

COULD YOU LOVE A LITTLE GIRL LIKE ME

April 1, 1935

"The swamp compels you to do things, things in God's eye you'd never do."

"Evil," Mama said, "the swamp is evil."

I only wore shoes for Sunday church or in the winter. Today wasn't Sunday and this hot July evening sure wasn't winter. But it would have been just as hard to cross the swamp without them.

But I, Hannah Rose Brown, paid no nevermind. Mama was going to have a baby and she was bleeding. I was afraid she was going to die. I had to go through the swamp to get Doctor Miller.

The harder I ran, the more mud oozed through the holes in my shoes. It left glopping sounds behind me. There were miles to go it seemed and then the sky started to turn dark.

"Evil," Mama said, "the swamp is evil, especially at night."

Mama's voice sounded in my head again.

My legs grew weary. My side ached. My throat was dry.

I stepped down over a log. The ground shifted underneath my foot. It was no windblown stick. It was soft, and squishy, and moving. It was a swamp snake.

"Evil," Mama said, "the swamp is evil under thy feet."

But I was quicker than any slither snake. The mouth snapped shut. Then I squinted and ran right past willow trees, broken logs and bullfrog noises.

Soon, I saw the lantern-lit window of Doctor Miller. I hoped he was there among the moving shadows behind the limply hung curtains. If he was, Mama and the baby would be saved.

Doctor Miller answered my knock on the door. At first, he didn't see me, being dark out and all, but then he looked down. He stared at me. I was huffing and puffing, trying to catch my breath. I probably looked funny dressed in a long, brown cotton dress with dried, caked mud scattered about my legs. My feet were so weighed down with mud that it felt like I was walking with cement shoes. My hair straggled around the sweat on my forehead.

"Hannah Rose? What is a twelve-year-old girl like you doing out this late and on the other side of the swamp too?" Doctor Miller said.

"It's Mama. She's bleeding."

"You're not telling me stories, are you?"

"Not telling no story, no sir. Mama told me to come here." I only told stories when I needed to, this was not one of those times.

"Well, all right then, come in. I'll get my bag and you can ride with me in the automobile."

"Au-to-mo-bile?" I sounded out and made a face with squished up eyebrows.

"You don't think I'm going to run after you through the swamp now do you?" the doctor said.

"I've never been in one before, that's all."

"There's nothing to it," Doctor Miller explained, "You just sit there. I'll do the driving."

He got his black bag, opened it, and put some shiny metal inside. Then he took a glass bottle of what looked like water and put that in the bag too. Doctor Miller snapped the bag shut, walked over to a hook on the wall, and grabbed a gold ring with keys attached.

"Let's go," he said.

I followed behind. It was the first time I stood next to him where he wasn't either bending down to listen to my chest or having me sit up so tall on a table to look into my ears. I usually stared at the wood-framed pieces of paper with squiggly writing on them. They hung on the wall above where I sat. They showed he was a doctor. Someday, I want to have important papers to hang too.

The automobile was in front of its own little house outback.

"That's a '37 Plymouth," Doctor Miller said pointing, "a gift from my dad."

It was black as night on the outside with shiny metal strips around the doors and windows. The wheels even had white on their sides which in the moonlight looked like two eyeballs with glasses staring back at me when I walked toward it.

Doctor Miller got inside and sat behind this great big white wheel. I stood next to the door on the other side. He looked at me, shook his head, and reached over to open it.

"Get in," he said. I did and sat on a wool brown blanket he put down so I wouldn't dirty his seat with mud. Inside there were so many buttons, numbers and other things I have never seen, I was too scared to move.

"Close the door," he said.

When I closed the door, the automobile made a loud whirling sound, and we started to move. It was slow at first, so slow in fact, I thought I could run back through the swamp and still beat Doctor Miller to my house. I changed my mind when we turned onto the dirt road and followed two streams of light ahead of us. The ground seemed to be moving toward us real fast. If automobiles had bird-wings we'd be in the air by now. Sometimes some animal would run out in front of us, then jump back into the dark again.

I could see my house in the distance by the glow from the lantern in the window. The automobile bumped and jumped through the grassy mud ruts. It stopped by the front door. Doctor Miller got out, taking his black bag with him. He motioned me to get out too, but I couldn't. He came over and opened the door. The doctor gave me a look on his face like Mama had when she's just about ready to yell at me.

"Hannah Rose, where is your Mama?" he said.

I pointed to the front door and walked in. Doctor Miller followed. We went through the kitchen. Two chairs and a table were in the center of the room. An old black stove stood in the corner. Beyond was a little passageway between two rooms. In one room was a bed, with Mama lying on top of it. She wasn't moving.

"Go get some water, Hannah Rose!" he said. I ran to get the bucket for the well outback. When I came with a full bucket of water, Doctor Miller had opened up his bag and had emptied everything out he brought on the bed. In his hand was a white handkerchief he kept putting over my Mama's mouth and nose. Soon Mama started to moan and turn her head from side to side.

"Ophelia, Ophelia," he called. There was nothing coming from Mama, only grunts and groans. I dropped the bucket on the floor. The water swirled around into a big puddle. I ran out the front door into the darkness.

"Hannah Rose," the doctor called out. But I paid no nevermind and hid.

The raindrops that dripped off of the front porch roof woke me up the next morning. I guess it rained during the night because my clothes were soaked right through. Doctor Miller's automobile was gone. I thought I was alone. Then I heard the soft whimpering coming from inside the house. Mama was alive.

I ran into the house with my wet dress clinging to my legs. My shoes were caked with newly formed mud. I stood in the bedroom doorway. Mama was crying.

“Hannah Rose, is that you honey?”

“It’s me, Mama. Why are you crying? Are you still bleeding?”

“No child, come here. Come see your baby boy brother,” Mama said.

I walked toward her bed, not taking my eyes off of a little rolled-up blanket my Mama held next to her by her side.

“I thought babies were supposed to cry,” I said, “Is he asleep?”

“Asleep with the angels dear,” she said. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Mama opened up the blanket a little. Inside was a grayish-blue lump. I could make out a hand with fingers. His head looked like a wrinkled old man even though he was just born. The eyes were closed, and he didn’t move. Sleeping away with the angels and no swamp snakes to be afraid of tonight.

“Hannah Rose?”

“Yes, Mama”

“You have to do something for me. Something special. Do you understand? Very special.”

“I understand Mama, special. Is it like the time we said goodbye to Poppa?”

“Just like that day, Hannah Rose, except I can’t help you. You have to do it all by yourself.”

I went out to the kitchen, opened the bottom cupboard door and took out a cardboard box that had three glass jars of pickled peppers in it. I put the jars back on the shelf and brought the worn-out box to Mama’s bedroom. Mama started sobbing all over again.

She handed me the bundled blanket. I put it in the box and closed the cover. I carried it

outside. The box wasn't as heavy as I thought and easily carried it in one arm. As I passed the front porch, I grabbed the shovel and walked toward the willow tree.

I put the box down on the ground. Then still holding the shovel by the long handle, put my back up against the tree. I pointed myself toward the front door.

One, two, three; large bulky steps. That's where Poppa was buried. Turn to the right. One, two, three; baby steps. That's where I started to dig.