

Highlights for Children

5:30 p.m., April 30, 1968

Rumblings in her stomach drove Rachel to the kitchen when the after-school showing of *Rocky and Bullwinkle* ended. She always got a kick out of “Fractured Fairy Tales” with their surprise endings. Hopefully, Mom was making something good for supper. No, not yet. She was at the sink scrubbing her hands. Dried dirt from the garden flaked off her feet onto the floor.

Mom’s bald spot—the older kids called it her badge of bravery from when she tried to save the baby from The Fire—glistened pink with sunburn. Her arms seemed to grow redder as Rachel watched her. She must have been out there all day. Nothing was on the stove.

Rachel crossed the kitchen to the corner cupboard, bent down, and peered inside. Maybe she could find some Cheerios to tide her over. Mom pulled some hamburger from the fridge and placed it on the counter, then crouched down to open the drawer under the stove.

At the sound of Dad’s car pulling into the driveway, Rachel stiffened. Rats. She needed to be in her room before the yelling started. She snatched a spoon from the silverware drawer and tried to find a bowl, but they were all dirty—Mom hadn’t washed dishes today. Was there time to rinse one out? No. Dad’s feet were clunking on the porch already.

He always yelled for half an hour when he got home, but from her room upstairs, if she covered her ears, Rachel couldn’t hear the words. Just the angry rise and fall of Dad’s voice, shouting questions that Mom never answered, blaming her for everything he could think of. If only Mom would raise her voice just once, tell Dad how mean he was, that he wasn’t perfect,

either. During the five-thirty ravings, Rachel came up with comebacks for every complaint and practiced them in her head—but Mom never peeped. She just let the scalding words rain down.

Even though she expected it, Rachel jumped when the kitchen door crashed open. He was madder than usual. His bald head shone with sweat, and his weak eyes squinted through his glasses as his plunging eyebrows pushed them farther down his nose. His heavy footsteps pounded the linoleum. He slammed his lunchbox and Thermos onto the yellow kitchen table. Mom faced him, frying pan in hand. Rachel pulled the Cheerios box to her chest like a yellow shield.

Twenty minutes earlier

Another red light. He pushed his foot, aching and sweaty inside the steel-toed work boot, down on the brake. That made another minute before he could yank these boots off, wash the sweat from his face, and sprawl on the couch in front of the fan, turned on full blast. Mid-eighties in Minneapolis, the weather man said. Hottest April thirtieth in twenty years. He screwed open his Thermos, poured some lukewarm tap water into the top, and twisted the plug back in place.

Blee-eeft!

He jumped at the blaring horn behind him, sloshing water onto his work pants and the car seat. “Hold your horses!”

He pressed his foot to the accelerator and eased forward, gulping water as he gained speed. People were so rude nowadays. Couldn’t a guy get a drink?

Just like the guys at work, hassling him constantly, calling him names. So what if he took a few more breaks than they did? Every curse word, every time they used Jesus’ name in vain, it raised his hackles. If he didn’t duck out to use the toilet sometimes, he might haul off and punch

one of 'em. Laying them out would feel good, but it would ruin his witness. Better to just quote Scripture. Heaping coals.

Hot air blasted his face—going sixty past open fields, windows wide open. Farmers were plowing—yep, some were planting. If he still owned the farm, he'd be out there, too.

Tail lights glared in front of him, and he slammed on the brakes. The Thermos rolled onto the floor at his feet. Traffic had come to a standstill, and he screeched to a stop within an inch of the bumper ahead of him. He bent to pick up the Thermos—and jolted. Someone hit him! Jerk!

When he sat up, the guy ahead of him was getting out of his car, yelling. “Watch where you're going! What's your problem?”

While digging around on the floor for the Thermos, he must have eased up on the brake enough to creep forward and tap the car ahead. But it was only a tap. Couldn't have done any damage. He jammed the car into park and got out to look at the other guy's bumper.

Try as he could, the guy couldn't find the tiniest dent. “Guess it didn't do anything. But pay attention, wouldja?”

Good grief! Hotheads everywhere today.

Ten minutes later he swerved into their driveway and parked. Clutching his lunch box in one hand and his Thermos in the other, he trudged up the sidewalk, pain stabbing his legs with every step. Now to get these boots off.

He stopped in his tracks. Against the front porch leaned a pitchfork and shovel, still caked with soil. Muddy footprints dotted the cement steps. Fury rose from the pit of his stomach, into his chest, and up behind his eyes. He glared to his left.

Sure enough, she'd dug up more grass to plant her garden. All summer long, instead of cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry, she'd be out there. And then the blasted canning! Endless

canning, endless jars of stuff they'd never eat. The kids wouldn't touch canned beets. There were rows of them in the basement already. It was a sickness. She had to snap out of it. She couldn't get over losing those cows, so she punished him for it—beet by beet, pickle by pickle.

Taking guff from the guys at work was one thing, but he was the head of this house. He shoved the front door open. There she stood with the empty frying pan, just getting supper on. His stomach growled. Look at those disgusting feet, covered with dirt! She'd gone barefoot in the garden and stood barefoot in the kitchen, like some filthy sharecropper. His breath came hard, with trembling exhales. The empty lunch box rattled in his hand.

More than anything, Rachel wished she wasn't the only one of the kids at home. What was the point of having a big family when no one was ever around? Tammy, a senior this year, was always with her boyfriend or waitressing at the Sugar Bowl. After Frank graduated last year, he got drafted right away. When she got off the bus today, Rachel had checked the mailbox, hoping for a mud-stained airmail envelope from Vietnam, but there wasn't one. Her oldest sister and brother had left home before the family moved to this house—Donna to get married, and Steve to join the Navy. So far he was safe.

How much fun they'd had just a few years ago when she, Brenda, Doug, and Davy played Tarzan and Gunga Din in the living room, jumping between the couches and chairs, pretending the rugs were quicksand. They took turns pulling Mattie, screaming and kicking with joy, around the floor on a blanket. How he pouted and moaned if he had to sit in his wheelchair and couldn't be part of their games!

But all of a sudden everyone was older. Doug and Davy worked at the mink ranch every day after school—they were saving up for cars—and now that Brenda was in junior high, she

stayed after for glee club, marching band, or girls' track team. And Mattie. Rachel's eyes stung with regret. He lived at Cambridge State Hospital now. If she'd helped Mom with him more, maybe he'd have been able to stay home.

Only Rachel was around for the daily yelling anymore. And here it came.

"I told you not to make the garden bigger!" Sweat trickled down his face, and his toes tingled with rage. "Why don't you listen to me?"

Her nose was bright red—she'd been in the garden so long she'd burned herself. Even her scalp under her scraggly hair was pink.

"We're never going to use it all! You've got jars from five years ago in the basement. Stop wasting my hard-earned money!"

He might as well be talking to a statue. Her dim blue eyes stared from behind her glasses as if no one was home.

"You're not gonna can *anything* this year, do you hear me? Just plant what we can eat, and we'll use up what we already have."

He couldn't tell if she'd changed her dress—she'd tied an apron on. But those feet! Too often her untrimmed toenails scratched him in bed. Those blackened feet wouldn't come clean without a long soak in the tub—which she wouldn't have time for with that stack of dishes in the sink.

Why couldn't she be one of the pretty, powdered housewives the commercials taunted him with? Not that he expected much in bed. His operation after their tenth, Rachel, had taken care of that, even though they'd promised him it wouldn't have that effect. Still, it kept them from having more mouths to feed. He couldn't support the kids they had without the monthly

commodity boxes from the county—and a couple of tens passed to him now and then from the preacher.

Too bad, because making babies was the only thing he'd ever succeeded at. Every eighteen months, like clockwork, he'd produced his quota. They were all smart and cute. Even Mattie, though he'd been born with cerebral palsy. Little blonde Rachel was the pick of the litter, even if she was the runt.

He clenched his fists. "I'm not spending a dime on canning jars! Is that clear?"

Silence. It was her weapon, and she brandished it like an expert. She knew it made his blood boil. Now she turned her back on him, as if she hadn't heard a word. This time, he'd get a response. With three strides he reached her and saw her feet up close—black dirt between her toes and thick under her jagged toenails. Inside his boots his own toes throbbed and itched. His athlete's foot had flared up in the heat.

"Get some shoes on! How many times have I told you not to go barefoot in the kitchen?"

The urge to grind those toes to powder erupted from every pore. He spun her around by the shoulders and plunged his right foot down on the hideous things.

Ten minutes earlier

She laid the meat on the narrow counter to the right of the stove and stooped to grab the frying pan. She straightened, rubbing the sore muscles in the small of her back with satisfaction. She let the frying pan dangle at her side, enjoying the way it stretched the throbbing muscles in her arm. She had prepared a lot of ground today. Enough for several rows of sweetcorn—the kids liked that. Twelve mouths were a lot to feed, but at least they had land. Just no cows anymore.

That was a crying shame—all those cows that had to be put down. Her heart twisted at the memory of Bessie—such a good milker!

Without the cows, the vegetables were even more important. They only had an acre here—not forty, like the farm. But she could dig up more—they didn't need lawn. Too bad the Minnesota soil wasn't as rich as their Wisconsin farmland. Before she could plant, they would need black dirt. Tomorrow she'd call for the delivery—she'd make sure it came before he got home from work. She'd already slipped some tens from his billfold over the past few months, so she had almost enough. Tonight when he was snoring she'd get the rest.

Steps echoed on the porch behind her back.

That's right! It wasn't twelve mouths anymore—Donna was married. But she was having babies now, and they needed to eat. The boys could be back from the service any time now—wars didn't last forever. They had such big appetites! As soon as he was better, Mattie would move home again—and meanwhile he'd be back for visits. There was sweet little Rachel—always looking for something to eat.

They couldn't count on him—he didn't make enough, and the way he talked about his job worried her. What if they let him go, like before? If he lost his job again, he'd be happy to have their meager store of food in the basement. You had to be prepared.

The door opened. She turned around. Was it that late already? He was going on about the garden.

If the weather was like this tomorrow, she'd get more soil turned up. Her skin prickled with warmth—she must remember to wear long sleeves. Sunburn never bothered her while she was digging—only in the wee hours when she couldn't sleep. Lying in bed would be painful tonight. Her head felt hot. Where was that hat? Potatoes! She'd meant to get them from the

basement. She'd bring up some canned beets for color, too. Everyone liked those. But first to get the burgers on. She turned around for the salt and pepper.

Rachel backed into the corner when Dad's boot clomped down on Mom's toes. As Mom writhed in pain, tears sprang to Rachel's eyes, and she squeezed the cereal box flat at the sides. Mom swiveled to escape the weight. They danced clumsily, bodies flailing, Dad trying to keep her foot nailed to the floor, Mom squirming to break free. She slipped away. He stomped again.

The frying pan came up and met Dad's temple. His glasses zoomed from his face like an Apollo rocket and crash landed against the metal leg of the kitchen table. They broke in two. One piece careened under the table, and the other skidded to the bench, where it smacked into stillness with a sickening clatter of breaking glass.

The frying pan clanged to the floor as Mom flew back against the stove. Pain wracked her face. Blood bubbled up onto her toes. Dad stepped back and looked around, confused. Without his glasses he was as blind as Mr. Magoo.

"Rachel, help me find my glasses." His voice was level. Calm, in fact.

Rachel scrambled under the table, sure of what she'd find. "They're broken, Dad." She lingered in the temporary hideout.

"Show me."

She scooped up the fragments and slithered out with an army crawl. She emptied the worthless offering into his waiting palms.

Shaking his head, he poured the pieces onto the table. He crooked his arm so his watch nearly touched his nose. "The clinic closes in fifteen minutes. Rachel, come with me to help me see."

Rachel froze. No. That was impossible. She knew nothing about driving—she turned eleven next month. “I’ll call Tammy. She can drive you. Or I can run next door and ask Mrs. Engstrom.” Mom hadn’t driven since they moved to Minnesota.

“No time. They’ll be closed by then. Come on.” He grabbed the largest piece of the frame and one broken lens and headed for the door.

Rachel looked at Mom, who had limped to the sink for a wash cloth. She’d be okay. She ran to the back door for her shoes. She’d slip them on in the car.

He could pretty much drive this road with his eyes closed—he had driven it so often. A few times he’d been so exhausted that he nodded off for a second. Only once he ended up in the ditch. With Rachel here, this should be a cinch. Anyway, he had no choice. If he didn’t show up to work tomorrow—even if he had broken glasses for an excuse—he might not have a job anymore. The union rep had told him he was on his own now—they’d gone to bat for him too many times already.

He could make out the yellow center line. He had to keep to the right of that. Just hope no kids dash across the street. Driving on the highway would be dicey. He’d stick to thirty and let them honk all they wanted.

“It’s red, Dad. The light’s red.”

“I see it. Thanks, honey.”

A guy could see more than he thought he could—if he needed to.

Five minutes earlier

Rachel peered hard through the windshield as Dad pulled onto Old Towne Road. She was seeing for two now, and both their lives were in her hands. Her stomach burned and churned—good thing she hadn't eaten the Cheerios. Steadying herself, she pushed her fists down into the upholstery.

What would become of Mom if they never returned? Rachel cringed, remembering how Mom had thrashed and screamed when Dad moved Mattie to Cambridge. She'd already lost a daughter in The Fire twenty years ago, which was why she didn't act like other kids' moms. And then she lost the farm she loved. Mom couldn't handle losing another child—especially her favorite.

So far so good. They'd made it through the first stoplight. Strangely, they met no cars on the first road to town. God must be keeping them away. Please, God, please don't let us get in an accident. She glanced sideways at Dad. His eyes were squinted to slits—maybe he could see something. Or maybe angels held the steering wheel.

On the highway, they hit every light green. Once in a while Rachel peeked at the side mirror to see how many more cars were lining up behind them. All those drivers were probably angry at them. But just because someone's mad at you doesn't mean you've done something wrong. They might not know why you're doing what you're doing. It makes perfect sense to you, but they think it's stupid. No one knew Dad couldn't see. If they knew that, they'd be glad he wasn't driving any faster.

Finally, he pulled into a parking spot in front of the clinic—they were all empty. Rachel let out her breath. It was five minutes to six. Dad wandered toward the counter holding out his broken glasses frame. The woman met him, took his arm, and brought him back to a room right away. Rachel plopped into a seat in the waiting area.

She should feel better—they hadn't died on the way—but her hands were still shaking. Dad yelling was nothing new. But that huge boot rising over Mom's tiny foot, coming down so hard— She shifted her feet under her chair, curling her toes within her red Keds. The churning in her stomach doubled—like riding the Octopus at the fair. Her chest felt like it did at the school bus stop in January when the windchill was twenty below zero.

As much as Dad yelled, he had never hit Mom. He had tussled with Frank in anger once—and after Frank threw him against the wall, Dad gave up trying to get the boys to obey. But stomping on Mom's bare feet with his heavy work boot—that was horrid. He deserved to get clobbered.

Maybe this would teach Dad a lesson. Maybe Mom would stand up for herself now—now that she knew she could.

Seeing Mom fight back brought no satisfaction after all. But then, Mom hadn't exactly fought back. It was pure reflex—she just happened to have the frying pan in her hand. Rachel swallowed. She felt crusty. Her mind kept playing reruns of the angry dance, the frying pan cracking against Dad's head, and his glasses flying through the air and smashing to smithereens.

On the table beside her lay a copy of *Highlights* magazine—the best part of going to the doctor or dentist. She picked it up and flipped to the Hidden Pictures page, her favorite. Inside a fancy frame was a pleasant farm in summertime. A lush garden, a leafy tree, and a wood rail fence bordered a great big barn. As she studied the drawing carefully, she spotted an arrow on the barn roof, a sword in a cornstalk, and an axe on the fence rail. Finding it all was hard, but once you discovered the hidden thing, you could never *not* see it after that.

Next she found, among the tree leaves, a long-handled frying pan. She shivered, but kept on searching.