

Baby Toys

Billie stood back, admiring it from a distance, carefully examining every inch, nook and cranny. The playhouse was wooden, not plastic like the ones in the backyards of other girls our age. It had three windows, a sturdy roof, a door, and a flower box with marigolds from Reed's Lawn Supply. Daddy brought it home the day he said we could stop worrying. He kissed mamma hard on the mouth before telling me to go look in his truck bed.

I stood next to Billie, admiring how perfectly it fit between two oak trees, my nails digging in to my palms with excitement. "Do you like it?" I squealed.

Billie was one year older and lived three houses down the holler. She had a deep southern twang that made my grandparents think she was uneducated. Her feet were always dirty, and her mamma let her skin get brown in the summer.

"The paint is ugly," she said, placing a hand on her tiny waist. "No one# likes a blue house. It should have been painted white."

A summer breeze ran through the hills tossing her loose tangles to the wind. Instead of braids and bows, her hair was wild and untamed. Although it was now stained with cigarette smoke and previously belonged to her older sister, her white dress seemed elegant and mature. Even a nine year old with chubby cheeks could tell she was beautiful.

"Let's go inside," I said, circling around her in white Keds with ruffled socks. "I have a chair, a desk, and some dishes from the kitchen."

Inching up on her tiptoes, Billie skeptically peered inside the front window.

“I have an art box and my sister’s *Seventeen* magazine,” I said, taking her hand and pulling her closer onto the front porch of the little house. “The windows can open, and the door even has a lock. No one else can come in.”

Six inches shorter and full of optimism, I looked up at her freckled face. She hesitated only a moment before releasing my hand and stepping back from the playhouse.

“No,” she said. “I don’t play with baby toys anymore.”

I stepped down from the porch, turning my back to the playhouse. The air was heavy with an unescapable stickiness. A small bead of sweat dripped down my back as my stomach filled with a sour pit.

Billie walked over to a straw bag that was tossed aside when she arrived. Digging around within, she quickly pulled out a pack of cigarettes. With her other hand, she grabbed a small lighter. Just like one from the movies.

“Do you want a cigarette?” she asked.

I hesitated, not knowing how to answer.

Flipping open the pack, she pulled out a thin cigarette and lit it effortlessly.

“I take them from the gas station when mamma is working,” she said, placing the pack back in her bag. “She doesn’t notice.”

I looked around, anxiously scanning the kitchen windows and yard for a parent or passing neighbor to stop her, someone to say no and tell our parents. But no one was there.

“Or I take them from home,” she continued. “Daddy keeps them beside the bed.”

Billie walked over to the picnic table a few feet away from the playhouse and sat down on the bench. Elbow on the table, she positioned the cigarette between her middle and index finger, allowing the smoke to dance around her face.

“We might be moving anyway,” she said after taking a long drag and exhaling into the wind.

“Why?” I asked, stepping closer to Billie.

“Daddy got a job that makes lots of money. It’s in West Virginia.”

“What’s he gonna be?”

I half expected her to say doctor or astronaut. Billie told stories most of the time we were together. Once she told me she only had a year to live because she swallowed a chicken bone when she was three. Another time, she told everyone her mother was in a gum commercial. When I watched the news that night, waiting eagerly for every commercial, I told Mom and Dad about our neighborhood movie star. They laughed.

“I don’t really know the details,” she said. “I think he wants it to be a surprise.”

“Why does he want his job to be a surprise?”

“I don’t know,” she said, flicking ash on the picnic table. “He just does.”

“When do you go?”

“Soon,” she said. “Before school starts. Daddy wants to go buy a house first, before me and mamma come. We’re gonna get one with a pool.”

“That’s cool. You won’t have to go to the city pool anymore.”

“Are you going to sit or not?” she said, gesturing to the other side of the bench.

I took another step forward and slid in to the picnic table bench. She extended her tan arm in my direction, the cigarette, now half of its original size, waiting at the end of her reach.

“Here,” she said. “Try it. It’s cool.”

Once again looking toward the window, I waited for my mother to peek out and wave the way she usually did. But, no one was watching today. I looked back at Billie, and she eyed me impatiently.

“Don’t worry, she’s talking to my mom,” Billie said, pushing the burning cigarette closer to me. “Go on. Do it.”

“Okay,” I said, taking the cigarette.

I brought it to my lips. It smelled stale. Dirty.

“Inhale,” she said, “but don’t swallow. It will make you sick.”

I breathed in, the smoke instantly setting my throat and lungs on fire. Choking and coughing, I fought the urge to vomit.

“Shhhh...,” she said. “Not so loud. I don’t want your mom coming out here.”

Billie took the cigarette from my shaking hand. She rubbed the end of it on the table, putting out the remaining portion, before flicking it on the ground.

“I told you not to swallow,” she said. “But, not so bad, for your first time. It will get easier, the more you do it.”

“I don’t think I like it,” I said, once the air came back to my lungs.

“At first, I didn’t either. But, now I do. You’ll see.”

I wiped my watering eyes with the palms of my hands. The world was cloudy and out of focus.

“I’m not supposed to be friends with you anymore,” Billie said.

“What?” I asked. “Why not?”

“Mamma said so.”

“Why?”

Billie looked down at the picnic table, chipping away paint with her short, bitten nails.

“Your Dad gets to stay working,” she said rather softly. “And mine doesn’t. Mamma said it’s not fair.”

I glanced back at the window, wondering about the conversation taking place inside.

“Is that why you are going to West Virginia?” I asked.

“No. He has a better job, and that is why we are going.”

I looked down at my shoes, now covered in a light layer of dust. The laces on the left were just beginning to untie.

“It’s okay,” Billie said, gathering her hair at the nape of her neck, exposing her sun-kissed face. “It’s not your fault. You are still too young to know.”

“Maybe we can be pen pals?” I asked.

Billie smile and released her hair to the wind.

“Here,” she said, once again digging inside her bag. I watched as she pulled out the pack of cigarettes. “Take these. I want you to keep them. Without me, you won’t have anybody to get you any.”

“Thanks, Billie,” I said, taking the pack and holding them to my chest.

“Don’t let your Mom see.”

“I won’t. I promise.”