

Adversaries

1. High Noon

When I eased into the kitchen from the backdoor, Auntie was sitting at the table shucking corn. Her hair was white as the cotton apron she wore pinned to her faded, flowered housedress, and her gold earrings caught the line of afternoon sunlight coming through the windows. Their shine caught my eye and a few moments passed before I noticed she was giving me an evil look from under her hooded eyelids. The iris of her eyes were a light hazel and when she looked at me, it made me think of the pictures of wolves my kindergarten teacher had shown us. Whenever she looked at me with those eyes, I felt like she had it in for me, like she was going to do something bad to me. For the thousandth time today, I wished that Mama and Daddy hadn't gone out to Knoxville College for that meeting. I was four. Why did I have to have a babysitter? Especially Auntie.

"Little girl," she finally said, "where you been?" Her voice reminded me of the threatening, low growl that Mrs. Hale's dog, Butch, makes when the kids tease him.

I lowered my head, afraid to look directly at her. "Outside," I whispered, hand in my hair, twisting two of my plaits together.

She said nothing for a time. Just stared at me. I hated having to wait for her to start in on me about whatever she thought I'd done wrong; waiting made me feel twitchy,

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but I told myself to stay still while I watched for her next move.

She was mad at me. I knew that for sure. My playmate, Shirley, had told me why in that Mama-doll voice of hers. Auntie, she said, had been standing on the porch yelling for me to come home, and, all of a sudden, she'd rushed across the street to The Square. Which was the spot in the middle of Austin Homes Projects where all the neighborhood kids played. They'd scattered when they saw Auntie coming cause everybody could tell by the way she was walking that she was mad. Shirley hadn't moved fast enough, and Auntie had caught up with her. Auntie started shaking her like a rag doll, hollerin for Shirley to tell her quick where I was. Shirley told her she didn't know, cryin and tryin to get away from Auntie at the same time. Shirley said she was so scared she'd almost peed on herself. And that the only thing that saved her was her mama runnin out of the house to find out what was the matter. That's when she got away from Auntie and took off to look for me. Everybody at The Square knew I was scared of Auntie. For that matter, they were scared of her, too.

At the end of Shirley's story, Evelyne had said: "Uh, oh," tugged at her top plait, and looked around for Auntie, like she was figuring out which way to run if she had to.

Shirley had said in that dolly voice of hers: "She's really, really mad at you." Then she'd pushed her thumb into her mouth, like she always did when she was excited.

I didn't say a word, just dropped the jacks Evelyne had been tryin to teach me to play, and started home.

Now that I was here, what was Auntie gonna do? Wondering gave me the shakes. All I could do was wait and watch.

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"Didn't you hear me callin you, girl?" Auntie's voice was rising like the summer heat while her wolfie-eyes were boring little holes into my skull.

I shook my head no. Because of the noise at The Square, I really didn't hear her. Like usual, The Screaming Meemies kept up a lot of racket on Saturday morning. That's why Daddy called us that.

Grunting, she pushed herself up from the kitchen table. "What's that you got there in yo hand, young un?" Auntie pointed at my hand with the ear of corn she was holding.

Looking down at my fist, I realized I was still clutching one of the marbles we used to play Jacks. I didn't want to show her because Auntie didn't hold with playin games. She said they were sinful idleness and a waste of time. I sighed. Seems like I couldn't do anything right for her. She made me feel like the taste of castor oil Mama had me take sometimes.

"Come here," she growled. "Lemme see what's in yo hand."

I went slowly, keeping some distance between us in case I had to run. Finally, I stuck my hand out and opened my fingers. The opaque blue of the marble gleamed in my dirty, dusty hand like a stolen jewel.

She spied it and I saw danger in her eyes. She took a step closer to me. "You been playing with marbles, have ya?"

I moved backwards from her, and, in spite of my fear, anger rose up in my mouth. I lifted my eyes and met hers. "Daddy lets me," I answered with a tad too much backbone.

Wrong answer. Her face changed and I knew I'd gone too far. "I ain't yo Daddy and I ain't having no sass from you!" As she shouted at me, spit flew from her mouth. "The Lord don't like a sassy-mouth child! Don't nobody like a sassy mouth! Ya better learn! They string yo black

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ass up for sassiness. Get outside right now and get me some switches. You need a lesson!"

I flew out of the door and down the back steps like a blue streak. As I went, she hollered: "And make sure you get good, strong ones. Don't bring me no little ones that's gonna break. Else I'll whup yo behind harder."

2. In the Backyard

Down in the backyard, I let out a big sigh, wondering how I'd managed to get on Auntie's bad side. I wasn't trying to. It was that mouth of mine. It had the habit of saying things grownups didn't like to hear. But what was wrong with games? I didn't understand. It was so unfair when grownups made rules you had to follow that didn't make sense. I was just trying to learn Jacks from Evelyne so the kids wouldn't make fun of me. And now look at what happened. Auntie was gonna give me a lickin.

Chills went up my back as I realized that Auntie had never whipped me. Not even the time I'd bounced up and down on her bed; she'd only screamed at me then, and, boy-oh-boy, that had been scary enough. Tears puddled in my eyes, and I sat down under a tree and bawled. Auntie musta heard me cause she shouted down: "Shut up that noise out there! You hear me? You don't want me to come down there! Shut up that cryin right now!"

But I didn't. Sobbing, I stumbled around in my backyard, breaking off tree branches for switches, and rubbing at the tears rolling down my cheeks. After a while, I wiped my wet, dusty hands on my blue overalls. My dirty hands left brown streaks on them. Looking down at myself, I frowned. I'd probably get in more trouble with her for getting my clothes dirty. Sighing, I pushed back the blue clothespins clamped to the ends of each of my tiny plaits;

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they swarmed about my face like bees. Auntie fussed about so many things I did. Not like Grandmama.

Thinking about my grandmama made me cry again. I wished I was in Grandmama's kitchen now. Where it smelled of hot, buttery rolls and brownies baking in the oven. Where I could play and nobody fussed or frowned at me. Where Grandmama smiled, put her arms around me, kissed me, and whispered: *I love you*. Where was she?

In the box, my mind whispered. *She was in that box they closed up at church.*

No! I screamed back at my mind. *No, no, no!*

At that moment, a woman's voice rang out in song from the church next door to our house. I choked off a sob and looked across the empty lot that stood between our back yard and the one-room church, peeling and fading to gray. What she was singing was full of rainy day, sad notes. Like the song they'd sung at church the day Grandmama was in the box. I'd put that memory in a shutaway place I'd made in my mind, so I wouldn't have to think about it. I didn't want to now, but the song was letting hurt-bad memories leak out from the shutaway place. And I couldn't stop them.

Everybody was there at my church. Me, Mama, Daddy, Aunt Claire, Uncle Matt, Uncle Frank, Aunt Helen, Reverend Dykes, and the Sunday church people. But it wasn't Sunday. And why was a big box in front of the altar with white and red and yellow flowers all around? When I looked up at Daddy sitting beside me, his chocolate face was all covered with tears. That scared me cause I'd never seen tears on his face, and, then, I heard somebody else crying really loud, and I looked to my right, and saw my Uncle Matt with tears on his face, and that scared me, too, cause I love my Uncle Matt almost as much as Daddy. I frowned and looked up at Mama sitting on the other side of me, and I squeezed her hand real

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tight, wanting to ask why they were cryin, but something told me not to, and I kept quiet.

Then, pretty soon, people lined up like we do in kindergarten for lunch, but I didn't see any food to eat, just the church people passing by the box in front. And then we lined up and walked by the box, but I couldn't see what was in it until Mama lifted me in her arms, holding me up above it, and I looked down. Grandmama was in there all dressed up. But she didn't have her glasses on and her eyes were closed. She was asleep. But why was she asleep in a box at church?

So I asked: "Why is Grandmama sleeping in the box, Mama?"

And Mama said: "She's not sleeping, honey. Grandmama has gone away."

And I said: "Is she coming back, Mama?"

And Mama said: "No, honey, she's not."

But I knew Grandmama wouldn't just leave me. Why was she gone? Before I could ask, Mama started turning away, taking me away from Grandmama.

I stretched out my hand to reach her before she could go away. Because I didn't want her to go; I couldn't let her go. I reached back with all my might over Mama's shoulder. Then I opened my mouth and screamed and screamed: "No! Come back!" Mama kept walking, and I kept screaming: "No! No! Come back, come back, Grandmama!"

It hurt to remember. Hurt badder than when I scraped both my knees bloody. Badder than when somebody stole Silky, my cocker spaniel. I didn't want to feel anymore hurt in my chest, so I pushed the picture memories back into the shutaway place, locked it, and made myself think of magic spells. If I could make the right one, I would swoosh my magic wand, make Grandmama come back right now, and Auntie disappear. It was then that I

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suddenly remembered Evelyne telling me that she had overheard her mother saying that my Grandmama had passed away. Evelyne had said she asked her mama where you passed to, and could you come back. Her mama didn't say anything about where; she just told Evelyne that you couldn't come back. This time, I sensed, magic spells wouldn't work. Loneliness made me lift my face to the sky. It was where Mama said Grandmama had gone. The sky was so big, so blue, so wide. Grandmama was lost in it somewhere. And I'd never find her again. Never see her again. The thought pierced my heart deep in its core.

3. Duel

I didn't want to go back inside to Auntie, but I couldn't see anyway not to, so I climbed the back steps, holding the branches I'd gathered behind me. At the top of the steps, I hesitated, and quietly peeped through the kitchen door screen. She was standing at the sink counter, humming one of her church songs, chopping up pieces of ham, and throwing them into the big, iron pot filled with greens. Glumly, I stared at dangling, gold hoops on her ears. For the rest of my life, I realized with a jolt, I was gonna be stuck with Auntie. Misery cut my heart into a million pieces and resentment made soup out of it.

As I stepped inside, she put the knife down, ran water from the faucet over her hands, and dried them. "Where's them switches I done sent you to get?" Auntie asked me.

Without speaking, I walked toward her, and held out the four branches I was clutching. She peered hard at them first, and then snatched them out of my hand. I moved away to sit down in a kitchen chair. There was silence as she slowly examined each branch. At first, I had tried to find little switches, the kind that wouldn't sting or leave whelps, but I chickened, afraid if I brought little

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branches back, she'd whip me all the harder. In the end, I had followed her orders. The branches were big ones, long, with the leaves still attached. I trembled to think how they'd sting when they touched my behind.

Satisfied that I'd done what she said, she nodded and started pulling the leaves off. "Yo mama and daddy spoils you. Don't know why yo mama spoils you. Prob'ly that daddy of yours leadin her. When I was raisin her, I didn't spoil ya mama. A child needs to learn the straight and narrow road early."

I hated the talking-to grownups always gave you before you got a whipping. Most times, I wanted to say something back. One or two times, I did, and found out that was a bad idea cause if you did, if you fussed with them, then the whipping was stretched out longer, and you got harder licks. So, I learned to keep my mouth shut.

"I did m'best raisin ya mama. I cain't be faulted for the way things was. I did my part, kept m'pledge to m'dyin mother, even though I lost a husband b'cause of it. " She stopped talking and made a face. "Lord, have mercy, these menfolk! They cain't be trusted to do right. None of em. I had me two husbands, so I knows what I be speakin on."

The leaves were gone and, now, she began stripping off the bark. I shivered. When you took the bark off, the switches stung you like crazy. Made the whipping hurt worse. I wanted to run out, but to where? And running away would mean double trouble cause I'd have to come back sooner or later. I felt trapped, like the bad guys in the movies who had to shoot their way out of a box canyon.

She glared at me with frozen eyes. "An them marbles you playin with! Sinful idleness! That's why you didn't come when I called you. Too busy playin with marbles!" Mouth turned down, she shook her head and the gold earrings flashed in the light. "Jus cause yo daddy lets you play them games, you think it's fine and dandy." Now,

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she was plaiting the stripped down switches together into one switch. "Humph! I'm warnin ya. Menfolk'll set yo feet on the path of sin, and then, Lord! Lord! They up an leave ya. Lord, have mercy! You know, Lord, I be speakin yo truth!"

When Auntie talked to God, it made me feel funny, like ants or something crawlin up my arm. She sounded crazy and it usually scared me, but her talking bad bout Mama and Daddy was making me mad. Made me forget to be still in the chair. I'd started swinging my feet back and forth. She noticed.

"Be still, there, you," she yelled, scrunching her face up. "Y'need to listen to what I'm sayin."

I stopped fidgeting like she said, but I knew that wouldn't please her. Even if I faked it and acted like I wanted to hear what she was saying, she wouldn't be pleased. Nothing I did ever pleased Auntie. If I only knew what she wanted, I'd try to do it so she wouldn't fuss and frown at me. The thing was I never knew what she wanted me to do; she didn't give me any hints. With her, it was like groping in the dark, so easy to lose my way or hit my knee.

"That daddy of yours—you think the sun rise and set in that daddy of yours, but you don't know im. You an yo sassy ways. Ya don't know what I know. Yo mama die, he ain't gonna be around. He'll leave ya high and dry. I know it's a fact that menfolk always be leavin."

What she said about Daddy scared me. My mind made picture of Mama in one of those boxes like Grandmama, and me all by myself looking down at Mama in the box. The thought squeezed my insides hard, like one of those big, jungle snakes, and I couldn't get my breath.

"You think if yo mama die, somebody gon take you in?" A wintertime smile touched Auntie's mouth, but not her eyes. "You doted on yo grandmamma, but she done

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left this here world, and yo aunts and uncles ain't gonna take you cause you too big for your britches. You better pray to the Lord yo Mama don't leave this world cause if she do, you ain't gon have nobody to take care of ya." Her face lit up as she finished. Like she had won something. Or I had lost.

While I was thinking about what she'd said about Daddy, scary thoughts ran through my head. Auntie was being mean, but what if she was right? I'd be alone like when I got locked in the house by myself. Bad things almost got me that time. I felt my face getting hot as all my feelings boiled and bubbled inside and finally, I opened my mouth.

"No!" I shouted, jumping out of the chair. "Daddy loves me! He wouldn't leave me!" But despite my words, I was scared.

She looked me straight in the face. "Humph! Yo daddy be hightailin it outta here if yo mama die." She pointed a gnarled finger in my face. "An ain't nobody gonna want a sassy girl like you. I sho wouldn't want you. Yo head too hard."

That hurt my feelings. Bad. A rainstorm of tears twisted inside me, and out they came in a downpour. The stubborn part of me didn't want her to see me cry, but I couldn't help it. I wiped at the tears with the backs of my hands and boo-hooed.

"You shut up that cryin." She snapped.

I couldn't make myself stop even though I could see that crying was making her really mad. Which, I figured, would mean she'd whip me even harder. And I understood dimly that she'd already hurt me really badly inside with what she'd said about Daddy, so could her whipping on my backside be any worse?

"I'ma give you something to cry about. I'ma teach you a good, old-fashioned lesson."

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With a shock, I realized that she had finished plaiting up the switches; a deep stab of fear went through me as she came closer and closer, lifting the braided switch high. I looked up at it, knowing it was going to sting and cut; automatically, I shrank back, trying to run away, but I was trapped. There was no place to go.

Something rose up in me then and before I had time to think about what I was doing, I reached out and grabbed the switch in midair. "No!" I shouted. "I'm not gonna let you whip me! No! You're mean and hateful!"

Shock and surprise stopped her; but after a few seconds, she recovered and jerked at the switch, trying to get it out of my hands. Once I had it, though, I wasn't about to let it go. We pulled on it back and forth until she saw that I wasn't going to let go of my end. Then, she stopped. We looked at each other in the hot, quiet morning with the switch, like a rope, stretched between us. We just stood there, holding on to the two ends, not saying a word to each other.

Later, I'd think that it was just like the big showdown at high noon in the westerns with the good guy staring down the bad guy just before they drew their guns. Once, when we were at the movies, Daddy had explained the good guy and the bad one were ad-ver-somethings. Which meant they were enemies. And that's why they were fighting.

Down the street, I could hear Butch barking as Auntie finally said: "You got as much spunk as yo mama had when we took her in even though them peoples of hers tried to beat it outta her." She tilted her head and looked at me. Like she was looking at something she'd never noticed before.

I wondered what and wanted to ask her. But I didn't. Auntie went on talking, her voice full of something funny, her wolfie-eyes looking at some place far off. "I was grown,

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and courtin when my mama and daddy took her in. She was a little bit of a thang then, all black and blue and hurtin, but Esther had her some spunk. My Lord, didn't she have her some spunk?"

What was *spunk*? I wanted to ask. From the way Auntie's voice sounded, it seemed like something good. The far-off look on Auntie's face was going away and, now, she looked at me close. "Ya look like her. Look like that daddy of yorn, too. But right now, ya puts me in the mind of Esther when I first laid eyes on her."

Then, she was quiet. Something she remembered made her eyes go far away again. I wished I could see what she was seeing, wished I could see it out of her eyes. Maybe then, I would understand her. Maybe then, I would know how to please her.

When she spoke, her voice quivered. "Beat her pretty bad, them folks a hers did, but they didn't kill her spunk." Her eyes came back to me, then fixed on the switch. "You comes by it honest," she said. "I oughta whip yo behind. Oughta but I ain't. Least not today." And she let the switch go.

I gaped at it dangling in my hand. Why had she let go? I didn't know the answer to that. What should I do next? Run out before she could change her mind? Stay where I was? Say something? I didn't know that answer either. Before I could figure it out, she turned away from me, moved to the counter, and reached for the bag of corn meal standing near the mixing bowl.

Over her shoulder, she said: "You still too big for yo britches, so you stay in yo room til yo mama get back. Don't be tryin to go back outside no more today."

I kept standing there like the world's biggest dummy.

"Go on now!" She told me.

I dropped the switch and ran.

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4. Puzzles

In my bedroom, I stared out of the open window at Austin Homes Projects, my mind whirling in a ball of confusion. It was really hot and the kids had deserted The Square. Mee Street was quiet. To give myself something to do, I tried to play with my United States puzzle, but none of the leftover pieces fit where I tried to put them. After that, I picked up the set of Jacks Daddy had bought for me. No good though. I couldn't make my fingers do right. On the floor next to my bed was the book Mama was reading to me. I picked it up and turned the pages, staring at the pictures of Cinderella, the pumpkin, the fairy godmother, but nothing could keep my attention cause my head kept asking questions that I didn't have answers for. Like why did Auntie let me go without whipping me? And what was all that about Mama she was saying? Something about spunk, whatever that was. And who was it that beat Mama?

Too many questions. They made my head hurt, so I lay down on my yellow bedspread, and fell asleep for most of the afternoon. Later, I woke up wondering what Mama would say and do when Auntie told her that I'd dared her to whip me, and then grabbed the switch. Sitting up on my bed, I asked myself if I had ever done anything this bad before? I thought about it. Was this as bad as the time I took the jar of raspberry jam out of the refrigerator and ate the whole thing? Mama made me go without ice cream treats for five days for that one. Was this worse than the time I snuck over and stole the red rose from our next-door neighbor's yard? Mama whipped me and wouldn't let me go over to The Square for a week. I cried a lot over that one because I could see Evelyne and Shirley and the other kids from my bedroom window having a good time without me. That was bad. As bad as the time Mama said

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I couldn't listen to my favorite radio mystery shows, *Mr. and Mrs. North*, *The Shadow*, and *Inner Sanctum* for two weeks, or go with Daddy to the Saturday movies I loved, all because I'd talked back to Mrs. Hill, my kindergarten teacher. I guessed this was worse than those other things. Way worse. So what was Mama gonna do to me for this? Thinking about it made me shake in my shoes.

Just then, I heard Daddy's voice as he and Mama got out of the car in front of the house. A lump of fear stuck in my throat as I tried to swallow. The thought of Mama's giving me a "hard lesson," as she called it, made me feel like I'd swallowed a frog and he was jumping around inside my belly. I remembered what she'd said this morning: "I'm depending on you to be a good girl and mind Sister. You know she's old and kind of peculiar." Daddy had looked funny when Mama had said that. Like he was mad or something. And Mama had asked: "Can I depend on you, Tiddley?" Tiddley was her special name for me. I'd said she could. But things had turned out so I couldn't keep my promise.

I heard Mama call to Auntie when she was coming in the front door. I could hear Mama and Auntie talking, but their voices weren't loud enough for me to understand what they were saying. Soon enough, Mama, in her new, candy-apple red suit, came to my room. "Come on, Tiddley," she said, "shake a leg. Sister's bus leaves in thirty minutes, and we have to take her to the bus station."

Slowly, I wiggled off the bed and stood. Mama walked over to my little white dressing table, and picked up my hairbrush. Uh, oh. I was gonna get it now. She was gonna use the hairbrush to whip me. I didn't move, or try to run. I just stood there waiting for the first lick, sure that Auntie had told on me. Instead of Mama tearing into me good, she came over, sat me down, brushed and plaited strands

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of hair that had got loose while I slept. After she finished, she hurried me out into the living room.

As I trotted along beside her, I told myself that she was gonna give me what-for in the living room with Auntie egging her on, and Daddy looking sad like he usually did when I got a whipping. The thought slowed me down a little, but Mama put her hand on my back and pushed me forward. In the living room, first thing I saw was Auntie sitting on the couch, dressed in her gray, Sunday outfit, her housedress and apron packed in a Miller's shopping bag at her feet. I couldn't tell about Auntie's feelings from her face. Seemed like it was closed tight as the pocketbook she had under her arm. Those eyes of hers iced up when she saw me looking her way, and I was sure she'd already told Mama. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Daddy with that funny, mad look he always had on his Hershey bar face when Auntie was around; he was squirming in his favorite chair, the one with the lamp beside it. Any second, I was sure to catch it. I peeked at Mama to see if she had the hairbrush in her hand; it surprised me that she didn't. Well, maybe she was gonna ask me to explain myself first. Sometimes, she did that before she gave me a whipping. Then she'd go get the belt or the hairbrush.

Funny. Nobody said anything though until Mama said: "Let's go. Frankie, you and Coach go on down first. I'll help Sister."

And we all went outside to the front steps. Daddy went ahead of me, but I hesitated, confused. Why wasn't Mama fussing at me for what I did? Why wasn't I getting a whipping? I glanced at Auntie again. Looked like she was staring daggers at me. I opened my mouth to say something, thought better of it, turned, and dashed down the steps.

I was in full motion, running toward the sidewalk until Daddy hollered from the other side of the street where he

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was getting in the car: "Frankie, you look both ways before you cross!"

I stopped, remembering that I had a bad habit of running across without looking, and that it had earned me a couple of near-misses with cars coming down Mee Street's hill. Mama and Daddy had fussed at me about that longer than they usually did about things I wasn't supposed to do. No cars were coming, but I stopped and hung back until Mama and Auntie caught up with me at the edge of the sidewalk. I wanted to check Mama's face again. In the car, I wouldn't be able to see it with her in the front passenger seat and me in the back. They came along side of me, and I took Mama's hand, looking up at her face. Nothing. No sign that she was mad. Why didn't she say something? Was she pretending?

In the car, I chewed on my thumbnail, trying to figure out what the grownups were up to. My heart was beating lickety-split. I felt like an ambushed, Army scout surrounded by Indians, and down to his last bullet. The scout knew he was gonna get shot full of arrows and the buzzards would come and eat up his innards. But he had to wait. Waiting was the worst part. For him and for me. As we drove uptown to the Greyhound station on Gay Street, the waiting made me feel like those ugly buzzards were already eating on me. Daddy and Mama talked about the meeting and Auntie kept quiet like she always did around Daddy. Maybe Auntie didn't snitch on me yet. Maybe Mama wasn't pretending. Maybe she didn't know. Maybe Auntie wasn't gonna tell until we got to the bus station.

I peeked at Auntie sitting beside me in the back seat. She was staring straight ahead. A few minutes passed and she said: "Esther."

When she called Mama's name, I jumped like she'd hit me. *Here it comes*, I said to myself, holding my breath.

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"Esther, you ain't got no tomatoes to go wit them greens I cooked. An I knows Mr. Lennon and this here girl dotes on having some sliced tomatoes."

"We'll pick some up on the way home, Sister. Thank you for letting me know."

I let my breath out slowly, feeling like John Wayne must have when a bullet whizzed by his head, just missing him. The next thing I knew Daddy was turning into the bus station. He found a parking space, pulled in, and stopped. My lungs felt like they'd run out of air. I was twisting and pulling at my plaits, waiting for Auntie to open her mouth and let it all out, right here, at the last minute.

Mama helped Auntie out of the back seat, and turned to walk with her to the boarding gate, but Auntie held up her hand. This was it. Auntie was getting ready to tell her. I scooted over to the other side of the car, so I could hear every word she was saying.

"No need for you to come, Esther. I kin make it by m'self."

"But, Sister," Mama said, "I always walk you to the gate."

Auntie shook her head; the little gold earrings danced at her ears. "You go on back. I wanta walk by m'self. Mind me, now. Go on." Then, she turned and hobbled toward the bus, leaving Mama staring, open-mouthed, watching her go her way alone.

I let out a shaky breath. Auntie hadn't told. I didn't understand why, but I did understand that I wasn't gonna get spanked, and I wasn't gonna get punished. Relief came so strong that I had to squeeze my legs together to keep from wetting myself.

As I watched Auntie go, for some reason, I remembered one of the things she'd said in the kitchen. *You got as much spunk as yo mama even though them peoples of hers tried to*

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beat it outta her. Auntie said that she and somebody took Mama in. Did that mean that Auntie and Mama weren't blood? Weren't really sisters? The idea was so confusing that my brain couldn't wrap itself around it. Feeling like everything was turning topsy-turvy, my mind made a grab for something that hadn't changed. Something that was still true. Mama was my real mama. Auntie had good as said so. Said I had *spunk* like Mama. I wondered again what that word meant, but I couldn't ask just yet because I'd have to tell where I'd heard it, and who said it. So, I'd have to wait until next week when I came home from kindergarten, and pretend I'd heard it there.

"Want to hear the radio, Tugg?" Daddy asked, using his pet name for me. That meant he was feeling good. Probably cause Auntie was gone.

"Yes, Daddy. Please."

He switched on the radio, catching the tail end of a toothpaste commercial. Music swelled in the background as the announcer's voice rang out, "And now, back to our program, *The Adversary* starring Dick Powell, with special guest star, Ida Lupino."

That was the word I had tried to remember earlier this afternoon. I repeated it aloud. "Ad, adver, adversary. Tell me again, Daddy. What does it mean?"

For a second, he said nothing as he stared at Auntie's slow hobble toward the gate. I started to ask him again. Then, he answered me: "It means two people who are opponents on opposite sides of the fence. It's almost the same as being rivals, just like when my basketball team plays Pearl High."

"Oh." I thought for a moment, then asked: "Is it like being enemies?"

Daddy nodded. "In a way, yeah."

I wondered what it was between me and Auntie that made us adversaries. Maybe it was like they said in the

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cowboy movies—that there was bad blood between us. Whatever that meant. But was there really? After all, she didn't tell on me. And why didn't she? Trying to figure that out was like trying to make the pieces of my puzzle fit right. Only a lot harder. Grownups, to me, were a mystery. And figuring them out would take forever. But I had figured out that if Auntie and Mama weren't blood kin, then that meant me and Auntie weren't blood either. I wondered, for a moment, if Daddy knew. But the wondering flew out of my mind when Daddy sneaked me a bag of M&M's. I tore them open and popped a handful of sweet chocolate in my mouth before Mama could see and say I'd spoil my supper. M&M's were my favorites. Right up there next to Hershey bars.