

I'm not allowed to go back to that chicken coop for at least an hour. "Those hens can't lay with someone in there all the time," my grandmother says. "Someone" I know, means me, the eight-year-old boy known around here for barging into henhouses, at least during these summer weeks my brother Garrett and I spend with her and my grandfather. If she would let me carry a chair and table out there, as I've repeatedly suggested, and set up a comfortable area in the corner of the coop to watch from, then I wouldn't disturb the chickens with my constant excited arrivals—swinging open the plank door and stomping across the speckled floor, anticipating newly-made eggs.

Reaching under a dozing chicken in the small nesting boxes and finding an egg there is a miracle, one that happens several times a day—not nearly enough. It's like finding a five-dollar bill or a jewel on the sidewalk. The egg in my hand is warm, heavy, a singular whole thing, impossibly smooth and brown, the same color as the makeup sealed in tiny glass jars in my mother's medicine cabinet at home. To think that *this* comes out of a chicken is mysterious and somewhat sickening, but I crave the discovery, and sometimes when I push my hand under those nervous, feathered bodies and mistakenly imagine my fingertip slipping over polished eggshell, I actually gasp. When the hen flutters off, her egg-making concentration broken, and she leaves me with her bare nest, I generally call her a name I couldn't repeat in front of my grandmother.

But this afternoon, here in the kitchen, a warning has been made about the henhouse. I am to stay in here until right before dinner, until Garrett and Grandpa come in from the field, no matter what. Only then, when the tractor is back in the machine shed, and my grandfather is washing up, may I check on the eggs.

Other than stalking chickens, there's not much to do at the farm. After the four-and-a-half hour car ride, and our eager greetings once we arrive, I slowly remember the previous long summer visits, the quiet days

stretching out in my head, hot and dull. This is a working farm, and that's what they do—my grandparents—ticking off the same list of chores one by one every day, whether little boys are here or not. Their mornings start in the dark hours before dawn when they sit at the kitchen table and he reads the Bible aloud before she cooks their breakfast. My grandfather then spends the rest of his day driving huge machines around, doing things to the soybean and hay fields that I don't understand. Garrett likes anything with an engine so he goes along. My grandmother tends to her garden and the chickens, sews, washes clothes, makes lunch, cleans it up, and then makes dinner. This is a farm in the middle of nowhere—nowhere near toy stores or libraries—so far from everything that even their mailbox is on the wrong side of the road, as if no one here has ever seen the way it is supposed to be.

In the kitchen, dinner is underway. My grandmother is measuring rice, peeling carrots, sugaring a pie. She works so quickly and mechanically, without any words—the way she does almost anything—that she doesn't notice me sliding my feet across the blue linoleum and down the hall. I know enough not to try opening the big door to go outside, so I wander down to the bedrooms, looking for a distraction. In the room where Garrett and I sleep, my dad's room when he was a boy in this house, I sit on the bed, bounce a little and stare longingly out the window through walnut branches at the chicken coop.

There's a large closet, and rummaging through things might give a few minutes of pleasure. On the shelves, I expect to find old toys of my dad's, thinking of the shelves of my own closet—hand-puppets, Candyland, my potholder loom—stuck there in the silent dark without me. And here is a Davy Crockett lunchbox, a glass jar packed with plastic soldiers, a metal car with doors that open, and strange orange numbered tags with barbed points that I'll find out later are pushed through the velvet of a cow's ear to mark them. On the bottom shelf, shoved beneath a lace tablecloth and a crocheted blanket is a large white box; inside it, wrapped in tissue paper, a blue dress.

Shaking it out, smoothing away wrinkles and laying it across the

carpet, I know immediately this is a dress for a girl, not a woman. The length is for a body about my height. Stiff navy satin with short puffy sleeves, wiggly gold designs threaded into the tight middle part—the pleated embellished bodice—cloth heavy and lush as I lift the skirt to trace the perfect stitches of the hem and peek underneath. My dad has a sister, a tall regal woman named Aunt Karen, so maybe this is hers from a long time ago.

I throw my T-shirt into a sweaty lump in the corner, and standing in front of the mirror on the back of the bedroom door, I pull the dress over my head and my shorts, and see that yes, it does seem made for someone my size. The bottom hem just skims the carpet as I shift my weight left and then right, my eyes in the mirror watching the full skirt tilting like a bell. I gather the folds of the dress in my hands, the way the women do on *Little House on the Prairie*, and bustle around for a minute or two before the door opens.

My grandmother. She just stands there and keeps her hand on the knob. She doesn't say anything, only stares at me with her serious face—the same face she always wears.

"I found this," I say. My hands clasp each other behind my back. I look at the T-shirt wadded up on the floor near her feet, but she doesn't seem to notice it. The fact that I took off my T-shirt before I put on the dress makes me feel more embarrassed, as if I'm somehow exposed in front of her, though the dress covers me, neck to toes. Suddenly my arms feel cold and the trim encircling the collar scratches my neck. She stays there, utterly still, and doesn't speak.

I say, "It fits me," and sort of twist side to side.

"It does. It does," she says. Her lips press together, bunching up like my two handfuls of blue satin, and then she lets them go. "I was coming in here to see if you would set the table for Grandma."

She knows I love setting the table because she taught me how.

The fork goes on the left and that's easy to remember because *left* has an *f* in it, and *f* is for *fork*. The knife and spoon go on the right. The

plate should always be an inch from the table's edge, which is two thumb widths. Water glass on the right of the plate, and just a little right of the knife's point. Tea for Grandma and Grandpa, milk for Garrett, water for me. Napkin folded in half in the center of each plate. We always pass to the right.

In the dining room, I walk behind each pushed-in chair and check the settings I've laid out. Over and over, I circle the table, each time nudging a fork, straightening a napkin, tapping a glass or pushing the ceramic boy salt shaker just a little closer to his twin, the pepper girl. Butter dish, pickle bowl, a stack of sandwich bread on a plate, milk pitcher, everything is here. Hanging next to one of the long sides of the table, a wide mirror stretches across the wall. I can't get enough of watching myself, gazing at how I move and perform these tiny actions, which are somehow glamorous now instead of just chores. Because I'm wearing the blue dress.

And I love the feeling of the skirt on my legs, the cool slickness sliding over my skin, how the hem rustles over the carpet when I stop suddenly to fix a spoon. Or how dark the small sleeves look against my white arm. I love smoothing my hand down the crinkles of the bodice. And standing at a corner of the table, spinning on my heel, watching the dress open up wide and twist around my feet. The gold thread, the pleats, the tightness at my waist. I love touching my face when I'm wearing the dress because beautiful women touch their faces a lot when they want to be noticed. I even pick up one of the spoons and hold its end to my ear lobe, imagining it as a long silver earring.

Because wearing it has me spellbound, I don't hear the tractor rumbling down the big hill and through the gate toward the gray machine shed. They are coming in for dinner. In the doorway, my grandmother dries her hands on the white apron tied around her waist. She's wearing a housedress, a worn shapeless thing printed with small yellow flowers. It's neither as lovely nor as womanly as mine, but I still wish I could wear that one too.

"Thank you for helping," she says, standing in the watery light reflected off the mirror from the dinnertime sun.

"You're welcome," I say, curtsying like the women on TV.

Though we can't hear it from the house, my grandfather heaves and pulls on the giant machine shed door to close it. He and Garrett start marching up the gravel driveway toward the house.

My grandmother fidgets with her apron. Her thumb rubs a stain near an embroidered leaf. "I expect you should change for dinner before your grandpa gets here," she says. Something on the stove is boiling over, steam pushing up on the pot lid, froth escaping and sizzling against an orange burner coil. She ignores it. We look at each other, a woman in her dress, a boy in his, one of us on each end of a perfectly set table for four. Here is a secret we both helped make, and in this moment we feel it dropping fully formed down into each of our bodies, whole and heavy, where it will sit forever. I'm too young to know exactly why we're keeping the secret, but I know we're not going to tell anybody what she's just let me do. "You better scoot," she says.

The sun falls a bit lower behind the old barn. Silverware sparkles. My earring spoon isn't close enough to its knife, but I can fix that later. "Okay," I say, hurrying to the bedroom as the hem of my dress whispers against the carpet.