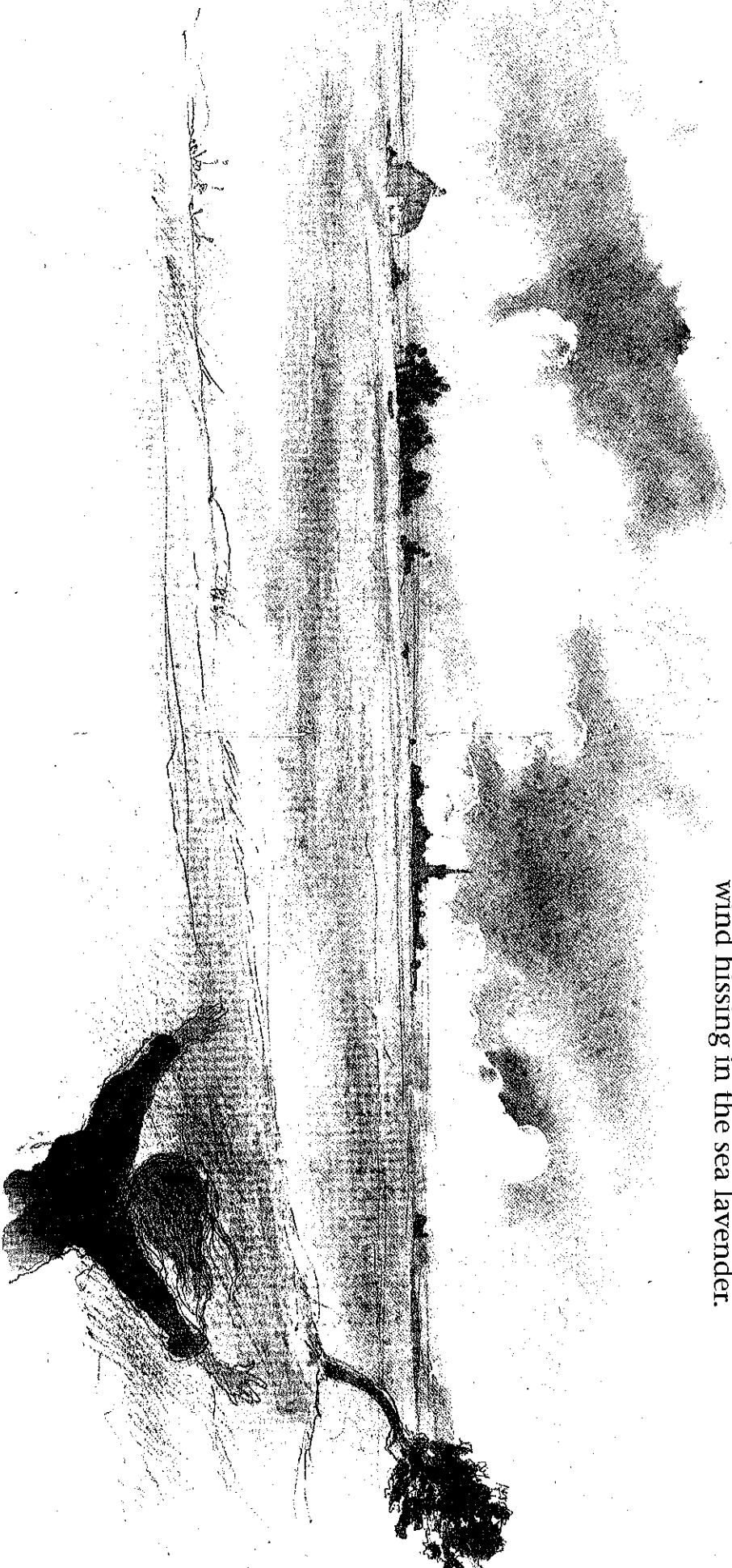
Annie was used to being on her own. She was used to talking and singing to herself, and playing games like two-handed poohsticks and patience and solitaire. She really had no choice because her sister Willa was already grown up and married to Rod and expecting a baby and, anyhow, she lived fifty miles away.

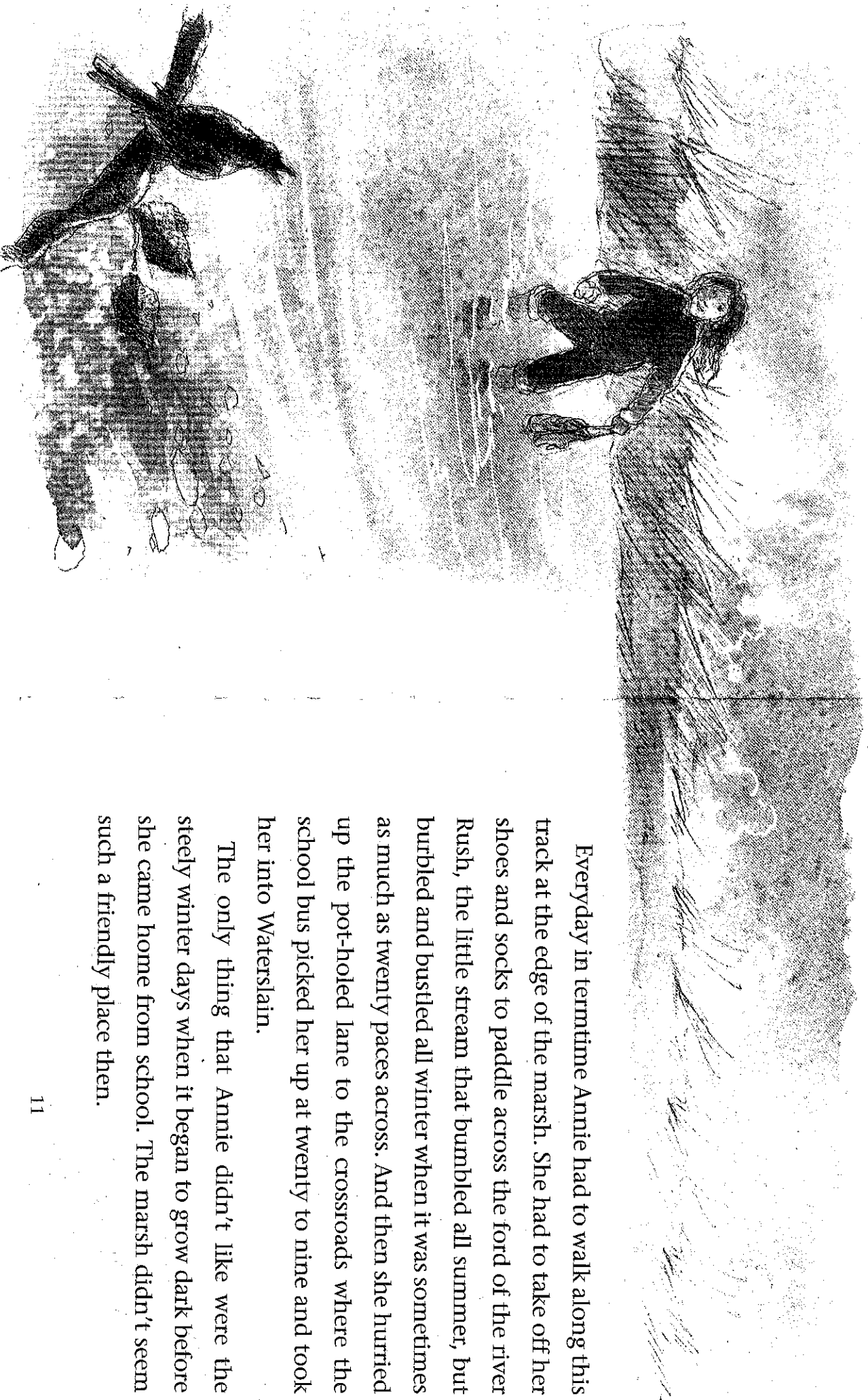


Annie's parents, Mr and Mrs Carter were rather old and not too well. Every day her mother complained that she felt as stiff as a whinging hinge. 'It's that marsh,' she kept saying. 'The damp gets into my bones.' And since his stroke, her father was only able to walk with the help of two sticks. He had become quite mild and milky, like grain softened by mist.

Their cottage stood on its own at the edge of the great marsh, two miles away from the village of Waterslain. That marsh! Empty it looked and silent it seemed, but Annie knew better.

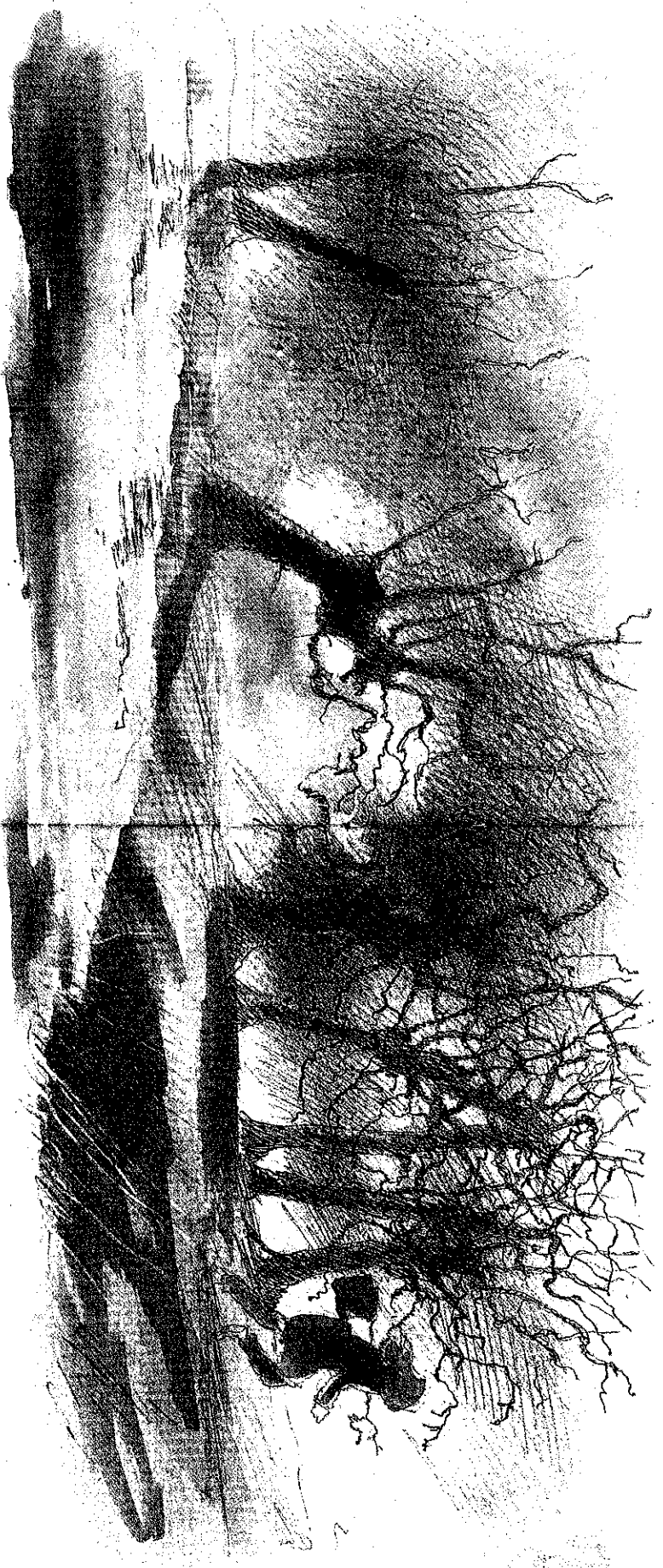
She knew about the nests among the flags and rushes, she knew where to find the dark pools teeming with shrimps and scooters. She knew the calls of the seabirds, the sucking sound of draining mud, the wind hissing in the sea lavender.





Everyday in termtime Annie had to walk along this track at the edge of the marsh. She had to take off her shoes and socks to paddle across the ford of the river Rush, the little stream that bumbled all summer, but burbled and bustled all winter when it was sometimes as much as twenty paces across. And then she hurried up the pot-holed lane to the crossroads where the school bus picked her up at twenty to nine and took her into Waterslain.

The only thing that Annie didn't like were the steely winter days when it began to grow dark before she came home from school. The marsh didn't seem such a friendly place then.



The wind whined, seabirds screamed. At night, the bogarts and bogles and other marsh spirits showed their horrible faces. Once, Annie had heard Shuck, the monster dog, coming up behind her and had only just got indoors in time.

Worst of all was the ghost who haunted the ford. Annie's mother said that he didn't mean to harm anyone, he just liked to play tricks on them and scare

them. On one occasion Mrs Carter had dropped a basket of shopping into the water, and she complained the ghost had given her a push from behind. And the farmer, Mr Elkins, told Annie he had heard shouting and whinnying at the ford, but could see no man or horse to go with them. Annie always ran down the lane after school in winter so that she could get past the ford before it was completely dark.

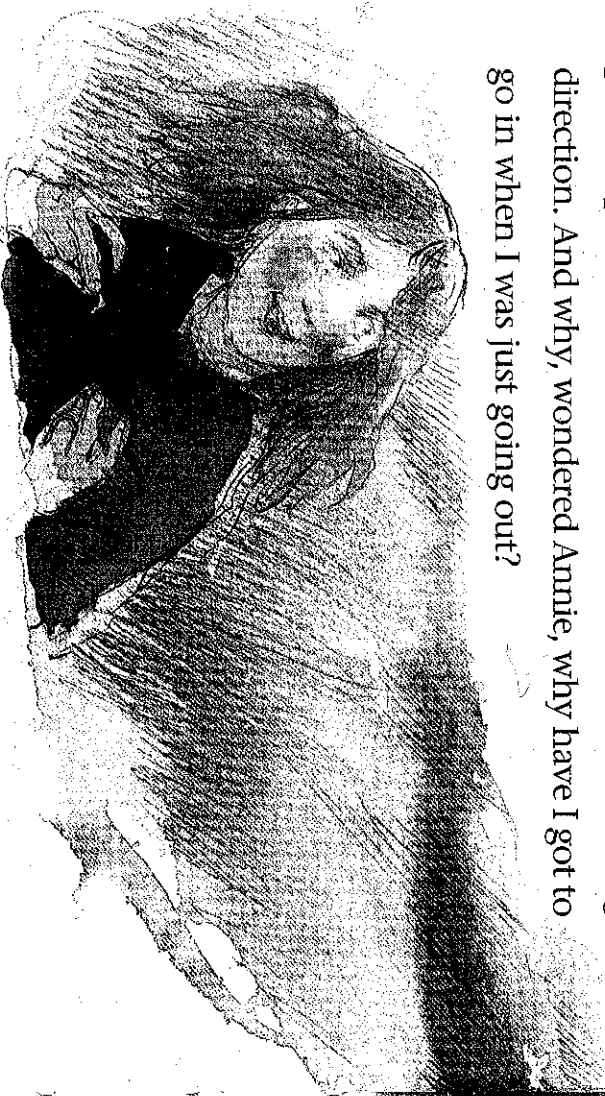
Chapter Two

'TWO TURTLE DOVES,' sang Annie – CLICK! – 'and a partridge in a pear tree.'

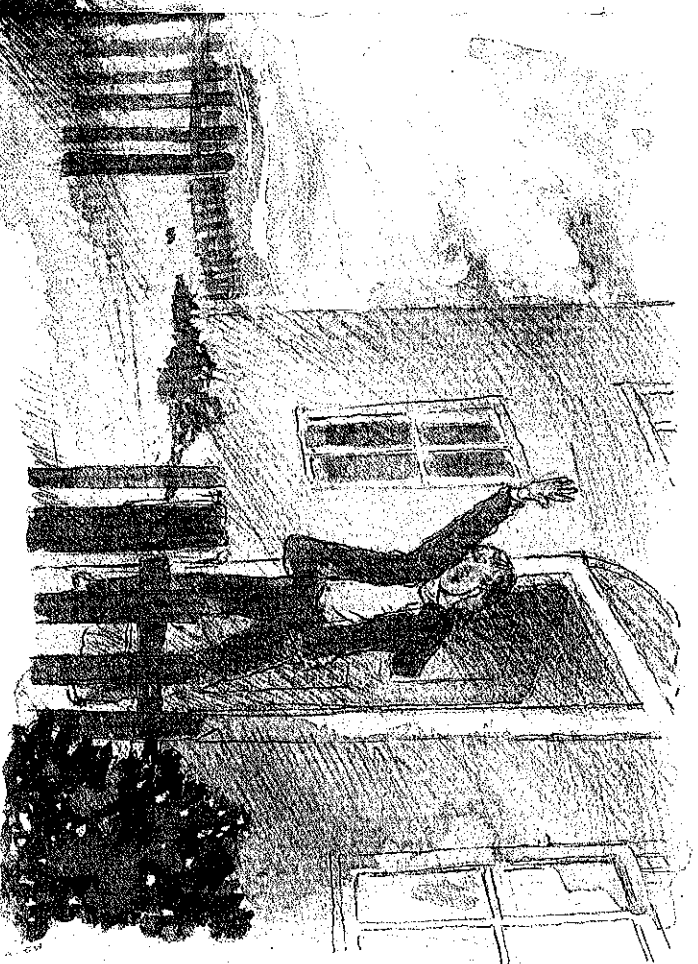
'An-nie! An-nie!'

Annie turned round and saw her mother standing at the door of their cottage, waving.

'What?' she shouted. 'What is it?' But the wind picked up her words and carried them off in the wrong direction. And why, wondered Annie, why have I got to go in when I was just going out?



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'Lunch!' called her mother as soon as she heard Annie open the door and felt a tide of chill air washing round her ankles.

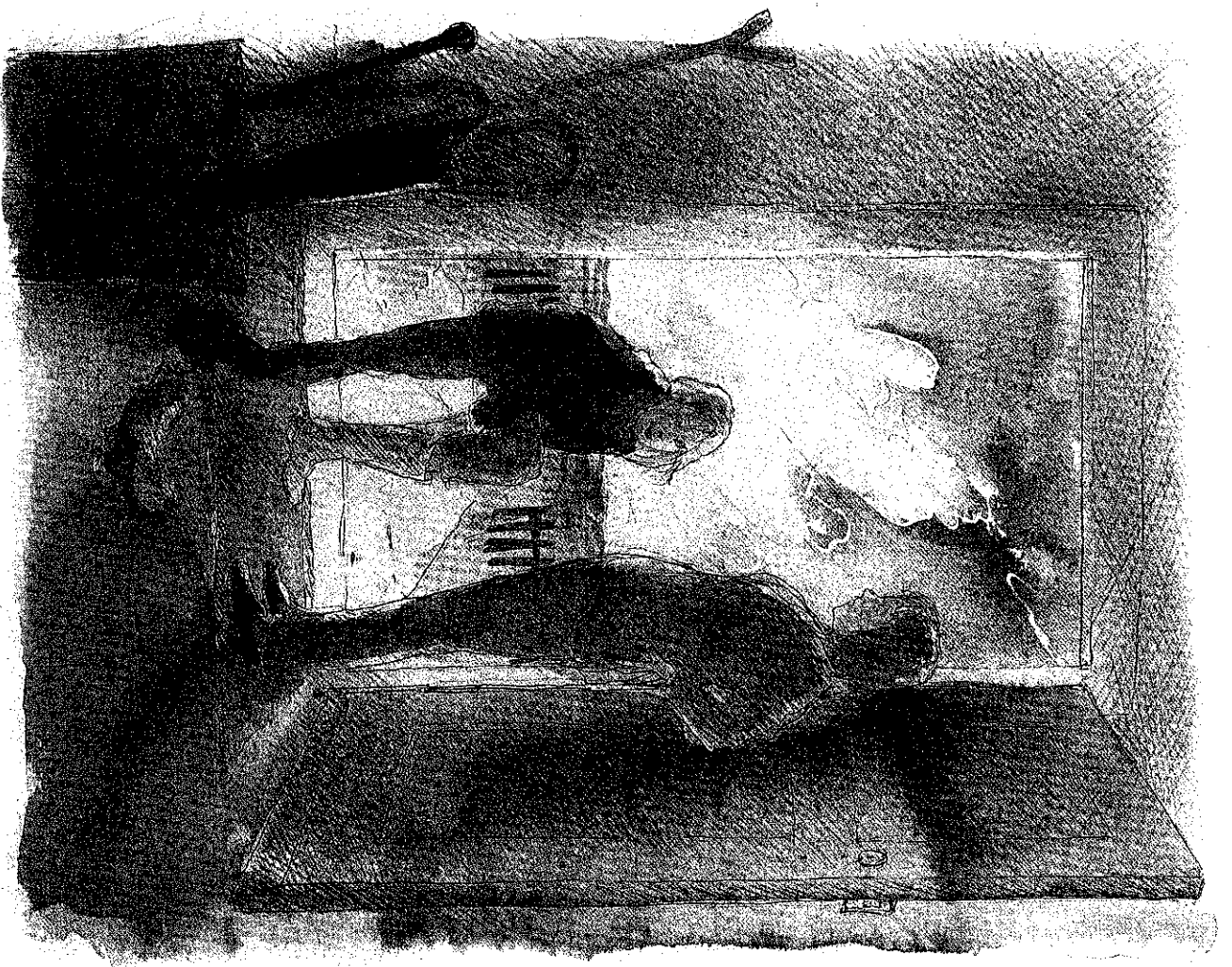
'Your sister's just been on the telephone. She's coming home tomorrow.'

'Willal!' cried Annie.

'You know the baby's due on Christmas Day?'

'Of course I know,' said Annie.

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'Well, Willa says Rod can't get home now until early in the New Year.'

'Why not?' asked Annie.

'Just when she needs him,' said Annie's mother. 'Can you imagine? Thousands of miles away on the Indian Ocean.'

'I wouldn't like to marry a sailor,' said Annie.

'So she's coming tomorrow,' her mother repeated, and then she smiled at Annie. 'She wants a bit of company.'

'What about the baby?' asked Annie.

'She'll have the baby in the cottage hospital,' said her mother. 'Doctor Grant has arranged that.'

'How long will she be in there?'

'Two days or seven days,' said Annie's mother. 'That's the rule.'

'Two, I hope,' said Annie. 'Then it can sleep in my room.'

'It can sleep with Willa,' said her mother. 'Oh! That marsh. The damp gets into my bones.'