

1- Home

St. Louis, Missouri, April 4, 1850

“Is it true, Mother?” I asked.

“It’s true,” she said.

“We’re moving west,” Father said, “to California.”

Mother took his hand, curled her fingers around it. Her eyes smiled, the color of a cloudless sky. Faye, my sister, all ten years of her, and me, just turned twelve, perched on the front porch steps beside them, twilight coming on, filtering into the orchard.

Father’s words, moving west, stuck me like a thorn and bore in, deep. I crossed my arms covering my heart, just so, the way the moon lays atop broken cornhusks on a field, furrowed and silent.

I didn’t want moving, I wanted to stay.

Here, it was the slow time, now, the very best time, with spring moving in, gradually, our garden of beans and squash, still in seed, and bits of sweet grass, green and wet.

Here, there was time for Faye and me to sit the sun down, crimson, fiery-red while Caleb, our puppy, lay stretched across our laps, and we listened to that one black-feathered crow call and I imagined lilacs and dogwoods, tulips and daffodils just now coming in.

Moving west, we’d miss it all. I tried to think of who would care for what was being born, if we couldn’t. Just last week, our pig, Sadie, bore five brand new piglets still suckled in with

half-closed eyes, snouts pale and barely pink, tiny hooves kneading, greedy-like and tiny mouths sucking fresh milk, warm, from their big-bellied mama, resting on a hay pillow.

I wished we could cup them in our hands like a prayer but couldn't bear to disturb them. And baby chicks hatching out all over the barnyard, one even in the pig pen and two, yellow as a field of dandelions, came through the barn doors over to Mother as she sat milking. Calling out cheep, cheep and we picked each up and held them to our cheeks, Faye and I, softest thing I ever felt, smelling of grass and earth and straw.

Mother brought me back. She reached out and took my hand as we sat together, Father and Faye there too sifting through what had been said. Faye flicked her long walnut-colored hair so beautifully straight, the kind of hair I wanted. Faye didn't say a word. "Why, Father," I asked, "Why do we have to go?" His steady gaze caught me off guard, made me lose my footing, so sure he was of his.

"Our farm's wore out," he said. "California's got the land we want."

Not the land I want, I thought. But he smiled, not knowing. That smile coming from somewhere deep in. Father was always fully himself and his smile, wide as a river, was natural as the sun shining in the orchard. I looked into his eyes, stared deep and saw what he saw . . . me . . . held together by this body, short and thick, not quite comfortable in calico, hair going everywhere, color of apple bark, and wild curls down my shoulders . . .

knots
that never brush out
too small nose,
ears too big
eyes a hazel mismatch.

Father's eyes lit up at the sight of me, his smile grew large like always. I turned away from it, hoping to catch Mother's eye. I did and her gaze met mine, something broken filling the space between. Silence came then and I thought to listen for the sounds of California, anything to comfort me like crickets in summer. I listened, but couldn't hear a thing but Missouri, wide open, the summer breezes coming through the corn rows, blowing tasseltops, silky, blonde with bullfrogs splashing, croaking deep, croaking loud, crickets and bullfrogs harmonizing like a crazy choir singing into a night that never stops, that goes on endlessly.

And Mark chasing me through row after corn row, until we get lost in the tall of it and the warm night and Faye finding us laying side by side in the last row of corn gazing up at stars, and the way they twinkle and seem to be gazing back at us. But, oh my, those stars, there wouldn't be stars like that in California or corn fields or crickets
...

and not until you've looked up
from corn rows, felt breezes blowing
eard tassels fluttering
and crickets and bullfrogs
composing their sweet river nightongs
not til you've breathed corn air coming

and seen stars blazing
not until you've had all of that
along with your best friend,

not until then could you say no to leaving

Mother broke the quiet and my thoughts as she stroked her auburn curls with an ivory-handle hairbrush. "We will build a better life."

"This one's fine," I said, in a whisper.

But Faye said, "I want to go."

"Well ... I want to stay," I answered sharply.

"Why?" Faye asked.

"All I know's here."

"Oh, Savannah," Mother said.

She reached over and touched my cheek. Touched it the way a breeze slips into an open window, stirring the curtains ever so softly, slightly. Father was standing there.

"It's not enough to keep us," he said.

I couldn't hold it any longer. "Father, something terrible's coming ... it's coming, if we go. I know it is."

"Savannah," Father's eyes darkened up and his jaw set stiff and he went on – "You don't have a choice, girl. We're going. And that's that."

I sat still as stone, thinking of California . . . tried to imagine Father's new and golden land, land of new corn, new moon silver and sun gold. But the long trail and the getting there . . . stopped my imagining. I saw darkness ahead and thought, no, *knew*, that we'd

lose everything, even California, if we went there. But how was it that in the midst of this topsy-turvy, I could notice Father's hair, brown and straight like Faye's, drifting gently over his eyes and making me almost smile as he kept brushing it out of his eyes.

He needs a haircut, I thought. How could I be thinking about him needing a haircut, at a time like this, and me being mad at him and his big idea of moving away into the unknown?

I'd said as much as I needed to, yet not nearly enough. In my head I wrote my poems as I always did . . .

Missouri moons and prickly stars,
a farm that needed tending
and a stubborn daughter
wouldn't hold Father back
we were going and there
was nothing I could do about it.