

On her way to a baby-sitting job, this teen-age girl took a short cut—which led to terror!



The gulping sand pulled me down till only my head and arms were free.

I WAS CAUGHT IN QUICKSAND!

By MARILYN WINDLE as told to Arden Eidell

IT STARTED OUT as a real fun day. I'd gone roller skating that Saturday afternoon, and later two friends, Tobey Krulik and Sue Moran, stopped by.

We went to the Sweet Shop, where all the teen-agers get together, and then to Sue's house, where we talked and talked.

Time just flew. When Sue's father said it was 9:30 already, I could hardly believe it. I knew my mother would be worrying about me being out so long, so I phoned her.

She was worried about the late hour all right, but she also was upset because she hadn't been able to get in touch with me. My sister Jo Ann and her husband had to go out that evening and wanted me to baby-sit with their two little boys.

It's not far to Jo Ann's, maybe a 20-minute walk along the curving streets of the new housing development where we live in Hazlet, N.J. But I felt I should get there as soon as possible. So when I came to where Coleridge Avenue dead-ends, I decided not to go the long way round by the streets. Instead, I took a short cut across the Gully, a long, narrow ravine that cuts our development in two.

I'd never done this before. The Gully is an odd place—even kind of spooky. It's no more than 200 feet wide, and the back yards of houses

line it on both sides. But it's full of brush and swamp grass, and the only paths are half-hidden ones that neighborhood boys have made when they go down there to hunt frogs, play cowboys, and, I guess, sneak cigarettes.

The path I took led along the rim of the Gully and then cut down across a sluggish little creek. The boys had put steppingstones across, but they looked pretty wobbly. So I took off my bobby socks and my new gray-and-black moccasins (I'd worn them only once before) and rolled my slacks above my ankles.

The steppingstones were cold on my bare feet. It felt good when my toes touched the warmer ground on the other side—even if it was a bit goeey and greasy.

I didn't know exactly where to go from there. Although a lot of the breaks in the tall weeds looked like paths, I wasn't sure. Lights from the houses along the Gully's rim shone in my face and made it hard to see the ground ahead. It was like wading up to your neck in darkness.

But I had to hurry; so I plunged ahead, picking my way through the tufts of weeds. The sharp blades of the swamp grass nipped at my bare ankles like insects. Less than 100 feet ahead were the back lawns of the houses.

Suddenly, a puddle stopped me short. It was too wide to jump across. Could I wade through

it? I tested it with my toe and found there was only a skim of water on the surface of the ground, so I stepped briskly into the puddle—and the earth suddenly came alive!

My legs sank into the ground as if it had opened up to swallow them, and each time I pulled away, the wet, rippling muscles of sand dragged me down deeper!

Screaming and sobbing and thrashing about wildly, I fell forward as my arms flailed for solid ground. But there was none!

I pulled myself upright, kicked and twisted, and toppled over again as the sand slid past my waist. I landed with my face a few inches from my moccasins, which I had dropped and which were sinking, too. In my unreasoning terror, their loss somehow seemed terribly important. I strained to grab them and tuck them under my arm—just as the gulping ground licked up around my shoulders.

"Mommy! Mommy! Oh, Mommy, please help me!" I screamed. But the only hands that reached out to me were the inhuman ones which quickly pulled me down and down until only my head and arms remained free.

DEATH WAS AN INCH below my chin. "God! I don't want to die this way!"

The sand brushed my cheek. "God, help me!"

I jerked back my head; above me waved the wispy blades of the swamp grass. I strained out, and my fingers clutched a bunch of them!

I pulled. The grass swayed toward me; my head slipped backward; the sand licked again at my cheek. But the grass bent only so far and then held firm—a 15-inch lifeline that was somehow anchored in the shifting sand. It seemed unbelievable, but I wasn't sinking any more!

Using both hands, I tried to pull myself out. But each time, I strained forward only an inch or so—and then fell back.

The lights were so cold and seemed so far away. As I sobbed to myself, only the handful of coarse, rough grass seemed comforting.

Then all of a sudden a man's voice shouted: "Who's out there?" and a woman's voice asked: "Who are you?"

It seems strange, but I answered just like a little girl lost in a crowd. "I'm Marilyn Windle. I live at 4 Ivy Place. Help me, please!"

From then on, things moved fast. The woman (who I learned later was Mrs. Edward Haley) kept up a conversation with me while her husband tried to pick his way through the swamp. The first person I actually saw, however, was Patrolman Edward Schramm, one of the three Raritan Township policemen who had answered the Haleys' phone call for assistance.

But Patrolman Schramm's arrival didn't reassure me: a moment after he came into view, he disappeared up to his waist in quicksand! When he finally had fought his way to me, he held out his hand—and I refused to take it. Keeping a firm grip on the clump of grass seemed like greater security to me!

Finally, another member of the rescue party, Sgt. William Sparks, appeared above me. He obviously was standing on solid ground; so when he reached down, I eagerly clutched his hands. After a few minutes of pulling and tugging, he yanked me free.

Half an hour in the grasp of murderous quicksand had left me sobbing, hysterical, wet, and dirty. But I really wasn't hurt. The sand and water, however, were pretty rough on my new moccasins, which—for reasons I'll never understand—were still clutched tightly under my arm!