

Daughter

Jasper comes in just as supper's nearly ready. The rest of us pick up on his mood right away and it gets really quiet in the kitchen, everyone waiting.

"We're moving out, Family," he says, trying to make like it's no big deal but meanwhile we're all looking at each other and thinking 'here we go again'.

So we start packing everything up, supper and all, trying our best to ignore our growling stomachs.

Everyone has their job to do. Faye takes care of the kitchen and Little Todd and me load everything we own--which ain't much--into the one box we're allowed between the two of us.

"Quick, quick, my lovelies," Faye calls, but by now she should know better. Little Todd is only six but he works as hard as anyone and I'm already finishing up in the bathroom, grabbing the shampoo, Jasper's razor and whatever else in there that's worth taking.

Jasper waits beside the car, taking the stuff as we bring it out to him and shoving it all into the backseat. The trunk is too full with his things but, like I said, none of us has much anyway.

"All aboard," Jasper says, really pleased with how quick everything goes, how soon we're backing out of the driveway and heading down the street, leaving our problems (hopefully) far behind us.

I don't look back and feel no regrets about leaving. We never stay anywhere long enough to form any kind of relationships. That old house was just somewhere to live and after a few more moves I'll hardly even remember it.

Faye hands me some chicken, still warm, and I peel off a piece and offer it to Little Todd. Faye flashes me a real nice smile for being such a good sister to him but I can see from her eyes how tired and frazzled she is. And I'd say by the way Jasper keeps checking the mirror that he's jumpy too only trying not to let on because, after all, we're under God's special protection and that makes us completely safe from any kind of danger and tribulation.

Or so Jasper says and tonight, more than any other night, I surely hope he's right.

It's another long drive but Little Todd and me are real practiced at sleeping on the road. Jasper never tells us where we're going and sometimes I get the idea he isn't sure himself, he's just following his nose or whatever. He says we go where we're guided and it's hard to argue when he puts it like that. And it wouldn't do you any good even if you tried. He can quote chapter and verse, prove he's right a hundred different ways from Sunday. Sometimes when he's drunk he makes us all get up and listen to him talk even if it's, like, three in the morning.

It gets kind of scary. He speaks in different voices. Sometimes he nods off and drools down the front of his shirt. Faye says it's all part of being in the Spirit and sends us back to bed so she can deal with him.

Jasper asks her to sing him a song and Faye, tired as she is, is happy to oblige. Usually it's a song of praise but sometimes she surprises us. For instance, it's no secret that Jasper just *loves* Bob Dylan. We all know 'Like A Rolling Stone' by heart. I guess you could say it's kind of our theme song.

We drive all night long and on into the next day. Finally, in the early afternoon, Jasper gets the word (or whatever) and we turn off the highway into a town that looks almost *exactly* like the one we just left, same color and everything. He stops at a telephone booth near a gas station, looks through the Yellow Pages and makes a few calls. Then he hops back in and we're off again, Jasper getting us to help him follow the signs until we're pulling into a parking lot in front of an ugly, grey building with slits for windows. Jasper goes inside to arrange things and the rest of us are left to wait, sweltering in the sun. Little Todd is dozing again so we have to practically whisper:

"What's the name of this town again?"

"Manley," Faye says, yawning, "just across the state line." Giving me another one of her soft as a feather smiles. "You tired of all this driving, Miss Jo?" Knowing how much I like it when she calls me that.

I stretch, jostling Little Todd's head in my lap--he grunts like a piglet but doesn't wake up. "I'm okay," I answer because in this Family

we don't whine, whinge or complain. She reaches back and runs her fingers through my hair.

"Have to give you a trim. You know Jasper doesn't like long hair on girls."

"On *anybody*," I correct her, pointing at Little Todd's bristley skull.

Not much later, Jasper comes out the door followed by a fat man in a wide, blue suit and the two of them shake hands. They're both smiling like they got the better end of the deal. The fat man bends down so he can see through the windshield and waggles his chubby fingers at us. I politely wave back but Faye doesn't even bother.

Not only does Jasper have keys but also a hand-drawn map to our new place.

"Any trouble?" Faye asks him and Jasper grins.

"The Lord is our Shepherd and Protector," he says. "And not only that," he adds, waiting for us to join in like we always do, "--He deals in cold, hard cash..."

Thanks to Jasper, devoted servant of the Good Lord Almighty, the Family's needs are always provided for. He's real good with his hands, Jasper is, in more ways than one. He can work construction, he can cut glass, he can fix almost anything except a broken heart (ha ha) and, as he himself puts it, he can steal like a heathen. Of course, as long as it's for the good of the *Family*, stealing is never bad or evil. It serves a higher power. I'm using Jasper's words because I've never figured out why it's bad for everyone else and yet all right for us. Jasper can give you about

a dozen different reasons, depending on which day you ask him, so I guess it's all right but deep down inside I still think that a sin is a sin, no matter who does it.

I hear Jasper say that he paid the fat man for the first three months rent in advance and I have to grin because if we stayed anyplace for three months that would be some kind of a world's record for us.

When he stops in front of the house it's not bad. No broken windows or beer bottles in the front yard. Matter of fact, it looks quite decent and respectable, a house any ordinary family would live in. Jasper looks at Faye, waiting to see what she thinks and she leans over and gives him a kiss. "Aw, honey," she says, "it's *perfect*."

That afternoon, after I've put all my stuff away--which, let's face it, doesn't take very long--I'm sort of wandering around out in the backyard when I see her.

She stands on the sidewalk beside her house, wearing one of those backpack things, watching me, just staring kind of rude like. I pretend not to notice her. She must get the message because when I look up again, she's gone inside. Then I feel bad for chasing her away. Then I wonder how I ever got to be such a weird, screwed up kid.

I think in my heart I already know what's going to happen. I know that Jasper will see that girl and want her. She's nothing like Andie but she's pretty and perfect like Andie was. A little living doll.

Do you know the difference between a little girl...

Good old Jasper.

It's like somehow he knew she was going to be here.

Jasper comes in to say good night and that's when I tell him about the girl next door, thinking to myself, *well, he was gonna find out sooner or later...*

He asks a few questions and keeps his eyes on mine the whole time I'm answering. Neither of us mentions Andie's name but she's here in the room with us, all around, like clear smoke.

After she died we all became different people, smaller and meaner than we used to be. We each had our separate reasons for loving her and missing her. She was *his* special girl and *my* best friend. The closest thing to a sister I'll ever have.

Andie and me used to talk after everyone else was asleep. She was a year and a half older and nearly ready for a bra and easily the wisest, coolest person I've ever met. Like she always knew when Jasper was gonna start drinking again and what nights to make sure she slept with her jeans on under her nightie. Sometimes, during the worst of it, I'd hear her praying but so softly that I could never make out what she was saying.

After Jasper leaves I lie there listening to Little Todd snore. Somewhere in the house Faye and Jasper are talking, maybe about me, maybe about that girl next door. I'm glad she doesn't look much like Andie. I'm glad I already don't like her much. If she was more like Andie it would make it harder...because then it would be like she never actually got away, never gave up, never died, never *won*.

"How come you don't go to school?" Melissa asks me. We're sitting on the swings in her yard, just dangling our feet and still getting

acquainted. I'm working very hard to make her trust me and like me so I put up with her questions, at least for now.

"Faye--my mother teaches me."

"Is that *allowed*?"

I bunch up my shoulders. "I guess."

"What does your dad do?"

"Fixes stuff."

"Like what?"

Another shrug. I'm already bored with her. "Everything." Then it's my turn. "How old are you?"

"I'll be ten this December." Andie's birthday was April 29th.

"That's good."

She doesn't ask about *my* birthday. Actually she's quite a bit stuck up and I don't like her at all. She's going to have some hard lessons ahead and a totally different idea about what being in a *real* Family is all about.

"Ya wanna go inside and play Nintendo?" This about the fourth time she's brought up her stupid, fancy video game.

"Sure." We leave the swings and head toward the house.

"Are you going to be staying in town a long time?"

I smile at the back of her head but she doesn't feel it. "Long enough," I tell her and that's pretty much all I'm gonna say on that particular subject.

Our Family doesn't have Nintendo or a VCR or a microwave oven even. I have one pair of shoes and two pairs of pants. I really like reading but I only own two books to my name, LITTLE WOMEN and

HARRIET THE SPY. Little Todd can't read and doesn't seem too interested in learning. He has a couple of trucks and a bag of marbles and that's good enough for him. See, the Family doesn't care much for *things* and we pretty much spend whatever money Jasper brings home on food and bills and the rest we save for rainy days. When he can't find good, honest work, Jasper sells something out of our trunk. Once it was a brand new computer, still in its original box, and that was because we needed new tires for the car.

In no time at all I become Melissa's best friend and pal. Pretty soon she's telling me all about her life, stuff even her *mom* doesn't know. Or so she says.

Of course, I never let on that I couldn't care less about what's going on in her creepy little world. And just to get even, I tell Jasper *everything* she says. He seems really pleased with me lately. One night he tries to give me a whiskery kiss but I hold my old stuffed frog up between us and we both act like it's a joke.

I don't like the lovey-dovey stuff but it's good that he trusts me again. Ever since Andie died I've had the feeling that he's been *watching* me, though I guess that could be just my imagination. So I'm really giving it my best with Melissa, showing him that I'm still Family, ready to do whatever I'm asked with no questions or back-talk. With Jasper, you don't want him thinking it's any other way. 'Cause, you know, as far as he's concerned, there's *Family* and then there's everybody else in the world...

Faye and me are working in the kitchen when there's a knock on the door. We give each other a quick look to make sure we both heard it and then I go and see who it is.

Melissa is home from school early and wants to visit. Stands there with that look on her face, waiting to be asked in. So I guess I don't have a choice, do I?

But Faye and me pretend it's the most natural thing in the world and let on like we were just about to have tea. Meanwhile, Melissa's checking everything out, naturally seeing the boxes and the fact that we have hardly any furniture or knick-knacks and all.

After we finish our tea and cookies I try to get her to go outside but instead she decides she wants to see my room, so off we go. She stares at the sleeping bags on the floor and bare walls and Little Todd in his underwear, watching her, kind of frozen with shock. There's no clothes, no dresser, no *nothing*.

"Are you really, really *poor*?" she goes, once we're safely outside and perched on our swingseats.

"Not really. It's not like we can't afford things, it's just that we don't *need* them." Standing up for the Family just like I've always been taught to.

"But you don't even have a *TV*," she says, her eyes all buggy.

Before I can answer that, Jasper comes along, whistling to himself and, of course, he sees the two of us or, anyway, he sees *her*. "Afternoon, ladies," he calls, walking over to get a good, close look. "So you're Melinda, are you?" he says, acting really friendly and smiling with his eyes. "How do you do?" Melissa ducks her head down and Jasper gives me a quick little nod. Right then it's settled.

From that moment on, it's only a matter of time.

Andie always worried about what would happen if Jasper ever found out I helped her. Not that I did much. Basically, all I had to do was wait and watch (which was hard enough). I remember I held her hand. Once it was done I had to crawl back into bed and try to *sleep*, for God's sake, sleep like I had no idea of what I would be waking up to.

Andie never read LITTLE WOMEN. She told me the title alone scared her off. She asked me once if I knew the difference between a little girl and a little woman. Then, without waiting for an answer, she said: "The difference is, little *girls* don't understand..."

Jasper always says there's no such thing as luck, that the Good Lord Himself takes a personal interest in our Family. Well, I guess the Good Lord must have been looking the other way last night because, guess what, Jasper finally gets busted and we wake up to cops at our door at eight in the morning.

Turns out they're both young and really nice and polite, telling us that Jasper has been arrested and there are a number of charges. The bail isn't going to be too high, nothing our secret stash can't handle. The cops don't say much, just that Jasper was spotted creeping around in a lumber yard after closing and a 66-year old security guard put the grab on him. They've impounded the car and are getting a warrant to search it. Faye plays it really cool, like she's sure there's been some kind of mistake, wondering if they could maybe recommend a good lawyer here in town...

She even lets the cops come in for a quick look around. Not that we have anything to hide. After they leave, she calls the lawyer and gets the ball rolling. By the time she hangs up it sounds like Jasper is as good as sprung, but the final price looks to be pretty steep. Faye takes the shoebox out from under the sink, grabs a wad of money and gets me to call her a cab.

I suspect we won't be hanging around Manley much longer, so after breakfast I start Little Todd packing in our room while I box up the kitchen stuff, piling everything by the door. It takes us almost 'til noon but we pretty much finish the whole house. I'm sitting on the back step, taking a break, when Melissa comes home for lunch. She waves at me from the other side of the fence...but then she sees the boxes beside me and catches on to what's happening.

"Are you *leaving*?" she asks, hanging her arms over to the fence and looking pouty.

"Yeah," I say, not bothering to lie because what's the point.

"Did your dad get a job someplace else?"

"He ain't my dad." She stares at me and I decide to cool it.

"He's...kind of my step-dad, you know?" She nods like she does.

Just then her mom calls out the window: "Melissa? Ask your friend if she wants to join us for dinner." I can hear it in her voice: good ol' Melissa has been telling her how bad off and starving we are and now mommy wants to play the Good Samaritan...and maybe pump me with a few questions besides--

I hear a car pull up out front and right then and there make the decision, no time to think about it, hardly any time at all--

"You better go inside," I tell Melissa, practically growling at her. "And tell your mom we ain't poor, we're just not stuck-up snobs about it." I can see I've hurt her feelings but maybe not enough. "Don't you get it?" I snap at her. "I can't be your friend any more, okay? We're never gonna see each other again so just...*go away*, will you?"

She sort of stumbles back from the fence and halfway to her house has to cover her face with her hands. Once she's inside she must really cut loose because through the open window I can hear her mom again, asking her *what's wrong, honey, what's wrong*.

Faye and Jasper come walking around the side of the house, talking, laying plans for our daring escape. He nods at all my hard work and gives me the keys to the car so I can start loading.

Now that I know Melissa won't be coming with us, I feel a lot better about things. I have to admit, sometimes it gets lonely and it would be nice, you know, to have someone to hang out with and talk to...but then I think about how hard it would be for her, getting used to a whole new Family, living an entirely different life, everything else becoming just a dream.

I wonder if her parents would ever stop looking for her. I wonder if they would ever forget their precious daughter. I wonder if they would still be able to recognize her, years later, and call her by her real name.

End

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