

One

FOLKS LIKE MY FRIEND CAMILLA HAVE lofty goals before they die, like stealing a kiss from a movie star or seeing the Sahara. Mine's quite simple. I want to tell my story unsevered, as if it was actually *me* walking the sweltering pavement of Burl, Texas. But the words never spill out that way. Not in the foothills of adolescence or adulthood or even today as I recount my life in retrospect.

My childhood flickers in front of me like a black-and-white movie. Used to be I couldn't watch more than five minutes of it, as the popcorn dropped kernel by kernel onto my tear-soaked lap. The weight of the story made me shut my eyes and clamp my hands over my ears until the memories faded in gray silence. But Jesus stayed with me, holding my hand while the images assaulted me. As He held me, I was able to watch through to the credits. Truth be told, there are still times I long for the projector to sputter so I can rewind, in vain hope that watching the tree limbs will be replaced with playing hopscotch or wearing Popsicle-stained smiles.

Someday I'll be able to admit I'm Mara.



Mara's world was quite small, as it should've been for a girl who'd barely trod nine years on the country roads of East Texas. New to town, her feet now explored the treed world called Burl, Texas—home of the Fighting Armadillos and the Stinging Scorpions. The Loop, a stoplight-dotted road that encircled the center of Burl, served as one of Mara's play boundaries. Even her house was small; its paint was sunshine yellow, and although it made her smile when she skipped by, it maddened her that the paint was flaking.

"It's the tyranny of the South," Aunt Elma would say nearly once a week. "Peeling paint. Bugs too big. Hotter 'an heck." Aunt Elma always wiped her brow with a red bandana when she complained of the merciless heat, and she did it with a dramatic flourish as if she might faint clear out.

Although Mara would never say it out loud, Aunt Elma was the ugliest beautician in Burl. She couldn't figure out *why* folks actually asked the woman to beautify them. It didn't make sense. The government gave Aunt Elma some money, so she only had to beautify folks twice a week. When that happened, Mara was supposed to stay inside the house; she had permission to go outside only if the house was burning clear to the ground—otherwise she had been told to stay put, a nearly impossible request when the adventure of living in a new town enticed her to walk its sidewalks, learn its secrets.

According to Aunt Elma, life had always been better "back there." She meant in Little Pine, where they'd lived before.

"Back there folks knew how to be friendly, how to give and give some more. If your neighbor shot him two possums, why,

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he'd give you one, sure as day," Aunt Elma would say. And then she'd fan herself again.

Truth was, Mara missed Little Pine too, but not because of the possum-giving neighbors. She missed friends, yes, but mostly she missed Nanny Lynn, Aunt Elma's mother. They'd lived on the family farm on the outskirts of Little Pine, an hour and a lifetime from Burl. There, Nanny Lynn taught Mara how to bait a hook, scrape and paint a fence, build a tree house, say simple prayers to God out in the fields, and swift-kick an angry rooster. "I knows you'll grow up to be someone amazing," Nanny Lynn would whisper over her as she tucked her between sunshine-smelling sheets. "God told me."

But Nanny Lynn couldn't live forever, no matter how much Mara prayed in the fields.

They buried her at Little Pine Cemetery next to her husband, Walter, the same day the For Sale sign marred the farm. It took near a year to sell the place—to some Dallas man who wanted to make it into a housing development called Pine Tree Estates.

Three months ago when the house was packed up and the man was ready to bulldoze, Mara moved to Burl with a few boxes and a nervous stomach—like June bugs were dancing a jig inside her. At least Aunt Elma didn't make her go to the last month in a new school.

While Nanny Lynn loved on her, she'd never really thought about who her parents were and why she didn't live with them. Nanny Lynn was big enough to fill her heart and quiet her questions. But when they buried Nanny Lynn next to Walter, Mara's heart emptied and her questions grew.

Now, whenever Mara asked Aunt Elma who her parents were, Aunt Elma repeated the same exact words—like when their Beatles record of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" got stuck

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on “I think you’ll understand.” A large woman with blotchy skin, she pinched her face into a concerned look and said, “Now, don’t you be asking things about them folks, you hear? Truth is, they don’t exist. Your father is God, and He made it so me and Nanny Lynn was your mama. She ain’t here anymore to answer you, rest her soul. And I don’t know how to answer. Don’t ask me again.”

Every time Aunt Elma said those things, Mara replayed “I think you’ll understand. I think you’ll understand. I think you’ll understand” in her head. And every week, she vowed to ask Aunt Elma the same question, hoping to jar the needle of her repetitions. Once, just maybe, Aunt Elma would skip over her usual words and give Mara a clue as to who or where her parents were.

She had one measly memory of what might have been her real home. She was two, or maybe three, and she sat on a green porch swing. A woman sang behind her, pushing her. Mara sometimes would lie in bed listening to the crickets chirrup, mulling over the memory and wishing she could remake it. She’d squint her eyes tight and tell herself, *Turn around and look at the singing lady. Turn around.* But her memory wouldn’t obey her. And although Aunt Elma spouted all sorts of random, careless words about the glories of life “back there” in Little Pine, she never leaked one clue about the faceless lady.

It was that summer, the summer of 1979, that Mara took to watching the tree limbs waltz above her—the summer that snailed by. Aunt Elma seemed bothered nearly every day with Mara underfoot. “You need more tending to than a cow about to calve for the first time,” she said. “I’m plain sick of your questions, child. Go talk to the rocks or the neighbor cats, you hear? I’m fixin’ to take a nap on my day off. Skit scat, baby.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mara said. Once Aunt Elma was in the

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skit-scattering mood, she could not be reasoned with, and that's the truth. So Mara went looking for rocks or cats to entertain. One day she walked around the block looking for a friend—any friend in this new town—while sweat ran drippy races down her forehead.

“Hey, Beautiful,” came a cracking voice behind her.

Mara jumped. “You scared me half to death,” she said to the older freckled boy. He wore shorts, an old T-shirt, and a green John Deere baseball cap that had seen better days.

“My name's General.”

“What kind of name is that? You an army brat?”

“Nah, my first name is Robert E. Lee.”

“That's your first name?”

“Yep, my mama wanted it, but Daddy, he got tired of saying so much, so he shortened it to General. Folks who know me real well call me that. Only teachers call me Robert E. And folks at church. My daddy's a preacher, you know.”

“Really?” Mara looked at General's feet. They looked like blocky two-by-fours.

“Well, he mainly repairs air conditioners, but on Sundays, he's a preacher. From the church down 'round the corner. He's the finest preacher this side of Louisiana. At least that's what I think.”

“I haven't ever been to church, but I'd like to. My Nanny Lynn, she seemed like a church person on the inside, but she never went to one. Now she's in heaven singing in the angel choir. My aunt says churches are for buttoned-up hypocrites. What's a hypocrite, anyway?” Mara took out her handkerchief and mopped her forehead with a flourish, exactly like Aunt Elma.

“I have no idea. But I do know folks are buttoned up when they come to church. I even have to wears me a tie.

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Makes me crazy.” General sat down right there in the middle of the sidewalk. “C’mon, sit here a while. I haven’t had company in a long time, ’specially not from a beautiful gal. Been on restriction.”

There was something in the way he said “beautiful” that wasn’t pretty. Her skin felt creepy-crawly while crickets did a hundred hiccups in her stomach.

He patted the cement. When he did, a red cloud of dust flew up and gritted her eyes. The summer sun had transformed spring’s clinging red mud into a fine layer of dust. It was impossible to remove the red stuff from shoes or socks, so Mara had taken to wearing flip-flops.

Something told her to turn around and walk away, but her loneliness in a friendless town kept her stuck to the sidewalk.

“Restriction? Were you bad?” Mara tried to sit, but the cement was roasting so she stood back up.

“Yeah, I suppose. But my parents are strict—too strict.” He took off his hat, ran his fingers through his red hair, and looked up at her. “Hey, you wanna go to Central Park? We could play. I like to play with beautiful gals.”

The word danced awkwardly in her head. It didn’t make sense. *Beautiful is for dogwoods in bloom or ladies in magazines. But me, beautiful? I’m only nine years old.*

He stood back up, and that’s when Mara realized how tall he was—nearly two cats taller—and it made her uneasy in a way she couldn’t put her finger on.

He grabbed Mara’s hand—tight. At first she wanted to tell Aunt Elma where she was going, but then she remembered the lashing she got the last time she woke her. So even though she didn’t want to go, as his bigger hand engulfed her own, she resigned herself to follow the capped boy toward the center of the sleepy railroad town.

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And then she had a strange thought—*he doesn't even know my name.*

Good parks had swings where you could kiss the sky with your toes, but Central Park was not really a place for playing; it was more of a tree place. There were nearly forty varieties of trees, but mostly pine, pecan, and the well-loved Burl dogwood. In March, according to Aunt Elma, folks in big tour buses would drive through the park with its narrow roads and angular switchbacks and gawk at the dogwoods in full white bloom. Old people with cameras would step off the buses in a precarious sort of way and pose for pictures—something Aunt Elma thought ridiculous. “How many pictures does someone need in front of a silly tree?”

As General pulled Mara deeper into the woods and farther away from the park's winding path, her heart thumped a little harder and a little faster. She strung questions together like plastic beads on a string. “What's that tree over there? Does your daddy like air conditioners? I don't have a daddy, but I have an Aunt Elma. She's a beautician, but the government pays her too. How old are you? Do you think cats really have nine lives?”

General ignored her, his grip on her hand growing painful.

Mara remembered the words of Nanny Lynn while they poked holes in garden hoses for something Nanny called drip irrigation. “If a man ever makes you feel uncomfortable, you run, child. Run as fast as you can. And pray, pray, pray, you hear me?”

But he was a boy, his grip was too tight, and her prayers caught in her throat.

“Here. Sit down. Here's a nice place, Beautiful.” His voice sounded different—less like a boy and more like a general.

I want to go. I need to run.

M A R Y E . D E M U T H

“Anyone ever told you how to make a baby?”

Mara shook her head, even though she knew perfectly well what went into baby making, thanks to Kristin Moeller, her world-savvy friend from Little Pine.

“You want to have babies someday?”

Mara nodded but then she wished she hadn’t. Instead, she wished to rewind the last minutes. Wanted to choose a different street, a different sidewalk. She wanted to run from the moment she’d met General.

“Well, this is what you have to do.” General tugged at his belt.

Mara squirmed, trying to free herself, but somehow he’d managed to remove his shorts while squeezing her arm.

She could not find her voice to pray.

Or scream.

Or cry.

The only thing she could find inside herself was a sickly feeling that something very bad was happening and she could do nothing about it unless she could find her voice. She took a deep breath and tried to talk, but no words came out. She closed her eyes, prayed, *Give me my voice*, and breathed again.

“Let go of me!” she hollered. “I want to go home! I’ll scream! I can scream real loud!”

*Excerpted from pages 1 through 6 of Watching the Tree Limbs
ISBN 1-57683-926-5
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