

The old Rambler rattled alongside the curb, spitting putrid exhaust out its back end, announcing our arrival with a shake and a shudder. Daddy turned the key to off, eased the steering wheel tight to the right, and coasted the aging wagon to a stop.

"Is this the place?" Mama asked. She stared out the passenger side window, Little Joe on her lap, the seat belt pulled tight across both of them. Daddy nodded. "Well, look at that," she muttered.

I sat behind Mama and gazed out the window at the tidy little ranch. A wide stretch of healthy green grass, fresh-cut and smelling like heaven, separated the street from the house. Chocolate brown with white trim around the windows, it had green and white awnings to shield its lucky inhabitants from the heat of the late summer sun. Fluffy blue hydrangeas burst forth from the garden, accented by clusters of Shasta daisies. A brand-new house in a cookie-cutter neighborhood, so unlike our rented duplex across town, with its peeling paint, unreliable roof, and tattered window screens. It pained me to think of it as we sat parked in front of this perfect home, gaping and gawking like a bunch of hillbillies.

Daddy opened his door and got out of the car.

"Where you going, Daddy?" asked Tommy. My younger brother was all scraped elbows and scuffed knees, the back of his neck dotted with mosquito bites. He smelled like sweat and grit, even though Mama had made him scrub himself with a wet washcloth before we left home.

"I'll be right back," Daddy said. "You wait here." He closed the door gently, but it squeaked anyway and he pushed it closed with his hip.

We watched him saunter up the flagstone path leading to the front door: Mama, her face tense; Tommy, ticked off that he was left behind to wait in the car with the rest of us; and me, speechless. Daddy knew someone who lived in that house.

Nine-year-old Becca, tucked into the wagon's rear corner with Daddy's work tools, was riveted to a dog-eared copy of Little House on the Prairie and paid no mind. Little Joe, dressed in no more than a diaper and a stained white t-shirt, fidgeted against Mama. Four-year-old Sadie slumped against her, slack-jawed, making little sucking noises as she slept.

Daddy rang the doorbell and rocked on his heels, waiting for someone to come to the door. I craned my head out the window to get a better look. Summer still reigned, and the late afternoon sun warmed my cheeks. The radio played that day's Top Ten hits, and Karen Carpenter crooned, "We've Only Just Begun." I counted to ten before the door opened and a woman stepped out, closing the door behind her. She smiled at Daddy. He smiled back. They exchanged a few words, and then Daddy nodded his head, thrust his hands in his pockets, turned around, and headed back toward the car. The lady peered out at us, at the dilapidated wagon gracing her curb, and then disappeared back inside.

"Oh, no," Mama said, pushing open her door and climbing out of the car, big belly first, Joe hitched to her hip. "Not again," she said. She left the door open and started up the flagstone path.

"Where you going, Mama?" Tommy called.

Mama turned back, squinting in the late afternoon sun. She combed her wavy dark hair with her fingers and tucked it behind her ears. She switched Joe to her other hip. "Tommy, you stay in the car," she ordered.

Tommy kicked the back of Daddy's seat and pouted.

"And Daisy," Mama told me, "you keep an eye on your brother and sisters."

I nodded obediently; as the eldest, it was my duty.

Sadie woke up, blinked, stretched, and watched Mama's departing backside for a moment before letting out an ungodly shriek. She scrambled across the seat and out the door, trotting after Mama, her eyes glossy with tears. Clutched in her hand was a beat-up Barbie doll, naked, its hair in a rat's nest, its feet chewed beyond recognition.

Tommy leaped out after her.

Becca, roused from her reading by Sadie's sudden squall, smirked at me, and then scrambled over Daddy's paint-spattered drop cloths, pails, and paintbrushes. She slipped through the rear window, chasing after the others.

I sighed, opened the door, and stepped out onto the blanket of immaculate green lawn. I followed my family and we met Daddy halfway back to the car.

"What did she say?" asked Mama. She brushed her hair back again, shifted Joe's weight across her hip, and took a familiar stance. Her children pulled up behind her, silent, waiting. We knew not to interfere in discussions like this.

"Her husband's not home," Daddy said. "He went out with the checkbook."

"Didn't she know you were coming by for your pay today? Didn't you call her like I told you to?" Mama asked. Her eyes were fiery mad, her lip twitching. Sadie whimpered and hid behind me.

"I called her. I told her. She forgot to ask her husband for the check. Said come back tomorrow. He'll be home."

"Tomorrow's no good," Mama spat. "The bank's closed. What good will a check do me tomorrow? We need money now, Tom, right now."

"There's nothing I can do, Meg," Daddy said. He rocked back and forth on his heels in paint-speckled work shoes. Chocolate-colored paint covered one toe, and I understood that he was the reason the house looked so pretty.

"Well, I can do something," Mama said. She stalked up the flagstone path, ignoring Daddy as he chased after her.

"Come on, Meg, don't make a scene. It's all right. We'll come back tomorrow," he said.

Their children trailed after them, me at the rear, my cheeks burning, my heart pounding at the thought of Mama making another scene.

"No way, Tom," Mama said, spinning around. She stood with her legs splayed wide, the weight of her belly and the baby in her arms causing her to list to one side. "Who does this woman think she is? We have children, Tom, five of them, and they're hungry. You gave this woman two weeks work, and she's going to pay you for it." Mama climbed the few steps to the door and pushed the doorbell.

A moment later, the lady opened the door and spoke to Mama through the screen.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Holmes, I'm Meg Hunter, Tom's wife. We need Tom's pay," Mama said. Again, she brushed her unruly hair back, trying to tuck it behind her ears. It fluttered around her face, giving her a wild look. "Is there any way you can call your husband and ask him to come by with a check?"

The lady eyeballed Mama, stared at her swollen belly, and then at the ragtag collection of children lined up behind her. I held onto Sadie, patting at the wrinkles in her tattered blouse. It was once mine and had seen better days. The lady's gaze settled on me, and she shook her head. I moved behind Mama, my face flushed, and focused on the ground, on my soiled canvas sneakers. My big toe poked out of a hole in one of them, revealing chipped nail polish. I stepped on my foot, covering it up.

The lady pointed at Mama's belly. "You're about near your time," she said.

"That's right, Ma'am," Mama said. "Two weeks."

"Oh, my," the lady said. "And how old is your baby?"

"Seventeen months." Mama pulled Joe tight against her and kissed the top of his head. He studied the lady with big brown eyes and smiled, his two front teeth gleaming.

"Good heavens," the lady said, fanning herself.

"About the money...." Mama started, but the lady interrupted.

"Yes, I told Tom to stop by tomorrow. My husband's not home. I have no checks. I'll have a check for him tomorrow." She stepped outside, closing the screen door behind her. "Mosquitoes," she said, glancing at me and the other children.

"Yes, well, we appreciate that," Mama continued. "But we need the money today. As you can see, I have five children, and my refrigerator is empty. I have no milk, no bread. If I get the check now, I can go to the bank before it closes and stop at the grocery store on the way home. I'm sure you understand."

The lady studied Mama long and hard, her eyes cold and uncaring. She reached up and touched her hair, fresh from the hairdresser, bleached blonde and cut short around her carefully made-up face. A heavy layer of hair spray held it in place. She reminded me of the mother on *The Brady*

Bunch. Her fingernails were smooth and shiny, flawlessly painted a pale pink, and her hands glittered with rings, diamonds probably, "money hands," Mama would say. She wore a white mini-skirt, a tight-fitting halter top, and strappy sandals with platform soles. Mama wouldn't be caught dead in an outfit like that. The lady cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. I hope you understand, but until my husband gets back, I have no way to pay you."

Daddy grasped Mama by the elbow. "Come on," he whispered. "I told you."

Mama tugged her elbow away. "Mrs. Holmes," she said. "Didn't my husband come here every day for two weeks, as you asked, and paint your beautiful home inside and out?"

The lady nodded.

"And he did a wonderful job, didn't he? I can see that myself. Are you not satisfied with the quality of his work?"

"Of course," the lady said airily. "Tom does beautiful work. He's dependable and honest. As a matter of fact, I've given his name and number to two or three neighbors."

"Then why won't you pay him? He's been here three times to collect his pay, and each time you claim you don't have the money."

"I don't have the money right now," the lady said, tight-lipped. She reached for the handle of the screen door. "I thought I made myself clear."

"My husband told you he would be by today for the money."

"I'm sorry, but I forgot to ask my husband for a check. It slipped my mind."

"Come on, Meg," Daddy said. "I'll be back tomorrow, Mrs. Holmes. I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

Sadie tugged at Mama's blouse. She bent down and listened as Sadie whispered in her ear.

"Now?" Mama asked, and Sadie nodded. Mama sighed. "Pardon me, Ma'am, but my little girl needs to use the bathroom. May we?"

The lady's eyebrows shot way up, her forehead pulled taut, her lips pursed. An awkward moment passed before she said, "Well, I suppose so," and pulled the door open, stepping aside to let Mama pass.

"Here, Daisy." Mama turned to me. "Take Joe."

I reached out for the baby and fitted him onto my hip. His arms wrapped around me, and I buried my face in his neck, breathing in his sweet baby scent: milk, powder, Farina.

Mama and Sadie walked through the front door.

"Me, too," said Tommy.

"Me, three," said Becca.

They filed into the house behind Mama and Sadie.

The lady followed. "Down that hall, second door on the right," she directed.

Daddy and I stood on the stoop, peering in through the screen door.

"Do you have to use the bathroom, too?" she asked.

"No, Ma'am," I said

"Would you like a drink of water?"

I nodded, and she let us in.