

They lived in the middle of dust-ridden plains, two miles from any house or town. No trees relieved the landscape; no birdsong filled the air. There was nothing but a flat unremarkable line as far as the eye could see. Funnel clouds of dirt danced around the ramshackle house, its clapboard shutters—once rich brown—were nothing more than pale gray, crooked teeth.

Mama washed laundry in the big copper bucket in the backyard. Not their own laundry; rich folks' laundry. Them that came in fancy motorized vehicles, banging and popping, dropped their baskets at the edge of the dirt street, and went on their way without so much as a “howdy-do.” They'd return at dusk, hand Mama a few dollars, and leave quick as they'd come.

Now and again Jacob tried to talk to them, but they'd just look down their noses and keep walking. His little sister Jessie never talked to them. Jessie never talked to anyone; not even Mama and Jacob. Not anymore. Not since daddy got to her.

Scrunched down on spindly bare legs and feet, Jacob stared at the motionless pebbles, his ‘marbles,’ in the circle drawn in dirt at the bottom of the two rickety front steps. Grimy and gray in reality, their brilliant color rivaled their smoothness in his imagination. Most days he spent hours lost in the angles of this game, but today his mind was as scattered as the pebbles when he flicked them with his shooter. His cousin Howard was coming to stay for three days. He'd never met his cousin, never had someone to play with other than his sister, for more than a few hours at a time. His stomach rolled like his marbles.

By the time the wagon wheel's rumble reached them, Jacob's feet—washed every night before bed and prayers—were as filthy as the ground now tattooed with his footprints.

“Mama,” he called, squeaking voice swirling around the house on unrelenting wind.
“They're here.”

Wiping pruny hands on her faded calico dress, Mama came round the corner. She grinned at her son, at his bucktooth smile, the spark in the dark brown eyes, so like hers. She put a loving

hand on his shoulder as they walked toward the wagon. Mama looked over her shoulder, sending her smile to Jess who sat on the porch in the tattered straw rocking chair, her doll, perched face out in her lap, shared Jess's vacant gaze. Jess hadn't moved since morning; she rarely did.

"Hey, Martha." The large man driving the wagon doffed his straw hat, pulling the horse to a stop.

"Hey, Fred." Mama looked up, shielding her eyes from the sun with a red-skinned hand.

"Me and Gail sure do appreciate this." Fred wiped sweat and dust from his eyes with a worn, washed out green bandana. He turned his jowl-heavy chin over his beefy shoulder. "Come on, Howard, get on out."

The wagon bounced as a young blond boy jumped out the back. He stood, one hand holding a lumpy burlap sack, the other shoved deep in the slash pocket of indigo overalls, long legs reaching the ground inches beyond the bottom of his pants.

"Our pleasure. Be good for the kids to have company," Mama said. "How's Aunt Clara?"

"Still holdin' on, far's we know. We'll let ya' know when we get back."

Mama nodded, rubbing the back of her neck as she sometimes did. She gave Jacob a tender push.

"Well, go on. Bring your cousin in the house."

Jacob shuffled forward, dragging his bare feet as if he hadn't been waiting for this moment for days. He wondered why Howard was so much taller than he was even though they were both twelve when he noticed a small drawstring bag hanging from Howard's neck.

"What's that?" Jacob asked in greeting, squinting up at the unfamiliar but not unfriendly face.

"Marbles." Howard replied.

Jacob's smile spread so far his dry lips cracked.

*

“I’ll be back in a couple hours,” Mama said, pushing her once pretty blue hat down on her head. “I’m goin’ to town to get somethin’ special for dinner, in honor of Howard bein’ here and all.”

“Thanks, Cousin Martha,” Howard stood, nodding his long, freckle-covered face, “mighty nice of you.”

Mama smiled. “You two keep a good eye on Jessie, ya’ hear?”

*

“What’s this one?” Jacob held a strange orange colored marble.

“Cat’s Eye,” Howard’s gaze flicked over his shoulder to Jessie, still rocking in the fraying chair, doll still in her lap. “What’s wrong with your sister?”

Jacob looked up at Jessie, at her pretty, vacant face, the brown eyes she shared with him and Mama, the tousled dirty blond hair. “Just quiet.”

“Whaddya’ mean quiet? Seems like she don’t talk or nothin’.” Howard took more marbles out of his bag. Jacob didn’t seem to mind talking long as he could look at marbles.

“No, she don’t...much,” Jacob replied, reaching out.

“How come?”

“Dun know for sure. She started talkin’ when she was little, but then...”

Jacob’s gaze flicked up to his cousin’s face, tongue twisting.

“Well, then we ran from daddy. She ain’t never talked since.”

Howard sat. “Why’d you run from your daddy?”

Jacob wondered if Howard had as many marbles as questions. “Got too hard for him, I guess. He...he didn’t like us no more.”

It was hard for Mama too. He saw it in her eyes, like she was on the edge of a cliff looking down, not wondering if she'd fall, but when. Most times the look went away, especially when she looked at him and Jessie. No matter how tired or hungry, she gave them what they needed most, her. She still liked them, loved them, never hurt them.

Jacob glanced back at Jessie. "She's a good girl."

Howard turned, shrugged. Seemed enough for him.

*

Neither boy noticed when she stood up, crossed the porch, and descended the crooked stairs. When her shadow fell over him, Jacob jumped.

"What the hell?" The words slipped out before he could catch them. He watched Jess plod away toward the street.

"Where she goin'?" Howard jumped up.

Jacob couldn't answer. He stood and followed Jess.

"Where you goin', Jess?" He called, catching up.

Jess kept walking. She seemed so small with her little feet and hobnobbed, skinny legs. Jacob wondered if all eight year olds were that small.

"You all right, Jessie?" Howard walked beside Jacob, who walked behind Jess.

No answer.

A few feet from the street, Jessie stopped. Jacob and Howard stopped. The boys circled around the girl to stand before her.

Jessie stared straight down. Jacob and Howard looked down. Jacob's thin brows furrowed on his sun kissed skin. Where did the small hole Jessie stood in come from? Had it been there before?

"What's wrong, Jessie?" Jacob asked, wind snatching his thin voice.

Jessie's head rose slowly. Unblinking eyes protruded from her gaunt face, her lips gaped in a gruesome gash. Her scream, when it came, shattered any peace that ever lived there.

“IT’S COMING!”

*

The days passed quickly. Jacob was sad to see Howard leave. His cousin promised to come again and bring more marbles, maybe even give Jacob some of his own. That night they played a game with Mama; Jacob laughed so hard his stomach hurt. When Mama tucked him in bed, her love covered him as completely as the dry dust covered the earth and his sadness disappeared. He felt guilty cause he never told Mama about Jessie did. He didn't want to make things worse for Mama; he wasn't sure she could take it.

*

The pounding woke them; it shook the earth beneath the clean, bare wood floor. Jacob was afraid to move, finding only enough courage to open his eyes. Jessie lay beside him; bulging eyes bore into his as if she'd been staring at him for hours, waiting. This time she whispered.

“It's coming.”

Jacob bolted upright, gasping. Mama stood at the open door, silhouette dark against pale morning light, staring out at the distance. Jacob ran past her onto the porch. Small figures moved about on the horizon. Three wagons huddled around them, long poles stuck out the back. They watched as men dug holes in the earth and rammed the poles in. The newly raised shafts reached out, skeletal fingers beckoning to heaven.

One by one, the men emptied the wagons, drove away. One creaking conveyance roared toward them. Jacob ran out, waving his hands until the driver pulled on the reins.

“What you doin' out there, mister?”

“Why, we puttin’ in e-lectricity poles, boy. They bringin’ e-lectricity out here.” As if that explained everything, the man whipped the reins, moving on.

Jacob ran back to Mama.

“They puttin’ in somethin’ called ‘lectricity.” Jacob stood at her feet, looking up into her eyes. “Is it that good, Mama?”

Mama looked down and Jacob saw it, her standing on the edge of the cliff look.

“I...I don’t know.”