

At the Bottom of the Garden
a short story by Jo Walton

Foreword

I wrote this on a Sunday evening after reading one too many twee bed-time stories about flower fairies and pastel-coloured children. This story gets a remarkably uniform reaction out of people. Absolutely everyone's response has been "Ugh".

At the Bottom of the Garden

Katie Mae was sitting cross-legged on the lawn carefully pulling the wings off a fairy. The wings were lilac and gold and slightly iridescent. She had one wing almost completely detached. The fairy was still struggling feebly, squeezed in Katie Mae's firm grip. Katie Mae gave the task all her attention. One of her golden plaits was coming slightly undone, and there was mud and a little ichor on the bodice of her pink cotton dress. "What you got?" Brian's dirty face appeared over the wall that separated their gardens. "Fairy," said Katie Mae casually, and showed him, keeping a tight grip on it. "Cool. Where'd you get it?" Brian's hands joined his face, and shortly the rest of his body followed as he squirmed over the red bricks to land on the grass beside Katie Mae. "Here." Katie Mae resumed her tugging. "How'd you catch it?" Brian peered interestedly at the fairy. It appeared to be a little man, about six inches long, with butterflywings. Brian flung himself down full length beside Katie Mae, a position the grass-stains on his t-shirt marked as habitual. "It was sitting on a flower," said Katie Mae, in a tone of disgust. "I just crept up and grabbed it. It tried to bite me, but I stopped that." "What you going to do with it?" Brian sat up again and prodded it tentatively. It squirmed as much as it could, which was not very much. "Get the wings off so it can't fly away." Katie Mae sighed at the idiocy of boys who required the obvious explained. Just then the wing came off, with another leaking of ichor. The fairy made a little whimpering noise. "I can see that," said Brian. He picked up the detached wing and folded and unfolded it a few times. "Pretty," he said, generously. "But what are you going to do with it then?" "Well I was going to put it in my Barbie house and dress it up in Ken's clothes, though it's a little bit too small I think. But I think it's going to die," said Katie Mae. "I think so too," said Brian. "Oh well. We could have a funeral." "We had a funeral for the hedgehog," Katie Mae reminded him. "I'm bored with funerals." The other wing started to peel away, and she bent her

concentration on it. "They're fixed on really tough below," she said.

"The top part's easy. But I think I'm getting the hang of it, it won't take so long next time. There it comes." The other wing came off. The fairy leaked more ichor, but did not cry this time. His eyes were closed and his face screwed up. "What did you come round for, anyway?" Katie Mae asked, realising now that her task was done that Brian was more than just an appreciative audience.

"Oh, I forgot," Brian said. "My mum said we could go swimming, and we could take you if your mum will let you, and she's gone round the front to ask your mum."

"Yowsa!" said Katie Mae, dropping the fairy and stamping on it hard.

Then she pelted at top speed up the garden towards the house, Brian close at her heels.

"It's so sweet the way they play together," Katie Mae's mother said to Brian's mother as the children hurtled towards the kitchen door. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the garden, next door's cat was eating the remains of the fairy.

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