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I parted the curtains just a bit and peeked out so the neighbors couldn't see me. "Maria, they're leaving! Keep watch while I grab that plaid skirt off the line."

Maria appeared at the door of our bedroom, her hair all askew and her gentle brown eyes betraying her doubt.

"Come on!" I urged. She followed quietly, shutting the door behind us as we slipped outside. She positioned herself at the corner of our trailer house in the cool shadows of our maple tree where she could see the road. I ran to the clothesline. One good jerk sent the clothespins flying, and in another second we were both safe inside. I stuffed the skirt into my tattered backpack.

"Joey, you're so brave! Aren't you afraid you'll get caught?" Maria whispered breathlessly.

"Aw . . . It was nuthin'," I replied, embarrassed by her praise. "I really wanted that skirt! Why should we always have to wear hand-me-downs?"

"I wish I could be like you, Joey," she said wistfully. "I'm shorter and so much scrawnier and not nearly as brave."

"I like how you are, Maria. Fancy you stealing anything! Why, you're too nice to steal!"

"Joanna! Maria!" Daddy's voice was loud and impatient. "Git out here or you'll be late for school, an' I ain't hankerin' after talkin' with that teacher again!"

The school year was just beginning, but we had already been late so often that Daddy had been summoned by Mrs. Bryon to see what the problem was. "It's not Daddy's fault we're late. I sure wish Mama would help him more!" I complained to Maria, but instantly I was sorry when I saw the misery in her eyes.

"Mama *can't* get up in the morning, Joey," she reminded me. "She's too weak and tired and . . . And maybe she's just sick of all the noise and stuff around here. You know, with baby Jesse and all the renters and all us kids . . ." Her voice trailed off.

I sighed. Maria was right about Mama. Mama had just gotten back from the hospital yesterday. It would have looked sweet the way Daddy carried her into the house if I could forget how he carried her out all weak and bleeding. And Maria was right about the noise too. We had three men renting our basement and spare room, and since there was no bathroom downstairs everyone had to use the one in the hall. Trudy, Daddy's daughter with another lady, was often there, and so were Mama's two teenage sisters, Snow White and Arlene. Then there was Pete Jr. who was three, Jenny Lyn who was almost two, and baby Jesse James who was only ten months.

"Why do Snow White and Arlene come here all the time when Grandma lives so close?" insisted Maria. "And Trudy's always hangin' around—what's a half-sister, anyway?"

Maria was two years older than I, but there were some things I understood better than she did. "Brian and Trudy have a different mom than we do," I told her wisely. "Arlene said her name is Georgia. That's why they're called 'half,' because they're half Daddy's and half Georgia's, and we're half Daddy's and half Mama's. And Snow White and Arlene are here all the time because they like it here better. They go home at night, but you know how strict Grandma Johnson is!"

The kitchen was blue with cigarette smoke when we entered. Daddy piled more dishes in the sink, grumbling as he worked. "Don't know why a man can't have a little peace 'round here. Where's the rest of thet cereal, anyways? Gone again, as usual. For pity's sake, Rick, stop spillin' coffee all over the floor!"

The baby's thin, high cries floated through Mama's bedroom door at the end of the hall, and that frazzled Daddy even more. "Where's Arlene? Jesse's cryin' again!" he said impatiently. "Is Jenny awake yet? Someone go git 'er."

Poor Daddy needed cheering up! I ran to him and gave a little jump so I could link my fingers behind his neck and give him a great big hug. He

hugged me for a moment and smiled into my eyes. I felt his rough skin against my cheek for a second. “Mornin’, Joey baby. Eat quick now an’ be off. Hurry!”

“You look like Elvis today!” I laughed. “Your hair’s all slicked back just like his. You have such black hair, Daddy!”

I was so proud of the way he looked, his eyes twinkling as he smiled at me, his black hair slicked back, and his whiskers smelling of Old Spice. My daddy was one cool guy—except when he was mad!

Pete Jr. came stumbling out of the bedroom dragging his torn old blankie. I picked him up and hugged him close, loving the feel of his silky hair against my chin.

“I hungry, Joey,” he murmured sleepily, snuggling against me. The only time he endured cuddling was when he was sleepy.

Snow White brought Jenny out, still rubbing her sleepy eyes, and plopped her in the high chair, an old wooden contraption with a faded blue cornflower design on the back. Bits and pieces of dried food from the last ten meals coated the hand rests and tray, but Jenny didn’t mind. She started gobbling Fruit Loops as soon as the milk was poured.

I slid onto a green vinyl-covered chair, feeling its stickiness against my bare legs, and poured some cereal into one of the plastic bowls. Across from me sat Rick, one of the renters, and, much too close to him, Arlene. Maria and I giggled as she blew neat little rings of smoke right past his nose.

“Arlene, I can almost do that!” I bragged. “And it doesn’t even bother me anymore to inhale really deep!”

“Shut up, Joey,” she drawled affectionately. “You’re much too young to smoke! Who taught you, anyway?” she asked with a wink. She drew on her cigarette, then leaned against Rick and kissed him on the mouth. “Know how to do *that*?”

“No, and I don’t want to!” I said hotly.

“Well then, why did you cry because you don’t have a boyfriend yet?”

“Yeah, Joanna. I heard some boy beat you running the other day,” added Paul, another one of the renters. “I thought you were supposed to be the fastest kid in school!”

"Leave her alone!" Daddy said as he wrestled with the overflowing garbage bag.

"Maybe you'll find a boyfriend somewhere today," Rick sneered. "Look in the lost and found bin—maybe he's hiding in there!"

"At least I'm not a school dropout!" I yelled at my tormentors. "I *am* the fastest kid in school, and for sure I can beat all of you! Why don't you losers find a real job?"

For a shocked second no one spoke. "You'd better not get mouthy with me, you little brat!" snarled Paul. He sat up in his chair and wiped the milk off his stubbly chin with the back of his hand. But I wasn't scared of him—not when Daddy was around.

"You're so ugly in the morning!" I said, sticking out my tongue. "Look at your greasy hair and your puffy old eyes and those week-old whiskers. And your shirt has a hole in it!"

"Why, you little . . ." he cursed, lunging for me. But I was already out the door, dragging Maria with me, laughing hysterically.

"He's really mad, Joey!" Maria exclaimed breathlessly as we hurried along. "Did you hear how everyone laughed, 'specially when you called him old!"

"I just told him what Grandma Johnson said," I said. "I heard her tell Mama that Paul and Rick and Scott are all losers. She even said Arlene and Snow White didn't care a fig if they graduated or not! Can you beat that?"

Maria stopped suddenly. "Joey! We forgot to say 'bye to Mama! Oh, let's go back!"

"Mama won't even notice, Maria! We'll give Pete Jr. and Jenny lots of extra kisses when we get home, 'cause they care about us. But Mama won't even think about us—not with Jesse to take care of."

"Joey, why is Mama so skinny? And what's ovarian cancer?"

"I don't know, but I heard Daddy talking about some nurse coming in here to help take care of Mama."

"Snow White says it's stylish to be skinny, but I don't really know what cancer is. I'll ask Daddy."

I dreaded the strange ache that built up inside me whenever I tried to sort out all my tangled feelings about Mama. Why did I like Arlene and

Snow White better than her? Didn't she love us kids? Why did she just lie in her room and get thinner and thinner? The more I tried to reason things out, the more confused I became.

I shut out the memory of Maria's pleading voice and all those troubling thoughts. I loved the half-mile walk to school, with the noise and smoke of our messy, crowded kitchen behind me and the fresh, cool air of the morning filling my lungs. I skipped and hopped and stopped to explore every little bug and wildflower along the way. There was so much to discover and explore, and I didn't want to miss a thing!

I was too easily lost in a world of my own, but was brought back by Maria's gentle calling. "Joey! We'll be late again!"

About halfway to school we slipped into an abandoned shed close to the road and I changed into the lovely red and black plaid skirt. It fit perfectly!

"Won't Janelle be jealous now!" I gloated. "She's so fat she could never begin to fit into this. Of course she'll get Paul to buy her something new as soon as she sees it, but I couldn't care less." Janelle was one of our renter Paul's children who lived with her mother in Owosso.

"Yeah, but she's way taller than you," was my sister's comment. "I sure wish her dad would move out of the basement and go back to his own place. I don't like him, Joey."

"He's not my favorite either," I assured her. "But he's been living at our house for a long time."

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Owosso's Bryant Elementary School was a sprawling, taffy-colored building with low, wide windows all around and a wonderful playground. Someone had hauled in fine red shale for the ball diamond and built up the pitcher's mound. There were monkey bars and swings, several teeter-totters, a jungle gym, and even a merry-go-round to get dizzy on. We had the best playground in Owosso, Michigan!

The school yard teemed with children. "Two minutes till the bell. Let's climb the monkey bars!" I yelled to no one in particular. Expertly I