

insanity

AFTER SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY, I WALKED OVER TO THE CARROLLS' TO see if Mary was ready to go pick flowers to sell at the dance that night. Mr. Cassell, who owned the Harper Hotel, had a dance every Friday night. He used to charge 75¢, but his price went down to 50¢ when they shut down the mine across the way in Mississippi. That closing cost a lot of people their jobs, including Mary's papa, but not too many mine folks went to the dance anyhow. I figured, and Mary agreed with me, that anyone who could afford 75¢ two months ago could buy flowers for his sweetheart at a penny a blossom. That kind of thinking had us outside the hotel every Friday night. Mr. Cassell wouldn't allow us inside if he didn't get a slice out of our profits, so we stood in the street, bowls of flowers at our feet, and pennies in our pockets to give out change. All our profits—which was sure to be at least a nickel because Winston Caveat, the fellow who married Mary's older sister April, bought his wife five ox eye daisies every Friday night—went straight to Mrs. Carroll who'd been reduced to giving only a nickel at church every Sunday now that her husband didn't have a job.

Mrs. Carroll was out front sewing up a pair of britches. "Morning, Nissa," she said as I stepped onto the porch.

"Mrs. Carroll." I nodded. I knew I didn't have to say another

word. Mrs. Carroll had gone to talking to anybody who'd stand still and listen since her husband lost his job.

"Anthony's still living like we've got money coming in." She smoothed out the fabric she held to take a look at her handiwork. "He's running around ripping his clothes like we can buy new. Don't know what we'll do for school come next year. Mary's going to have to go through the dresses April left behind, I guess. And Teddy's even taller than Simon now. I don't know what I'll do for him."

Teddy was a tree with a sassy mouth—tall enough to touch the doorjamb with the top of his hat. The only person taller than Teddy was Eliah Roubidoux, Miss Chessie's younger brother, and he's the tallest man I've ever seen.

"He says he won't go back if he can't wear decent clothes." She looked at me as if I knew where to find new britches long enough to fit a tree. "My son needs to graduate."

"Yes, ma'am." I nodded, feeling a little hollow. It didn't seem right to just stand there and listen, but there was nothing else I could do.

"I'll think of something." Mrs. Carroll bit through the thread. "I'll go see what's keeping Mary." Mrs. Carroll disappeared into the house, but I never heard her call for Mary. I suppose she lost that thought amongst all the worries floating around in her head.

A bit later, Mary came bounding out onto the porch in a dress with her hair dangling down her back. She even had her school shoes on. "Hey there, Nissa!"

"What are you wearing?" I walked around her to take a good look.

“Nothing fancy.” She tried to act all modest, but she kept smiling like she’d just won a cakewalk and claimed a triple-decker chocolate cake with coconut frosting for her prize.

“You can’t go picking flowers in that.” I pointed at her dress. “You’ll get it all full of stickers and you could rip it.”

“We might meet someone while we’re out picking flowers,” Mary announced. “I don’t want to look like some crop-picking boy.” She waved at my overalls, averting her eyes like my clothes were unfit to even look at.

“Who are we going to meet that’s going to give an owl’s hoot what we’re wearing?”

Mary bowed her head, then did a weird kind of half turn like she’d gone soft in the hips or something. “Gary Journiette,” she whispered.

“Gary Journiette?” I laughed. “The boy who wears britches so full of holes you could use them as a fishnet?”

“He does no such thing. Gary wears fine clothes.”

“Are you blind as well as stupid?” I shook my head. “Just last week, I saw him walking down Quince Road wearing a shirt with the pockets flapping in the breeze like two string-tied butterflies.”

“Stop trash talking Gary!”

“All right.” I leaned in close so I could see the sweat on Mary’s nose well enough to count each bead. “But in that thing your thighs will be sweating like a boiler tender in no time. I’m not listening to you complain about prickly heat for the next three weeks.” As I gave Mary a piece of my mind, I noticed a smell. Not a stench really, but a nose-biting odor that struck me as a cross between pine sap and baking soda. “What is that smell?”

“Perfume.”

“Per-what?” My ears felt like they’d been turned inside out. “Do you want every wing flapping bug in Tucumsett Parish to be swarming around us while we’re flower picking?”

“It’s pretty.”

“It stinks! And I’m not going anywhere with anybody wearing no perfume!”

“Fine then. I won’t go picking with you, Nissa Bergen! I’ll go all by myself.”

“You do that.” I turned and walked off.

I stomped down Quince Road with my bucket knocking me in the knees. God, what now? Do I have to give up my best friend, too? First Mama, now Mary Carroll. Everybody was leaving me in one way or another. At the open field on the far side of Sutton’s Creek, I realized I’d cursed at God. Shaking my head, I tried to clear out all my anger. Just let it out into the air so it could fly off somewhere.

Dropping to the ground, I stared up into the sky. Why do people have to be so dumb? It was a question to God, really. My way of apologizing for accusing Him of taking my best friend away. He did no such thing. It was Mary who was leaving me of her own accord. Just like Mama. What I didn’t understand was why Mary would be such a fool on account of Gary Journiette. No man’s worth prickly heat and more bug bites than a toad’s got warts. Why can’t she just be the same old Mary and do her courting with Gary? Mary and Gary, I said their names in my head, then rolled over to bury my face in the grass. Their stupid names rhymed. Darn if they weren’t doomed to be married off someday. I hated man-to-woman love—all that silly flirting, courting and kissing. Not to mention the fighting, leaving, and

divorcing part of it all. People called it romantic love like it was something spectacular, but for me romance was a kind of insanity you never recovered from. I prayed right then that I'd never look at a boy and think of courting for my entire life. Assured that I was safe from future insanity due to courting, I stood up, then set off to pick flowers all by myself.