



"I hate that man." The words bubbled up and out. I knew I'd said it out loud when I heard Mama say my name using that particular tone.

"Egg."

"Yes, Mama." I tried not to look at her face and those brown-black eyes. I couldn't help stewing over our situation.

"Stop pouting, dear."

"But it was a mean thing leavin' us like that. Why didn't he want us, Mama?"

"I can't say, Egg. Only he could. And darling, divorce is a grownup thing. You don't need to concern yourself. Not now."

She was right and I knew it. But because we are allowed freedom of expression in this country, I pushed it. "I guess he thought he was too fancy for us, owning the mercantile and rubbing shoulders with every important person in Liberty . . . I do hate him," I said, trying to use my church voice on this last bit, hoping she didn't hear me say it a second time.

Mama sighed. "Now, Egg. Don't waste your precious heart on hate. We are doing fine. In fact, we are blessed. You have me. I have you, my lovely girl. And we both have your Granny and Granddaddy Morehouse. We have plenty of love to go around."

Once I set aside my cantankerous feelings, I had to admit Mama was right. Mama's parents loved us to pieces and spread that love around their home we now shared. Yes, we had plenty of love. Granny was pretty quiet, but my granddaddy made up for that. Golly, he showered love on us the way my mama watered the sweet-smelling rose bushes when spring turned to summer, like water that came from a bottomless well. He made me feel awfully special. I was a lucky girl that way.

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Granddaddy patted his big hand beside him on the wooden porch swing.

"Sit with me, Egg." The Missouri sun beat down and I was glad to be under the broad porch roof. The fine smell of gardenias came to us from the yard. The heat seemed not to bother Granddaddy; over his shirt he wore his brown knitted sweater open down the front. Granny called it a Fisherman's sweater. But I never knew Granddaddy to fish.

I hopped onto the seat, kissed his cheek and started swinging, which was no easy job because my granddaddy was a big man. The chains holding the swing made clicking noises as we swung, as if to say, Tsk, tsk, too much, too much. I stared at the pretty cutouts along the porch roof until Granddaddy's voice cut into my daydreaming.

He pointed across the road. "Honey, it won't be long till your old granddaddy will be lookin' over there and see his own little lamb a rompin' and playin' at school. The very same place where your mother went. What do you think of that?"

"Well, I'm both glad and sad. Glad I'm starting a new school, but sad I can't spend all day with you. Did you sit here and watch over Mama too?"

"Yes, child, I surely did. I never imagined I'd have the pleasure of

watching my own girl's child all these years later." Granddaddy's green eyes were shining. I thought on what he said a minute and smiled that he seemed pleased as punch.

The porch swing moved us through

spring and summer. We watched the tulips open into reds and yellows and the white daisies bloom. Robins greeted us in the mornings and owls hooted us goodnight.

On occasion Granddaddy brought out a jug of rich, thick buttermilk from the icebox, with tiny bits of orange-yellow butter floating. Or a pan of steamy golden cornbread fresh from the old cook stove oven. Crunchy on the edges the way we liked it and smelling in a way that made my stomach glad for what was coming. We nearly burned our fingers, unable to wait for it to cool. While we made plans for my future, we ate and we drank. We dreamed aloud over what we were going to do together while I grew into a young lady, as he would say. How I loved my granddaddy.

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Mama and Granny and I went to town for new shoes and a couple new dresses for school. Though sometimes I'd rather wear long pants like the boys wear. There are times when a dress is plain inconvenient. My mama could have sewn me up a dress or two of calico or my favorite green gingham. I liked to watch her running the old black Singer, her feet rocking



the treadle front to back to run the needle and thread through the material, and listen to that certain humming of the machine running and stopping at her whim. But Granny was real quick to open her purse strings to get these store-bought dresses. I think she and Granddaddy were in cahoots to buy me what I needed, for I saw them talking together—their snowy heads nodding about like a couple Leghorns in the chicken coop—before we left the house.

Another day Mama took me into town to the sturdy brick mercantile to buy my supplies—papers and pencils and such. I was secretly hoping for a bag of Horehound drops. But I didn't help my cause when the next thing out of my mouth was, "Why are we going to *this* nasty place, Mama?"

"Egg," she said, "First of all, this is not a nasty place. It is a very fine mercantile."

"Maybe, but didn't you-know-who own it before?" By this I meant the man who made me with my mother, but who did not want to keep me.

She didn't answer immediately so I turned to study her face, though I could see her reflection in the shop's glass window. My mama peered at me with a look that said she was about to drop over the edge of patience. I tried to focus on a horse tied at the rail beside us, the smell of his sweaty hide and the sound of his nostrils blowing.

"You are right." She tilted her head and gave me a sideways glance that made me know she was actually the one who would be right in the end; and that there would be no use asking for candy. "Before. A very friendly family owns the mercantile now. So put on your best manners, young lady, and let's go inside."

I practiced getting out of bed each morning to the sound of the rooster crowing so that I shall not be late to school. I think when I am wearing my new dress and shoes I will sashay all the way on the arm of my proud granddaddy.

Once I heard someone say he was a fine specimen of a man. Not being exactly sure what that meant, I decided it must mean what he's like: tall and strong, with hair pure white and plenty of it. And his good humor, what Mama called his Irish wit, made and kept him lots of friends. I swear—not really swear of course because Mama would not allow those kind of words to come out of my mouth—that everyone in our town of Liberty knew him.

I imagined the first school day and Granddaddy looking dapper in his vest with his gold pocket watch chain trailing across, his hand firmly closed around mine, saying, "I'd like to present my granddaughter, Miss Eglantine Rose Preston."

Since Mama raised me to be polite, the way mamas do, I'd wait until my granddaddy left and then ask my schoolmates to *please* just call me Egg. Of course some silly boy will look at me cross-eyed and say, "EGG?" Then I'll have to explain it was my mama's idea to name me after a silly flower. That won't be enough for any boy. Naturally he's going to say an egg pops out of a hen, not a flower.

But a flower it is. "Eglantine," Mama had said while gently stroking the soft petals, "is my favorite flower. This special rosebush that blooms these delicate-looking, soft pink roses."

*Doesn't sound like me at all*, I think, until she says, "It is kind of a wild thing."

Anyhow, *Eglantine* is such a mouthful that Mama took to calling me *Egg*. And so did my granny and granddaddy, though I knew Granddaddy would call me by my proper name, *Eglantine*, on that first day at school. That was fine with me. I hoped this would distract the other children enough they won't ask why I am with him, and where is my father.

As the end of harvest time came, I began to worry. One morning soon the school bell would start ringing. But something was very wrong. The house had become a quiet place.

"Your granddaddy has become frail," Mama said one day as we took a bit of leisure together on the settee.

"Frail? What do you mean? Sick, you mean," I said before she could answer, knowing Granddaddy had been feeling under the weather. He took to only wearing his striped pajamas and smoking jacket in the house. Now he was rarely even out of bed.

"Yes, he's very sick, Egg."

*How can someone so big and so strong be so sick?* No one had an answer for me. That made me worry more. Granny and my mama kept the

door to his bedroom open so he could feel closer to us. Granny spent a lot of time sitting by his side and holding his hand. Mostly he kept his eyes closed. But I knew he was only resting up, waiting until time for me to start school. By then

he would be well and ready. We had made our plans.

Though it was still summertime, children were already playing on the open school grounds, its sparse grass green but looking thirsty. I waited every single day for Granddaddy to get well. I often spelled Granny at her watch and sat in the chair beside his bed. I reported to him what I saw. How one girl's red dress was smudged black from falling when her feet got tangled in her jump rope. Or one boy's knickers were scuffed at the knees from sliding into base. Or how another boy's suspender broke and trailed behind him like a puppy dog's

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tail when he walked. Granddaddy smiled with each report, as though he were happy to have a vision to go along with the noise coming from outside the window. Soon he closed his eyes to rest. I pulled the covers to his chin and sat awhile watching him sleep, wishing for him good dreams.

“Eglantine,” Mama said one morning as I came late from my room, having not heard the old spotted rooster. My curls were a ratty mess I couldn’t get my fingers through. I tugged my white cotton nightdress away from my warm body. I smelled my sweat and knew I needed a bath. I would ask Granny if I might use her Palmolive soap. This morning was a while since granddaddy turned frail as they called it.

Mama’s nose was red. She was still in her lavender nightdress and housecoat. In her hand was wadded her blue hanky with the little purple violets and the embroidered letter M. I frowned when I saw that. *She must be sick now too.*

“Come here, darling.” She put an arm around me and pulled me close. All at once I couldn’t breathe. An awful feeling crept up behind me. I looked toward Granddaddy’s bedroom door. It was closed. I could hear Granny moving around inside the room. “I have some sad news, Egg. Your granddaddy went to sleep last night for the last time.”

First I thought, *What do you mean?* But suddenly I knew. *No . . . no, no.*

“He is with the angels in heaven now.”

“No, Mama,” I said, feeling I would choke, “don’t say that.” Mama squeezed me tight and her familiar smell was a small comfort as I whispered. “He can’t be in heaven. We made plans for here.”

“I know that, Egg,” she said softly. “He wanted to be with you in the very worst way. Your granddaddy would have done anything to stay. He loved you so. But he just couldn’t. He was too sick.”

“He promised . . . I want him . . .” I wailed, and burst into tears as my mama held me still.

“Oh, my lamb, I’m sorry. We are all so very sad.”

“No.” I pushed fiercely away from Mama’s arms and through the front porch doors. The screen door screeched its protest before it slammed behind me. I bumped the porch swing as I passed and set it swinging wildly. I heard it thumping against the house.

Her tender calling of my name reached my ears. “Oh, Eglantine . . .” I didn’t care. I ran out into the yard and kicked the ground. It stubbed my toe and I yelped between my sobs.

Laughter came to my ears. It hurt to hear it. *Nobody ought to be happy right now,* I thought. It was those children again playing across the road. My eyes glared at them as if just my looking could hurt them. “I hate you,” I said, though my words could not reach them. Tears gushed from my eyes like a waterfall running down to my chin. I tasted the salt of them. My throat hurt. I couldn’t stop crying.

I ran around the house and straight at the swing hanging from the biggest branch of the black locust tree. The swing Granddaddy hung for me. I slumped onto the stiff board seat and clung to the ropes. It pressed hard into my legs but I did not care. First I tried swinging as high as I could to try to not hear those happy children. To try to not think how my fine specimen of a granddaddy was dead.

Even though I pushed off with my feet as hard as I could, it did not work. With every thrust of the swing my nightdress clung to my legs then billowed away as the sounds of laughter and screeches of joy rose above the house. I squeezed my eyes shut and spun round

and round. I heard my granddaddy’s strong, deep voice, “Pumpkin, you have the loveliest, deep brown eyes. Your mother’s eyes.”

Faster and faster I spun, my feet pushing me off the ground into circles until I had to bend forward beneath the twining ropes. A sour taste rose in my throat. *I’m going to be sick.* My heart felt heavy as a stone inside my chest and like it would burst through my ribs at the same time. My arms ached from holding on and I knew I couldn’t spin forever. Next thing I knew I was limp as the rag doll Mama made for me when I was little. The swing unwound me from the ropes and stopped with a lurch. Listening to the children I tried to imagine how their voices sounded to Granddaddy.

Every ounce of me was sorrowful, but still I remembered my mama’s words to not hold hate in my heart. As I leaned over and studied my sore toes dirty with Missouri clay, I knew I did not really hate those children, even though my granddaddy had watched them romping and playing in the schoolyard, and me, he never would. It was only my heart was broken, and a little bit jealous.

Why do I have to hurt so badly? Why does my heart have to ache? My mama said it’s because the stronger you love someone, the stronger is the pain when you lose them. I think I understand this now. Because my granddaddy had been more than a grandfather, he was like my father too. And after my father left and granddaddy scooped my mama and me up in his arms, we had felt safe. Now he was gone.

Now I had no father *and* no grandfather. I couldn’t figure out why God let him die when we needed him. I knew I sometimes misbehaved. Was I being punished? I missed his jolliness. I missed sharing cornbread and buttermilk with him. I missed him. All I could do now was sit on the porch swing wrapped inside his brown knitted sweater.

Though I believed I would hurt like this every day of every year for the rest of my life until I was a grandparent myself, my sadness did not last forever.

One day Mama told me that on the next Sunday afternoon she would take a buggy ride with a gentleman. I thought, *A gentleman?* I said, "A buggy ride? Can I go"?

"May I go."

"*May* I go?"

"Not this time, Egg."

"But Mama," I whined.

"No *But Mama*. Maybe the next time you may go."

"Who is this gentleman?" I said as I put on mock airs. "What's his name? How do you know him?"

"His name is George. He's someone I met after he was invited to the church social. We've been getting to know each other."

"George." I studied the sound of the name. I scratched at my head as I worked it out in my mind. Suddenly it occurred to me that Mama might be lonely for a gentleman friend, like I was lonely for a father. I remembered her sadness when my father went away. I thought how maybe this buggy ride could be a good thing. *I hope he doesn't turn out to be too fancy.*

It turned out that George was not fancy at all. He was a farmer who owned a place outside town. He was a nice man who must really enjoy buggy rides, because he kept calling on Mama to come along. I began to wonder how on earth he got any work done on his farm he spent so much time driving Mama. On occasion I got to go along.

"Egg, dear." Mama called me into the kitchen some months later. I walked into the aroma of my favorite gingerbread. She was drinking a glass of pale lemonade and poured another for me. The glass was cold and slick in my hand. The door to the back yard was open to let air in through the screen. I smelled the dust that also came. I took a sip.

"What, Mama?" My lips puckered under the influence of the refreshment. I licked away the lemon bits.

"You know that George and I are getting along fine. He is a good man.

"Uh huh." I took another sip.

"And he treats you well, doesn't he?"

"Yes, Mama. Not exactly like Granddaddy did."

"Oh, darling, I know no one can fill your granddaddy's shoes." I could see Mama was waiting on me.

"But he treats you well, right?" I began to wonder if Mama was going to play Twenty Questions with me, though somewhere in my mind I knew better. I soon had a sneaking hunch what was coming next. Mama's cheeks suddenly went pink.

"George and I have decided to be married."

I have to say I was not surprised. I was not a baby. I saw on their faces the special feelings they had for each other, no matter if they tried to hide them. George was a fine man and treated Mama and me well. Granny liked him, too. But what would this mean for me if Mama married. In the yard a magpie chattered.

"Married?" It was my turn for questions. "Are you sure, Mama? When? Where will we live? What about Granny, she'll be lonesome. Will he live here with us? Will we move to his farm?" I took a breath. "What about school?" With the last question I almost cried. Mama wrapped me in her arms and whispered a promise that everything would work out fine.

Not long after that day Mama and Granny and I each put on our best dress—mine the blue taffeta for special occasions. I liked how the taffeta was crisp and shiny and smooth to the touch. Our shoes were polished like new. Granny wore her netted hat and white gloves. Mama fixed a bit of lace in her hair. She tucked a flower in my belt. Once we were ready, I heard horses' hooves on the road. It was George coming from the farm where we would live, driving the horses and buggy.

That buggy was cleaner and shinier than I had ever seen it. George had tied blue ribbons in the horses' manes. A broad smile broke across Mama's face at the sight. This was the first time I ever saw George wear a suit. I thought he looked uncomfortable in it, as compared to his bib overalls he usually wore. In spite of him screwing his neck around inside his starched collar, he drove us safely to the First Baptist Church parsonage. Granny had baked a cake and left it at the parsonage that morning. I remember it tasted delicious.

Mostly what I remember of that day is afterwards when tall, skinny George bent near to me and took my hands in his. I noticed that his hands were calloused and cracked. But they were strong. He looked me in the eye and said, "Eglantine, I know I am not your father, but someday if you get to feeling like it, you go ahead and call me Papa."

It was so long I had been sad, and mad sometimes, about not having a father and about granddaddy dying, my heart wanted to burst. This time in a good way. I looked right back at him, holding so tight to his hands a cyclone couldn't take me. Then louder than I meant to I said, "Papa, you go ahead and call me Egg!"

"Stop, Old Tom." I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Curly, whoa." But they ignored me, and in their mule-ish way were bent on going where they wanted. My eyes were open big as

saucers though I wanted fiercely to squeeze them shut. I imagined I must be white as a sheet on my mama's clothesline, because I was scared spittleless.

Green and golden corn stalks flew past me like telephone poles out a train window. The mules were not stopping.

"Now, Egg," Papa had said, "be careful when turning at the end of the corn row cause if Old Tom sees this umbrella, he'll probably tear off through the corn field." Old Tom is one of the team of sorrel mules I was driving to help my papa. This time the team was pulling the cultivator to keep weeds away between the rows. Ever since I turned eleven—and because Papa had no son and I was the only child in the family, at least so far—he had been teaching me to drive the team to help in the fields. Seemed like just as we finished at one side of the long cornfield, the weeds started back up on the other. The umbrella was a couple burlap gunnysacks Papa had brought from the barn and jury-rigged over my seat on the cultivator to shade me from the sun. My mouth began to feel like cotton, even though Papa had scooped a ladle of water from the bucket for me.

Mama's insistence had led to the umbrella. "George," she said, "her skin is nearly as scorched as this field. You must do something to protect her."

"She's got her hat."

"It's not enough."

"I got an idea, Mary Jane. I'll get to it," he said. And he had.

I had got along pretty well driving the mules, enjoying the beauty of the bright green rows set against the dark brown earth. Papa watched protectively from the edge of the field, his hands inside the bib of his dark blue overalls. A hat rested atop his head to shade his eyes. I felt important learning to handle the team and help Papa in the field.

But then skittish Old Tom spied the umbrella sure enough when I made the turn to the next row. Up went his tail. One big snort burst from his nostrils. Curly got the message from Old Tom that something was bad wrong and with a start he joined him. With a jolt that nearly pulled away the reins, down the row we raced, tearing through that dark dirt at break-neck speed, the trace chains jangling a tune. In spite of my fear, I found I was thinking how Granny was surely watching from her bedroom window and she would likely tell Mama and there was going to be a fuss.

I pulled the lever to drop the cultivator shovels called sweeps. Maybe the sweeps dragging through the dirt could slow us down. With all my might I fought to stay upon my perch and not fall onto

the blades below. Inside my mouth was the taste of a copper penny. Watching the fat rusty-colored rumps of the mules bounce down the field in front of me, I hoped and prayed with all my might this wild ride would end. *Dear Lord, please save me from going to heaven before my time.* Just then I was glad I say my prayers at night and hoped that would count for something.

My arms hurt and my fingers burned but still I pulled on those reins. Pulled with all my might. My straw hat sailed from my head setting loose my curls. By now I was sweating like a hog at butchering time. Trickle sweat blurred in my eyes. Finally at the other end of the field Old Tom was ready to stop and jerked Curly to a halt in the harness beside him. I kept a firm grip on the reins, even though the leather had rubbed raw my fingers. Inside I felt soft as the tapioca Mama makes on Sundays. I thought Papa would be madder than a wet hen.

"You alright, Egg," he called; puffing some and sweating himself once he reached me after running through several rows of corn.

"Yes," I said. But my voice was as shaky as the rest of me, my arms weak as I handed over the reins. "Sorry, Papa, I tried to keep Old Tom from seein' that umbrella. Like you said to do."

"Don't fret. I know you did your best. I'm just glad you weren't hurt, my girl."

*My girl,* he said. *His girl.* I am my Papa's girl, and he is a good, plain steady, not-fancy man, and mine.

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