

Whistling Past the Graveyard

July 1963

My grandmother said she prays for me every day. Which was funny, because I'd only ever heard Mamie pray, "Dear Lord, give me strength." That sure sounded like a prayer for herself—and Mrs. Knopp in Sunday school always said our prayers should only ask for things for others. Once I made the mistake of saying that out loud to Mamie and got slapped into next Tuesday for my sassy mouth. My mouth always worked a whole lot faster than my good sense.

Don't get the wrong idea, Mamie never put me in the Emergency Room like Talmadge Metsker's dad did him 9 for sure nobody believed the stories about Talmadge being a klutz). Truth be told, Mamie didn't smack me as often as her face said she thought I needed it; so I reckon she should get credit for tolerance. I heard it often enough: I can be a trial.

I was working hard at stopping words that were better off swallowed; just like Mamie and my third grade teacher, Mrs. Jacobi, said I should. I got in trouble plenty at school for being mouthy, too. Usually I was provoked, but Principal Morris didn't seem to count that as an excuse. Keeping one's counsel was important for a lady in order to be an acceptable person in society. Not that Daddy and I thought I needed to become a lady, but it meant a lot to Mamie, so Daddy said I had to try.

Anyway, I'd only been about half successful, and had been on restriction twice already since school let out at the end of May. Once for sass. And the second time ... well, I don't really count that as my fault. If not for a rotten board, it never woulda happened.

Out past the edge of town was a haunted house, a big square thing with porches up and downstairs. It had a strange little room stacked on top made mostly of windows—that's where people saw the ghost lights on foggy nights. There wasn't a lick of paint left anywhere on that house and the shutters had lost all of their teeth. Vines grew through the broken windows on the first floor, snaking around the inside and back up the fireplace chimney. It was hundreds and hundreds of years old, from back in the days of big cotton. I'd been there plenty of times, but I'd never seen a ghost—and I wanted to see a ghost almost as much as I wanted a record player. I figured my problem had been because I was always there in the daytime. What ghost would be out in broad daylight? So I got a plan. After Mamie went to bed I snuck out, rode my bicycle out there see my ghost, planning to be back in bed long before she woke up. I peddled as fast as I could and had been out of breath with legs almost too shaky to climb the front steps by the time I got there.

I hadn't been inside that house more than a minute, not near long enough for a ghost to get interested in me, when I stepped on that rotten board. One leg shot through to the basement. I kicked and pushed and hollered, but there was no getting back out. It was the middle of the morning the next day when the police found me. Mamie was madder than I'd ever seen her ...

and that's saying something. I got restriction and the belt and my bicycle taken away for the rest of the summer. It'd been worth it if I'd seen my ghost. I reckon all my hollerin' and kickin' had kept it away.

I'd been off restriction for over a week. The Fourth of July parade and fireworks were coming up the next day, the best part of the whole summer—other than Daddy's visits home, which were almost as scarce as holidays. He worked down in the Gulf on an oil rig 'cause all the jobs in Cayuga Springs didn't pay as good. We had to talk with letters 'cause there wasn't a phone out there in the ocean. Sometimes he called from Biloxi when he got a weekend off, but that was long-distance and cost a lot of money so we had to talk fast, and Mamie hogged the phone telling him all sorts of stuff I know he didn't care about. I did most of the letter talking between me and Daddy; he wasn't much of a letter writer. But he liked mine and said they always made him smile, so I wrote a lot.

On July 3 I woke up with bees in my belly. As I put on my white Levi shorts and tied my Red Ball Jets, I promised myself I wouldn't sass or do anything at all to make Mamie need to say a prayer. I couldn't risk missing everything—and that's what Mamie'd do, she'd ground me 'cause she knew that would hurt way more than a wallop. Mamie always knew what punishment I most dreaded. It was like she could see inside my head.

If I got in trouble now, I'd have to wait a whole nother year for fireworks.

I took extra care in making my bed just right; I even made hospital corners on the bottom sheet. I zipped my pj's into the Tinker Bell pajama bag that Daddy gave me two Christmases ago and set it just so against my pillow, nice and neat. I even picked up the dirty sock I'd dropped last night on the way to the hamper instead of kicking it under my dresser with the others that Mamie thought the washer had eaten.

Then I stood back and tried to look at my room through Mamie's squinty work-checking eyes.

A-okay.

I felt good as I headed down to the kitchen, sure that she couldn't find anything wrong with my room today.

Through the screen door I saw her hanging a load of our pink bath towels on the line that ran from the back of the house to the corner of the garage. She had two clothes pins in her mouth, her lipstick making a bright red "O" around them. She had on a yellow dress and flat canvas shoes that matched. Even this early with no one but me and the squirrel in the backyard tree to see, Mamie took care about her appearance. She was always looking at magazine pictures of Jackie Kennedy and trying to fix herself up like her—Mamie even got a new haircut last year. Worryin' about how I looked was one part of being a lady I wasn't looking forward to. Thank goodness I was only nine-and-a-half and still had some time left.

With a quick glance to make sure Mamie was still busy pegging towels, I opened the bottom cabinet door and stepped on the shelf. Why she expected me to fetch the step stool all the way from the utility room every time I needed something from the top cupboard when the

shelf on the bottom worked just fine was one of Egypt's mysteries. I got down my favorite bowl, Daddy's from when he was a kid; the picture on the bottom had faded so much you could barely see the cowboy and his lasso anymore.

I poured myself a bowl of Sugar Frosted Flakes—they're grrrrreat!—and before I even had a spoonful to my mouth Mamie came in the back door and said, "Good morning, Jane."

The spoon stopped halfway to my face; milk ran over the edge and dripped onto the table. "Starla," I corrected through pinched lips, but was careful not to look up at her, 'cause she was sure to think had on what she called my defiant face.

"We agreed yesterday to start calling you by your middle name," Mamie said, just as if it was the honest truth. "It's so much more suitable for a young lady."

We hadn't agreed. Mamie agreed. I just stopped disagreeing.

I started to say that out loud, then remembered my self-promise not to sass.

"It's high time for you to start thinking of how the world looks at you," she said. "Your name is one of the first things people know." Mamie was real concerned over what people know about us. She stood up real straight and stuck out her hand like she was going to shake hands with an invisible somebody standing beside the sink. Then in a prissy high voice she said, "How do you do? I'm Jane Claudelle." She switched back to her normal Mamie voice. "See how nice that sounds. *Starla* makes people think of a trailer park," she flipped her hand in the air, "just sittin' there waiting for the next tornado."

Mamie had a real thing against trailer parks. We weren't rich, couldn't even afford help like the LeCount's next door, but Mamie liked to make sure I remembered there were folks out there who had less than us.

Fireworks. Fireworks. Remember the fireworks.

I shoved the Frosted Flakes into my mouth to keep all the words spinning around in my head from shootin' out.

Truth be told, no matter how much Mamie tried to get me to agree, I would never give up the only thing my momma gave me before she went away—the only thing left since Mamie burned Mr. Wiggles with the Wednesday trash the last week of third grade anyway. She said he was "too filthy for human contact." I know nine-going-on-ten was supposed to be too old for stuffed animals, but it still felt wrong going to bed without him.

"Daddy likes my name," I said after I swallowed. Mamie liked everything about Daddy, so that couldn't be considered sass...could it?

Mamie huffed. "Porter let Lucinda have anything she wanted—and see what it got him." The way she was looking at me made me think I was what he got and he'd be a whole lot better off without me. But I was Daddy's girl; he'd be lost without me.

“Lucinda--” Mamie started.

“Lulu,” I corrected, the word out of my mouth before my mind could grab a hold of it. All the sudden, I felt like I was sliding on ice, arms flailin’, about to fall flat. Lulu had told me not to tell.

“What?” Mamie’s head swiveled and her brown eyes stared at me.

I’d started it. If I clammed up now, it’d be even worse. I dunked a flake floating in the milk with my spoon, staring at it as it popped right back up. “She wants to be called Lulu,” I said real quiet, not sassy at all.

“Since when?” Mamie’s red lips pinched together.

“She said so in my last birthday card.” My birthday cards from Lulu was private, even Daddy wouldn’t let Mamie snoop in them.

“Certainly not by her own child!”

“Now that I’m gettin’ so grown up, she said it would be better for her career if people think we’re sisters.”

“Career, my--” Mamie snapped her mouth shut like she did when she wanted to yell at me in the grocery store but couldn’t because we was in public. “What will people think, you talkin’ like that? You call her Mother or Momma, or I’ll get out the soap.” She sighed. “Lulu, dear Lord, give me strength.”

I bit my tongue and slid out of my seat.

Real quick, I washed my bowl and spoon and set them in the drainer, all the while the pressure was buildin’ up inside me, like it always did before I did something that got me in trouble. Lulu was gonna be famous, that’s the only reason she left me and Daddy when I was just a baby. People around here were so jealous...so was Mamie, that’s why she always looked so sour when Lulu’s name come up. Lulu was going to be famous all right, and then she’d come back and get me and Daddy. We were going to live in a big house in Nashville with horses and whatnot, and Mamie would have to stay stuck here in Cayuga Springs all by her hateful self.

Just before I went out the back screen door, I turned around and looked at Mamie. I was real proud when I kept my voice respectful. “My name is Starla. Not Jane.”

Then I run out the back screen before she could say anything else. I heard it slam behind me, but kept running around the corner of the house.

I was real surprised not to hear Mamie hollerin’ for me to come back.

#

I decided to spend some time in my fort, just to stay out of Mamie's sight so I wouldn't fall into getting in trouble. Course my fort wasn't really a fort, but a giant waxy-leafed Magnolia in our side yard. Mamie said it was almost hundred years old. Back before I knew people weren't as old as I thought they were, I asked her if she remembered when it sprouted. She scrunched up her face like she was gonna be mad before she laughed and told me she was only forty-two years old, too young to even be a grandmother of a six year old.

Anyway, the tree. The branches go clean down to the ground and there's just enough space for me to get inside. Nobody can see me. I keep Daddy's old Howdy Doody lunch box in there with stuff I don't want Mamie to stick her nosy nose into—mostly stuff that belonged to my momma and whatnot. I'd even found two pictures of her in a drawer in Daddy's old room. Mamie kept everything in there just the same as it had been when Daddy'd been growing up. I wasn't even supposed to go inside, even though Daddy had told Mamie I could have his room 'cause it was bigger and he wasn't hardly ever here. Mamie had told Daddy she'd think about it, but that was a lie. When I asked her when I'd be able to change rooms, she'd looked at me with those hateful eyes she gets and said, "Never." Now I sneak in there and sleep at night sometimes, even though I never even wanted to before. What with Mamie's bedroom being downstairs, she never even knew. I was always careful not to leave clues.

I opened the box and pulled out the birthday cards from Lulu—one for every year except for when I turned six; that one must have got lost in the mail.

I laid on my back and read them, tracing my finger over the big loopy L in love you and the little x's and o's that were kisses and hugs sent through the mail. I spent some time thinking about Momm—Lulu recording her songs up in Nashville, getting famous. The memory of her was worn and fuzzy on the edges, since I hadn't seen her since I was two. But I know I have the exact same color of red hair, so that's the brightest spot in the picture I keep in my head.

Back when Momma and Daddy and me all lived together, I remember liking to twist her hair around my finger while she held me on her hip. I loved the way it felt soft and slippery, like the satin edge of my blanket. Momma didn't like it though, 'cause she'd spent a long time getting it to look just right and I messed it up. I remember her and Daddy getting in a fight once when she smacked my hand away. It was all my fault, and I'd felt bad. When we all got to live together again, I'd be careful not to cause any fights. I put away the cards and just laid there for a spell, watching light dance with shadows and thinking about what I was gonna name my horse. By 10:32—I knew the time exactly because Daddy had given me a neat Timex with a black leather band for Christmas—it was already about a thousand degrees out. The brick street out front looked like it was wiggling from the heat. Dogs had already crawled under porches and into garages to get out of the hot sun. They would come out after sunset with cobwebs on their noses and dirt clinging to their coats like powdered sugar.

Wish I had a dog.

Suddenly I heard, *clack-clack-chhhhhh, chhhhhh, chhhhhh, chhhhhh, clack-chhhhhh chhhhhh-clack*. I knew who was coming, wearing the metal clamp-on skates she'd just gotten for her fifth birthday; Priscilla Panichelli. I called her Prissy Pants. She wore dresses with can-

can slips and patent leather shoes every ding-dong day. She wasn't even gonna have to work at changing into a lady when her time came.

I was kinda surprised she'd risk getting those shoes all scuffed; skating on our broken-up sidewalk was a dangerous business—which accounted for the *clacks*. I bet her big brother, Frankie, who was in my grade and called her way worse things than Prissy Pants, had made it a dare.

I moved so I was behind the tree trunk and held real still, just in case. Besides dressing like a doll, Prissy Pants could be a real pain in the behind with her goody-two-shoes tattle-tale ways.

Then I heard trouble. A bicycle was coming fast with a card clappin' against the spokes. It meant only one thing: Jimmy Sellers, turd of the century. Jimmy was going to be a hood, anybody could see that. But Mamie, and truth be told a lot of the other old people on our street, thought he was a "nice, polite Christian boy," 'cause he was a real brownnoser too.

Prissy Pants was like a lightning rod to Jimmy's thunderbolt. She was just too shiny and clean to not try and mess up—even though it always seemed like an accident.

As I said, I had no warm place in my own heart for Prissy Pants, but Jimmy was twelve, almost a grown up. Him picking on her was just ... wrong.

I held my breath and hoped that bicycle just buzzed right on by.

Chhhhhh-clack-clack. Silence.

Prissy Pants must have seen Jimmy.

The card slapped the spokes just a little faster, and I thought trouble would just keep rolling down the street. I moved around the trunk and peeked out just in time to see Jimmy's bike jump the curb and head right for Priscilla.

She stood there in front of the LeCount's house like a possum staring at a Buick.

Jimmy pedaled faster.

I jumped out of my fort, too far away to do nothin' but hold my breath.

At the very last second, he cut the handlebars and swerved around her. Priscilla jerked backward and fell flat on her flouncy heinie. One of her skates come loose from her shoe and hung from her ankle by the leather strap—she wouldn't need that skate key hanging around her neck to get that one off.

She squealed, then started a real-tears cry, not her usual just-for-that-I'm-gonna-get-you-in-trouble cry.

Jimmy swooped in a circle and come back around. He stopped his bike and looked down at her. “Gosh, looks like you’d better practice some more with them skates.”

Prissy just cried louder and used her key to loosen her other skate.

I got what Daddy calls my “red rage.” I was hot and cold at the same time. My nose and ears and fingertips tingled and I couldn’t breathe.

I run down the block and grabbed his handlebars, jerking them to the side. Instead of making Jimmy fall down, he just let the bike go and stepped over it as it fell into the grass beside the walk.

“Go back to your tree, shitbird.” Jimmy shoved my shoulder.

“Shitbird!” I swung. His nose popped.

The blood hadn’t even reached his top lip when I heard Mamie yell, “Starla Jane Claudelle!”

Goodbye fireworks.