

## NOTHING IN THIS WORLD BELONGS TO JOSIE

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Despite the threatened thunderstorm, Josie knew she'd go today. The plan was set. Everything was ready. She couldn't wait any longer. From the front porch, she could hear Uncle Lyle riding that rocking chair, back and forth like he was in the saddle, hunting for bear. Even though she'd avoided him this afternoon, stayed inside, kept busy, she knew exactly what he was doing out there.

That porch rocker gave him a view of the road all the way to the livestock market. Tuesdays they sold horses. And rich women bought horses. Uncle Lyle loved to comment on the fancy ladies who came on Tuesdays with their red cowboy boots and their sparkly earrings. Too many afternoons to count she'd been forced to sit with Uncle Lyle and listen to his running commentary on women. What they were good for, how they made him feel, why they liked him, why he liked them. Since she was little, to get her out of the way, she'd been sent with Uncle Lyle.

"Sheeeet, girl, you as slow as they come. I asked for beer, I want it today, not next week."

"In a minute," she muttered.

He wasn't really her uncle. An orphan, he'd attached himself to Gram by doing odd chores until she finally relented and let him move into the farmhand's empty room in the back of the barn. There hadn't been a farmhand in eons. The way Gram told it, Lyle and her father had grown up like family, jumping from the hayloft and scrapping just like brothers. They'd been inseparable.

Pa had sailed through Tech Ed. Lyle had barely graduated. When her father found a job driving for the milk coop, Lyle tried working too, but he couldn't stay employed. Veiled references to miscellaneous minor offenses crept into the dinner table conversation, but the family joked and forgave him because he made himself useful around the farm.

When Pa married his high school sweetheart, Gram gave him sixteen acres up by the barn. Lyle went off to see the world then, appearing three years later after Hatcher and she were born. Lyle moved back into the farmhand's room, but spent all his free time in the trailer on Pa's sixteen acres. Somehow though, when Pa couldn't make the trailer payments, everyone ended up back at Gram's.

Oh, Josie knew that had something to do with Uncle Lyle too. Mama had left in a hurry. Although no one talked about it, Josie could see it in her father's face when Lyle came in the room. The lines under her father's skin—veins or muscles, she wasn't sure which—all drew up taut so that if she had touched them she knew they'd be hard and throbbing, the way her head felt when she had a migraine. Ready to explode.

After Mama left, the farm went down, a slow slide into neglect that even as a little girl she noticed. Lyle stopped hanging around and started drinking more. Pa would leave the milking machine running or cut hay and forget to bail it. If Hatcher asked Lyle to help, Pa would pull out his belt and tell Hatcher that Lyle wasn't family and it wasn't right to tell strangers your business.

So Gram made room for the three of them, and, whenever she was out, Uncle Lyle babysat by default because Pa was driving the milk truck up to Fort Smith and back, twelve

hours round trip. Ten years since Mama left, ten years for Uncle Lyle to be the boss of her, and make her do what he wanted. She was sick of it, sick to death.

“Josie, I’m thirsty,” he whined from outside.

“Aren’t we all,” she mumbled under her breath, leaving the hot iron to find the long-necked brown bottle he craved. The kitchen floor was cool on her bare feet. Through the parlor window she could see the shape of him in the porch rocker, a solid blot on the brown landscape which stretched for miles on the far side of the road. Wiping her face and neck with the hem of her dress, she shoved the screen door with her shoulder and stuck the beer within his reach.

“Here,” she said.

“Aw, Josie, don’t be mad at me, sweetie. We’re all poor wandering souls with nothing but what’s on our backs and we gotta love each other. Please don’t be mad. The sun’s out. The grass is green. Your Pa’s gonna have the hay money on Saturday. Why don’t we go find you a new dress Saturday evening? Whatd’ya say?”

When he leaned to take the beer, she had to step closer so he wouldn’t drop it. His other hand snaked around and grabbed her wrist.

“Come sit with me, babe. I’m lonely.”

“You’ve got your fancy horse ladies today, you don’t need me.”

With a sharp twist, she freed herself. The screen door slammed behind her.

“Aww, Jose, that ain’t nice. Life’s too short to be mad.”

She could hear him moaning on the porch, but she turned up the radio and shoved the iron along the cloth. The sooner she finished Gram’s list, the sooner she could go. She wouldn’t think about what Gram would do next week when there wasn’t anyone there to help.

From the porch, the floorboards creaked and groaned. If she had to guess, Lyle’d spied a good-looking woman. That always made him rock faster. When she was little, he would pull her up onto his lap, smooth her dress, and whisper in her ear. He made up things about those women. He described the houses where they lived. Satin sheets and closets jammed with glittering outfits and dozens of shoes. Swinging her bare feet, she would fiddle with an empty buttonhole and imagine what it would be like to live like that.

One morning she woke up, exhausted before the day started. She was sixteen and she knew she had to get away. She was done with his stories. Like those women, she yearned to be free to ride wherever she wanted in a big new car and see the world. Figuring out a way to do that had been harder. But she’d been thinking and planning for months now, and today was the beginning.

After she hung the shirtwaist in the closet, she snuck a look at Gram’s jewelry box. Used to be, Gram would let her sit on the wide saggy bed and try on the costume jewelry while she told her about her grandfather Henry. He died the year Hatcher was born, eaten up with cancer, Gram said. Josie never knew him. But Gram said he died happy at last to have a grandson to continue the family name.

Without saying anything, Josie thought it was the stupidest idea in the world. You lived for today, no point in putting all your money on the future or you’d be stuck forever in a broken down farmhouse. She’d bet a million dollars those women in their spangled leather boots didn’t care about carrying on the family name or farming or worrying whether it rained at the right time. They had it all, not just one pitiful box of reminders of a dead man and youthful dreams long faded. She meant to have it all, too.

She had to hurry. Marcus was going to meet her at the trestle. He knew how to board

the train without anyone knowing. You didn't need a ticket until Richmond, he'd told her. It had taken her months to convince him she was serious about going.

They'd met at church. Encouraged to share hymnals, he had touched her hand accidentally one Sunday. She thought he'd never stop apologizing, which was sweet since Uncle Lyle just touched whatever he wanted and never apologized for anything. Marcus sent her bible verses on fine white paper. Finally, when she saw he wasn't just teasing her, she gave him one of Gram's hand-stitched handkerchiefs. In the next letter he told her he put it under his pillow. That was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her.

When she asked him about his relatives in Washington, he mentioned the train. That was it, she thought, the way out.

One Sunday, in her most respectable tone, she asked Gram for permission to walk with Marcus after church. He told her about books and constellations and history. He offered to take her to see the ocean, and she let him kiss her. What did it matter, if it worked. If he would take her away from here.

When he finally agreed and started making plans, she didn't have the heart to tell him she wasn't going all the way to the ocean with him. Surely in the city she could make enough money to live on her own. Better than this. And he would understand that she had to try, that she couldn't go home.

Next to the jewelry box on Gram's dresser, she left the note she'd written a week ago. *Tell Pa I love him. I'll write when I can.* She wanted to tell Gram not to worry, but she'd worry no matter what so she left it alone. Before she shut the door, she looked back. The small white square looked sad and somehow helpless, propped up as if it were too weak to stand on its own. Gram had to understand there was no future for her here.

Standing at the top of the stairs, she listened for a lull in the rocking that might signal one of Lyle's catnaps. Without a breeze, the stillness engulfed her. Poised on the top step, she closed her eyes for a minute, needy for a final message from the ghosts of her childhood. Nothing moved in the stifling summer afternoon. No cow lowed, no car skittered gravel on the road. While she could see her mother's clear eyes smiling at her in a long ago memory, there were no whispers of good wishes or good-byes. She was alone.

Grabbing the ancient knapsack that she'd rescued from the attic, she tiptoed down and slid out the kitchen door. A clump of birch behind the barn offered a brief stripe of shade that she followed to the side road, doubling back to the main road once the house was out of sight.

"Hey," Marcus called from under the railroad bridge. She moved out of the glare and took his offered hand. The shade there was lovely and cool.

"Did they give you a hard time?" he asked, stroking her fingers and breathing out warm air like a spring breeze.

"Nah, they'll be fine. Hatcher'll have them all laughing before dinner's over."

"What about your father? Are you sure he won't come looking for you?"

"He doesn't care about much since Mama left, and anyway, he has to work late today. He won't be able to go anywhere."

"You are so beautiful, Josie. With the sunlight in your hair, you look like a goddess."

She didn't know what to say. It wasn't true, just Marcus trying to make up to her. Brambles stuck to her stockings and pricked her maddeningly. Her mother's shoes, too big for her and misshapen from being jammed in a box in the back of the closet, wobbled when she walked. She flicked the hair off her forehead where it stuck from the heat.

“Where’s your suitcase?” he asked.

“I put what I needed in my backpack.”

“Oh,” he said. When he saw her noticing his shiny brown suitcase, he blushed. “My father gave me this for my twenty-first birthday. *Great big world out there, son, go get ’em.*”

Marcus didn’t sound convinced, but that was his problem.

“Well, when do we climb up?” she asked

“Not for a while. Let’s sit here where it’s shady.”

“I don’t want to miss the train. When’s it coming?”

“In a while. I’ll tell you when.”

“I’m not good at surprises. And you don’t want to be dragging me up because I’m stuck underneath somewhere.” She craned her head to analyze the trestle. Beyond the puzzle of wooden lines, the rails glistened between her and the blue dome of cloudless sky. If the bridge hadn’t been there, she might have floated up and up, disappearing into the azure void.

“Is it soon?” she couldn’t help herself.

“Four-forty,” he gave in, “Plenty of time. I brought something to read. I’ll read to you.”

“You go ahead, I’m fine.”

“Ah, come on, you can sit on my suitcase. Your dress won’t get dirty.”

He tugged on her hand, and she realized he still held it. She gave him the hardest stare she could muster. He let go.

Leaning against a support post, she tried not to look at him. She analyzed how the bridge was constructed. Tall poles ran up to the tracks in a long row, maybe ten on each side. Attached to the poles, crossbeams of lumber almost as thick, connected the poles to each other. A pattern of sun and shadows flickered on the leaves and on the river underneath. Here in the woods no single shape existed separately. The shadows ran together, shifting in the breeze that had come from nowhere. With a soft crescendo of leaf against leaf, the shadows changed and then, as if unnerved by the transformation, adopted their original shape. Her feet were perspiring in her mother’s shoes.

Marcus extracted a blanket from his suitcase and fought the latches to close it again. He owned more than she did. In deep concentration he spread the blanket on the flattest piece of the hillside he could find and sat down. After he took off his shirt, he laid it across the suitcase, taking care to keep the shoulders square so it wouldn’t wrinkle. In his undershirt, he flexed his shoulders as if he were squaring off for a fight. His muscles shone with perspiration.

“It’s pretty comfortable down here, Miss Josie,” he offered.

“I’m fine.”

“For a traveling companion, you aren’t being very hospitable.”

When she didn’t move, he pulled a small book from his pocket and started to read. He had fingers like a woman, slender and well-manicured, the nails curved in perfect half-moons. The white undershirt glowed in the woody dimness.

After a little bit, he began to read the words out loud. She recognized it as poetry. With the birds and the river, she had trouble hearing. She moved closer. Her feet stung on the hot plastic liners in her mother’s shoes. Sitting on the edge of the blanket, she slipped her feet out of the shoes. She wished she’d taken something else to remind her of her mother. And she’d forgotten to leave a note for Hatcher. He’d be hurt.

Like a snake charmer, Marcus strung the words out in long lines that wound themselves around her. Each phrase slithered, weaving itself into the heavy air, pulling her into

its subtle, hypnotic rhythm. He turned the pages gracefully and, smoothing down the next one, he read.

Marcus was right. He'd planned all this for her because she'd asked, and she ought to be more appreciative. Soon enough she'd be on her own, so what did it matter, this small concession. Between poems, he inched closer on the blanket. In the afternoon heat, her head drooped. He read on. She lay back and looked at the sky through the leaves and the train tracks. An unfamiliar view, something she hadn't seen before, part of her new life.

As she daydreamed, Marcus's voice filtered in and out. Afraid he'd lose track of time, she wanted to ask again about the train, but his voice held her attention. The long vowels and the sliding syllables entranced her. They hinted at flowing gowns and rainbow gardens where gentlemen waltzed ladies in wide, gracious circles on polished marble. Marcus's fingers wove themselves into her hair, moving in slow circles on her neck and shoulders. The poetry sang in her head. With the warmth and the release of tension, she relaxed. The farm seemed a long time ago.

"What about the train?"

"Not long now," he whispered, "Just rest, Josie. I'll tell you when."

She could feel the heat from his body, closer now. His hand moved to her chest, but she hardly cared. When she opened her eyes, he was right there. His eyes, curious and eager, glistened like Gram's rhinestones.

"I love you, Josie. I'm going to show you the ocean. You've never seen anything like it. It moves constantly, endlessly. The water rushes and swirls, cold and furious up to the beach, then it turns all lazy and warm. Lingers on the sand, drains into the earth until it's only the sand again."

His hands and his voice moved over her as if in an ancient ritual of prayer. And she lay still, straining to hear, patiently waiting for her chance to own the world.