

MEGHAN KENNY

*The Driest Season*

In that driest season, Cielle's father hanged himself in the barn. A rope tied to a beam above stacked bales of hay, a wheelbarrow, rusted cans. Cielle found him. Home from summer school in the middle of July, and her legs couldn't move beneath her. She looked and didn't look. Her father hung still, bloated and blue. Years later she would think of chickens, pigs, and hides of cow tied up and heavy-looking on rope and hooks at the butcher's.

Cielle wasn't a child, nearly sixteen. She walked closer and touched his boot. Jesus. Sweet Jesus. She kneeled before her father and thought for a moment he could fall. Light came in from rafter windows and cut long square shadows on wood plank walls. Then light shifted to dark from what she knew to be passing clouds. The barn was cool and damp. Sharp pebbles dug at her knees. She didn't look at his face again, or his hands, or all that was him outside of his clothing. Because it wasn't him right there, but something else, someone unrecognizable, and a memory she didn't want. Why had she gone into the barn? She never went in first thing after school. But that day she did and she couldn't remember the reason.

Their farm wasn't large, but it paid. It was a living. Wheat, corn, oats, hay, chickens, pigs and cows. Their house was 200 feet from the barn. Where was her mother? Helen, her sister, had gone to the lake. Cielle stood and touched his boot again. It floated above her shoulder.

"Daddy," she whispered.

She kept her eyes down and went to the house. The dirt road was dry and soft like flour. The red pick-up truck was parked in front and shucked corn lay in the kitchen sink. A pitcher of iced tea sat on the Formica table. She called for her mother but there was no answer. She went out back into the garden, but no one was there. A breeze came through and rustled leaves. Cielle stood a moment at the door, expecting the world to stand still with her, but it didn't. Clouds like stretched gauze moved quickly above, the tire swing in the oak tree shifted and its chains creaked.

Her father had headaches. Cielle knew dust and pollen made them worse every year and that doctors said there was nothing to do for them but wait out the season. “How does a farmer wait out a season?” her father would say. “Do they expect I sit in the house with a wet towel over my face?” He said it hurt to walk. Felt his head was caving in. He’d moan deep and low at night, as if there was something inside him trying to push up and out. He’d writhe on the bed, on the floor. He’d hit his forehead with his fists hoping to jar and get rid of the pain. Once he asked Cielle to rub his temples, asked her if she felt anything out of the ordinary.

“Nothing,” she said. “Just your regular head.”

“My head is pulsing. It’s pressure all over. How is a farmer allergic to everything, Cielle? That’s the sorriest thing I ever heard.”

Cielle went upstairs and lay her satchel on her bed. From her window she saw the barn: faded red paint and stone; tall and long; dark windows. She leaned down, put both hands on her bed, and shut her eyes. That morning before school she’d collected chicken eggs. She scrubbed them with a damp nail brush by the coop behind the barn and rinsed them in hot bleach-water. She set up a chair and small table and laid the eggs on a towel to dry. Her father had said it might be time to cut for hay, and he walked the field. He stood far off, they had four hundred acres, some of it wooded, but mostly fields, and he seemed small in the tall grass. She could make out his hands on his head, as if he were holding himself together.

He faced the woods, and stood for some time, as if he were waiting for a sign of clouds or rain. They needed the water. After rain the air would clear and the allergies and headaches would be lessened or gone for days. Then her father turned toward her, the house, the barn. Cielle waved. He held his arm high, his hand wide open. Then he brought his hands to his mouth and a high-pitched, fluttery whistle reached her, distinct and clear. It was the bird call he’d taught her. She’d asked him what he thought it meant, and he told her those birds were saying, “I’m right here. Find me.”

She heard noise in her mother’s room. She walked the narrow hall, ran her hand along the bead-board wall. She kept slow and steady. If she moved any faster she’d trip over her own feet and fall face-first, heavy like a wooden door.

She found her mother in the claw-foot tub, lying still, looking at her feet in front of her. Her mother did not bathe in the afternoon or during drought. Cielle sat on the rim and couldn't remember when she'd seen her mother naked last. Her arms and legs were tanned. Her stomach was white, rounded and swollen as if she were pregnant. Her nipples were wide brown circles.

"I found Daddy," Cielle said.

Her mother looked up at Cielle blankly, as if she couldn't quite locate her. She pulled her knees to her chest and lifted her right foot out of the water. The skin was white and shriveled. "Have you seen this blister on my foot? It doesn't want to go away."

"Mom, what should I do?"

"About this?" She rubbed her foot, and shook her head back and forth. "There's nothing you can do."

"No, about Daddy in the barn." Cielle dipped her hand in the water and it was cold.

"He'll be back for dinner. Don't bother your father. We're just fine."

Cielle touched her mother's shoulder.

"Let me finish my bath," she said. "We'll be fine."

Cielle got in the truck and drove. It was five miles to the Mitchells' farm. She didn't want lights or noise or strangers taking her father away. The Mitchells were her parents' best friends. The road was pebble-paved and flat. The steering wheel was big in her hands, and she sat far up on the seat to reach the pedals. Her armpits were damp, and her legs sweat and stuck to the vinyl. She held tight and drove fast. Waist-high corn divided into patterned rows, not as tall as usual for this time of year, and the stalks were yellowing, drying out in the heat. Irrigation wasn't enough without rainfall, and water was low all around.

A small blue car came from the other direction, and slowed to wave. Her sister was in the car, heading for the house. Cielle pulled onto the shoulder and the blue car pulled over too, and Cielle stepped out of the truck and waited for Helen to walk to her. Helen wore a white eyelet dress and had braids. She was eighteen and tall, and her strides were slow and long. She was a beautiful girl.

"Where're you going?" Helen said.

"Mitchells'."

Helen waved off the car. It beeped and peeled out down the long stretch of road. Cielle watched it zoom away until it got so far it seemed to evaporate into the heat waves just above the pavement. The girls got in the truck and Helen rolled down her window and turned on the radio. Cielle turned it off, and pulled back onto the road.

“What’s wrong?” Helen said, and tapped her hand on her thigh.

Cielle looked straight ahead and shrugged. She put her hand to her mouth and bile inched up the back of her throat and the truck reached fifty-five, the fastest Cielle had ever driven.

“Jesus, Cielle, slow down, the turn is coming.” Helen put both hands on the dash.

Cielle turned left onto the bumpy dirt road to the Mitchells’. Bodie, seventeen and the oldest son, drove the tractor in the field, dust clouds billowing behind him. The diesel exhaust was dense in the humid air. He tipped his hat and waved. Helen knelt on the seat and leaned half-out the window and whistled. Cielle pulled on her ankle, and she slid back down.

“I love him,” Helen said, smiling, watching Bodie in her side view mirror.

Cielle pulled up in front of the house. Bodie rode the tractor toward them. Helen went to meet him, and so Cielle knocked on the screen door and went inside. A fan ran on high and turned back and forth. It rippled her blouse like a wave, blew back her hair, and cooled her neck and arms. She breathed heavily, and her chest felt tight and thick, and she thought, a long needle could be stuck right through me and I wouldn’t feel a thing.

Mrs. Mitchell walked in the kitchen with laundry in her arms, and laid it in a pile on the table.

“Cielle,” she said, “you look hot. Some iced tea?”

Cielle nodded yes, and folded bath towels.

“Leave that,” Mrs. Mitchell said, and handed her a glass. She looked out the screen door and said, “You girls come for Bodie?”

Cielle wanted to say, *Daddy is dead*, but Bodie and Helen came in, chatting and flirty, their arms touching. *Nobody should have to know this*, she thought.

“I told Helen they could stay for supper,” Bodie said to his mother. “That all right?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Mitchell said, and patted her upper lip. “But I’m not baking anything, we’ll just have beans and leftover chicken.”

The cold drink felt good but Cielle felt light-headed, tired, as if she could lie on the floor right then and sleep. She needed to tell someone about her father in the barn, her mother in the bath. But she knew to say the words out loud was to change lives instantly, and to throw the world off balance from that moment on. She remembered the barn swallows clucking and flapping high up in the rafters and her father’s horse stomping in his stall. The sharp smell of urine. The wheelbarrow in which she’d carried the eggs that morning. Had he stood on it in his last moments? If she had put the wheelbarrow behind the barn maybe none of this would have happened. Maybe if she’d done the bird call back he would have known she loved him, but that morning her hands smelled of bleach and she didn’t want them near her face, near her eyes. Now, at the Mitchells’, all she could think of was the sharp smell of bleach on her fingers. Maybe if she didn’t say the words *Daddy’s dead*, didn’t even think them and stayed at the Mitchells’, then by the time they went home she would know it was imagined and her mother would be out of the bath in a cotton dress, and her father would be in for dinner. They would be sitting at the kitchen table eating steak and corn, listening to the ballgame on the radio.

Mr. Mitchell walked in red-faced and sweaty. He wore a white undershirt tank and dirty pants held up by suspenders. He wiped his face on one of the folded towels and Mrs. Mitchell said, “Honest to God, Jim, not a good, clean towel.”

Mr. Mitchell laughed, “Expect me to wipe my face with a dirty towel?”

“Just not a good bath towel,” she said and handed him a glass of iced tea and he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

“I’ll wash up for my sweetheart,” he said and took a long drink, “just after Miss Cielle here might help me bring in a horse.” He winked at Cielle, set his glass down, and held the door open for her.

The Mitchells owned two quarter horses—tall, lean, strong animals. They had English saddles and bridles and let Cielle ride when she wanted. Mrs. Mitchell gave lessons on weekends for extra money but taught Cielle for free.

Cielle walked behind Mr. Mitchell. His steps were heavy and sure in his work boots and his soles left diamond patterns in the dirt.

Cielle stretched her legs to step into his footprints as if they were tracks in the snow. She moved forward awkwardly like a circus clown with a wide, exaggerated walk. She saw him turn his head toward the pasture for the horses, but knew it was for a sideways glance of her behind him, and he smiled and continued on. He smelled like her father after work in the sun—musky and salty and alive.

He stopped at the barn to get halters and lead ropes, and Cielle waited outside for him. She heard him talk inside the barn, and then he came out.

“Thought I had you behind me still,” he said, “I was talking to air.” He handed her a red halter and lead and said, “You can bring in Ginger.”

Ginger was the quarter mare Cielle loved to ride. She clipped the lead rope to the halter and swung it over her shoulder. Mr. Mitchell held open the metal gate and closed it behind her.

“I almost forgot,” he said, and handed Cielle a carrot from his front pocket. He kicked a clod of dirt and it broke into a fine dust. “One of the driest years on record.”

The pasture was bumpy and rocky and could twist an ankle easily. The air was warm and carried the smell of sweet grass up from the swale that dipped down to a still body of water and a stand of trees where Ginger stood. Her tail slapped at flies and her withers quivered. The ticking of grasshoppers and cicadas was all around. A sound that reminded Cielle of her mother starting the gas oven. The sound of fire.

Cielle walked down the hill and watched her step. Buttercups and clover bloomed bright and low to the ground. She bent and picked a buttercup and held it to her chin, but forgot the reason why you did that. Her father knew. She smelled honeysuckle as she neared the trees, and the air cooled, like a cold pocket of water in a lake.

“Here Ginger,” she said, and came up on the left side of the mare. “Here I am, girl.”

Mosquitoes swarmed by the water and buzzed around her head. Cielle ran her hand down Ginger’s neck, it felt soft and firm, and she thought of the blood charging beneath.

“I love you Ginger,” she said, and pet her hard. “You’re so good.”

She put her cheek to Ginger’s neck and felt tightness rising in her chest, tightness moving up into her throat and then her throat gone

itchy and salty, her cheek muscles pulling back and her eyes filling up, her eyes wet.

“I love you so much,” she said, and held the carrot out in the palm of her hand.

Ginger raised her head and took the carrot, and Cielle’s arms shook as she adjusted the halter. Cielle led her up the hill toward the gate, toward Mr. Mitchell and the barn, where she would walk Ginger into her stall, amongst the cool dampness of the hay, slip off her halter, and let her lie down in darkness.