

Only Weak Folks and Babies Cry

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Sunday mornings, Mamma, Esther, Henry and I would climb into the wagon and Daddy would carry us to Piney Grove Church. He never attended services; he stayed with the horses and drove us back home once church was over. Then after we'd had our dinner, he'd sit in the parlor and listen to the radio. That radio was Daddy's pride and joy. He was the only one who ever listened to it; Mamma said she was too busy. One time, Esther and I sneaked in to listen to 'Our Gal' but Daddy found out and near about skinned us alive.

This Sunday started out different. I heard Mamma downstairs scolding Daddy, telling him it was a sin to work on the Sabbath. He snapped that if God hadn't let it rain so much, he wouldn't have to be working on the Sabbath. But he was weeks behind in getting the fields ready for planting. Esther and I quickly changed out of our Sunday dresses into our work clothes.

Daddy hollered for me to hitch the horses to the plow, then off he went. It was getting on toward dark and I was doing the evening chores when I heard the jingle of the bells on Bess and Joey's bridles and saw them come running up the lane, their sides heaving and flecks of froth dripping from their mouths. Both looked like they were ready to drop. Daddy was

running behind them, cursing and slapping them with the reins. He was covered in mud from the top of his sweat-stained felt hat to the bottoms of his lace-up boots. Mamma and Esther would have a time getting his clothes clean.

As I took the horses to the barn to wipe them down, I heard Daddy cussing some more as he told Mamma that he'd buried the plow so deep he might never get it out. I couldn't hear Mamma's response, but dinner that night was real quiet. Neither Daddy nor Mamma said a word to one another for days.

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My job was to help Daddy with the outside chores. I was the oldest, and the strongest; whatever he set me to do, I did and did quick or had a switch taken to me. Still, doing chores was better than being cooped up in the house like Esther. She helped Mamma with the laundry and the dishes, the baking, cooking, cleaning and ironing, and taking care of baby Henry. I was glad that was her job; I needed to be outdoors.

Mamma didn't wash Henry's diapers when he'd only wet them; she'd rinse them and hang them on the clothesline strung across the end of the kitchen over where the stove squatted. Some days, the ammonia smell was

so strong it made my eyes water.

I couldn't really blame Mamma; washing clothes took an entire day every single week. First she had to build up the fire in the woodstove while Esther carried water in from the well, one five-gallon bucket at a time, and poured it into the big copper tub. Mamma was real proud of that washtub. Uncle Ethan and Aunt Ruth had given it to her as a wedding gift. She said it cost a pretty penny.

In the wintertime when it was so cold the wet clothes would freeze on the clothesline outdoors, laundry was hung over the kitchen stove, on the back porch, and across the upstairs hallway. We were forever dodging Daddy's long underwear and bib overalls or Mamma's flannel nightgowns and housedresses when we went up to bed.

A few days before my birthday - May 2 - Mamma started feeling poorly. She took to her bed and Esther and I were left to keep the house running. It was hard for me to help with the inside work and do my outside chores. The cows had to be milked, eggs gathered, animals fed and watered twice a day, firewood split and stacked, and the barn mucked out. I wasn't about to complain to Daddy, but one day, out of the blue, he announced he'd got him a hired man. I was relieved, although I felt bad; I knew we didn't

have money to spend on hired help.

The next day Will moved into the lean-to attached to our barn. It wasn't big, but it was clean and large enough for a bed and a washstand. Will ate his meals with us, so while he took some of the outside chores off me, it was another mouth for us to feed. And he ate a lot.

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Will was nice looking and a hard worker, but he wasn't real pleasant most mornings. Daddy never said much at breakfast but nothing suited Will, and he wasn't shy about saying so. If we'd fixed scrambled eggs, he'd say he wanted poached. If we'd made pancakes, he'd complain that he wanted oatmeal with lots of sugar and heavy cream.

One morning, Esther and I made eggs and biscuits and ham and gravy. We'd really outdone ourselves, hoping that Daddy or Will would praise us on our cooking skills. I didn't know all that much about cooking; Mamma was the cook in the family, with Esther doing whatever Mamma said. Still, I thought we did all right.

Daddy sat down and began to eat. The only thing he said was "more coffee." For once, Will didn't say anything; he just shoveled the food into his mouth. All of a sudden he stood up so quick his chair toppled over. He

ran to the back door, threw it open and spit out into the yard. I heard him cough and clear his throat a couple of times before he came back to the table. He righted his chair, sat down and took a big drink of coffee.

"Eggshell," he snarled. He didn't eat another bite.

Daddy and Will went out to finish the chores and Esther and I cleaned up the dishes, laughing until I thought we'd bust. Henry giggled along with us.

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Mamma began to get cranky after a day or two in bed. She called for me to come bring her some stale bread to calm her stomach, open the curtains, close the curtains, bring her something cool to drink, open the window, fetch her the weekly paper. She kept me hopping.

One day when I'd brought her a third glass of water in less than an hour, I asked her if she ever planned on getting out of the bed, or if she was going to stay there the rest of her life. Well, she hauled off and slapped me. My cheek burned and my eyes watered, but I didn't cry. Only weak folks and babies cry; that's what Daddy said.

I found it odd that Mamma didn't seem to miss any of us. Not even Daddy. He started sleeping on a cot on the back porch. Said he didn't want

to disturb her, since she was 'in the family way'. Esther asked me what that meant, and I had to be the one to tell her Mamma was going to have another baby.

Esther's face flushed bright pink, but all she said was she thought she'd bake some bread and maybe scrub the kitchen floor while the dough was rising. I went out to feed and water the chickens, gather the eggs and hand-feed two baby lambs whose mother had died.

I was headed back to the house with the egg basket when Will came around the corner of the barn. "Come back to Bess's stall with me, Claire. She's actin' peculiar."

That scared me. We only had two workhorses. If one of them was laid up, well, one horse by itself was as bad as no horse at all.

I sat the basket down and followed Will to the far corner of the barn. When I stepped into Bess's stall, she snorted and bobbed her head. I looked her over carefully. "She looks all right to me. What did you think was wrong?"

I felt his hot breath on my ear as he slipped an arm around my waist and pulled me close. He whispered that he'd been waiting for the moment when we could be alone. He caressed the back of my neck, and my knees

near about gave way. Part of my brain told me to give him a tongue lashing and walk right out of there, but a stronger part of me was desperate for a gentle touch. I wrapped my arms around him and we tumbled into the prickly straw.

Will kissed me and nuzzled me and touched me in places I'd never been touched before. The pain, when it came, wasn't so bad. Although as soon as he was done, he jumped up, fastened his britches, and walked out of the barn without a backward glance. I lay there for a long time, feeling ashamed, but a little bit pleased, too. Finally there was someone who I thought really cared for me.

I knew Will was dirt poor; no one worked as a hired hand unless they didn't have two pennies to rub together. I knew poor, and I was determined to hold out for something better. Still, the thought he found me attractive made me smile.

What I didn't know was that a couple of months later I'd discover I was pregnant. I couldn't tell Mamma. She was finally up on her feet, but grumpy as could be. She looked like she'd strapped a little melon to her belly. And I couldn't tell Daddy. He would have beaten the life out of me, then made me tell Mamma. I decided to keep quiet for the time being.

Will tried a time or two to get me to come to his room, but I told him no. Even though he seemed to like me well enough, I could tell he only sought me out when he was bored. I wasn't about to be courted by a hired hand. Before long, he stopped acting interested. I was both relieved and sad.

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A few weeks later, the sheriff came to our door. It was a rainy August afternoon and Mamma was sitting in the rocker, knitting a blanket for the new baby. Henry was playing on the floor at her feet with some sticks and pinecones I'd gathered for him in the timber. Esther was peeling potatoes to go with our dinner and I had just come in from mucking out Bess and Joey's stalls.

The sheriff stood on the faded rag rug, clutched his hat in his big, awkward-looking hands, and blurted it out. Daddy was dead; killed in a car accident. He'd been driving through Webb's Crossroads when a car ran a stop sign and hit his pickup truck. Daddy was thrown into a tree and his neck was broken.

I admit my first thought was, God Almighty, who's going to tend to the farm? I know how to do chores, but I don't know how to plant and harvest crops. Esther dropped the potato she was peeling and began to cry.

Henry kept on playing; I don't believe he understood what the sheriff said.

Mamma stopped rocking, put aside her knitting and asked, polite as could be, where we might go to retrieve Daddy's body. Once the Sheriff left, she told me to bring her the bottle of brandy from under the sink. I brought it and a drinking glass. She ignored the glass, pulled out the cork and took a big drink from the dusty bottle.

Will was nowhere to be found, so I hitched up the horses and put fresh straw down in the wagon bed so Daddy's body wouldn't have to lie on the splintery wood. Mamma handed me some stiff, musty-smelling burlap sacks.

One of the boys at the Sheriff's office - that's where they'd taken Daddy's body - helped me hoist him into the wagon. I covered him with the sacks and piled the straw up all around. During the ride home, I kept glancing over my shoulder. Daddy looked like he'd just fallen asleep; I expected him to sit up and ask me what I thought I was doing, half suffocating him under scratchy straw and dusty burlap. I told him not to worry; I'd take care of Mamma, Esther, Henry, and the new baby.

By the time I got home, Mamma had got word to Grady Daniels, the cabinet maker, that we were in need of a coffin. I found Will out in the

timber, chopping down a gum tree. Together we put Daddy's body on an old door and laid it between a pair of sawhorses in the front parlor.

I was feeling wobbly and sick on my stomach, but there was nobody else to tend to his body; Mamma had gone to bed, and all Esther did was sniffle and cry. Still, I set her to stoking up the stove to heat a pan of water and told her to get Daddy's suit, shirt, tie and smallclothes. I managed to get him washed and dressed. At the last minute, I discovered I'd parted his hair on the wrong side. I fixed that real quick, only minutes before family and neighbors began to arrive to pay their respects.

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Mamma told Esther and me if we cried and carried on during Daddy's funeral, the whole community would pity us and she wouldn't have it. She needn't have worried; I didn't feel the least bit like crying, and every time I heard Esther start to sniffle, I pinched her.

Two days after Daddy's funeral, I told Mamma we had to let Will go. We didn't have money for a hired hand once we'd paid for the coffin and headstone. Besides, there wasn't much fieldwork to be done until harvest time, which wouldn't be for a few more weeks. I figured we could ask some of Daddy's brothers to help us with that. I'd worry about how to deal with

planting next spring's crops later.

Will left; he didn't know I was going to have his baby, and I wasn't about to tell him. He'd had his fun, and while I was going to pay the price, I didn't mind all that much. I'd have a baby to love, and it would love me in return. Having someone love me was all I'd ever wanted. Mamma would probably go for weeks without speaking to me. But I'd gone for weeks before when Mamma didn't talk to me; I'd survive.

Thankfully, neither Mamma nor Esther noticed my condition. I'd taken to wearing loose clothes, and since I spent most of my time outside, they hardly ever saw me anyway.

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The first day of January, I was mucking out the barn when a pain seized me in my back so bad I fell to my knees. Took my breath right away. I was pretty sure it was the baby ready to be born, although by my figuring, it was at least ten weeks or so early. I let Bess out of her stall and into the barnyard, then spread clean straw over the old. I paced back and forth, stopping to grip the rough board of her stall every time I had a pain. Thankfully, it didn't take long; a couple of hours later, I had a tiny baby boy, red-faced and mewling weakly.

After I memorized his features, I kissed his cheek and wrapped him in a piece of musty horse blanket. Then I lay down next to him to rest for a bit. A few minutes later, he stopped breathing; I knew he was born way too early.

I stumbled to Will's old room to clean myself up, then went back and put the tiny body in an old apple crate I'd lined with a piece of flannel. Then I slid the crate under Will's bed in the lean-to. It was cold in there; the body would keep and no one would find him. Besides, the ground was frozen solid; I couldn't bury him properly until spring anyway. I named him Edward, after Daddy.

It was dark when I finally staggered back to the house, only to learn that Mamma had gone into labor around sundown. All I wanted to do was lie down, sleep and forget everything that had happened, but I had to tend to Mamma. It was bitter cold in her bedroom, so I helped her out to the kitchen and piled on the wood to get the stove going stronger.

Esther got Henry's dinner. She tempted him by telling him he could eat his dinner in bed and she'd tell him a story. It was a good thing, 'cause about the time they went upstairs, Mamma started having to bear down, and in about three pushes, we had ourselves a baby - a girl, with dark curly hair,

the very image of Daddy. But when she came out, the cord was wrapped tight around her neck. Try as I might, I couldn't get her to breathe.

I tucked blankets around Mamma and pulled her chair close to the stove. I snatched the bottle of brandy from under the sink and took a quick drink before I placed it in her lap. I told her not to worry; I'd take care of everything. She sat in the rocking chair, dry-eyed and silent. The only sound was the crackle of the fire.

I swaddled the baby - Mamma finally whispered that her name was Nell - in the blanket Mamma had knitted and carried her out into the frigid night. The moonlight peeking through the clouds was enough for me to find my way. I placed Nell's body in the crate beside Edward and crawled under the bed to lie with them for a while. Finally I left, pulling the door firmly shut.

Outside, snowflakes were falling thick and fast. I told myself that's why my cheeks were wet.

