

FRETTING OVER THE YELLOW SUN

Pippa in a faded pink flower-print cotton dress, her barn boots two sizes too big, hair brushed flat, held back from her face with a strip of ribbon that always slips its grip. And Pippa swings on the wire fence at the far end of the grass meadow, even though her mamma tells her not to. She looks at the sky, marking the height of the sun and the direction of the wind. She's singing to herself and you would not know she is worrying. She waits for the train.

There's a man on the train and it's his job to stoke the boiler. He has a black handled shovel and his hands are black too and his britches and his shirt. Even his face and the thin hair under his black cap. White only in his eyes and his teeth when he smiles, and Pippa swinging on the fence doesn't know what she would do if he was not there.

His name may be Willie or Will. And, as the train slows to take the bend, he tosses a shovel of coal into the grass at the side of the track, sometimes small gifts of candy tucked into sooty cloth, and soap once, wrapped in blue waxed paper and smelling of lemons. Pippa waves to him, her arm stretching towards the sky, wiping the clouds clean, and though his name may be Willie or Will, in her head she calls him her da.

Pippa collects the dropped coal in a tin bucket, and the candy and the soap, and she takes everything back to the shotgun house. Her mamma smiles and fixes again the pink ribbon in the girl's hair, and she says to her child, 'There now,' and 'after all there was no need to worry,' she says.

Pippa checks under the hens for eggs, anxious that today there will be only three when yesterday there were four. And the traps set for jackrabbits she checks, too, and she's relieved when there are no rabbits caught and relieved just the same if there's something snared for the table.

And she frets over the stew when it's bubbling in the pot, watches so it won't burn, stirring it when her mamma is not looking. And when her mamma coughs sharp as pins or broken glass and holds a hand to her chest and her face looks pale and tired and strained, or when the dog doesn't eat or the cow gives no milk, or the wireless says rain or wind or hail, Pippa worries then, too. And Pippa is a great mis-shaped bag of worries and her mamma says she should be a child more.

So, at the dark end of each day, her mamma reads her stories before Pippa slips into sleep. And the stories tell of giants with

castles in the air and magic beans that grow impossible tall, or a boy called Ali who finds a lamp with a genii inside and Ali can have anything he wishes for, and gold sits at the ends of rainbows if you look, and sudden silver weighs heavy in a pauper's pockets. And when the story is told, Pippa asks her mamma to leave the curtains open so she can see the stars from her bed. But her mamma knows it's not the stars that Pippa's looking for. Pippa worries over the yellow sun that has left the sky, and Pippa wonders if tomorrow it will come up as it did today, and she's never sure that it will, even when her mamma says she's not to worry.

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Then a day that is different from all the rest. The sun comes up the same and so Pippa does not see the difference at first. Her mamma is already about the business of cleaning and making and mending, and the smell of new bread sweetens the warm air, and the dog is getting under mamma's feet so that mamma looks like a string puppet dancing.

Pippa is spark awake and she sits at the table, and her feet don't reach the floor so her legs swing free. Before her is one of the hen's eggs in a wooden egg-cup with the top cut off and a slice of yesterday's bread on the plate because mamma says bread straight from the oven is not good for her tummy.

The sun is like a slap across the face when Pippa's mamma opens the curtains. 'See,' says her mamma, 'no need for worrying.'

Pippa nods, and she dips a spoon into the sunshine yellow of her soft egg, and it's the best part of her day, all her days, the part when the worry leaves her for a moment, and the dog licks at her toes and the pink-burr of its tongue tickles. It's too early for the radio and with the sun breaking through the gloom it could be a day for finding magic beans or lamps that hold wishes or money in the pocket of her cotton dress.

After breakfast, Pippa must do her chores. There are plates and knives and spoons to be washed, and the bed-sheets need boiling today, but first she must fetch water from the pump-well. Outside, the birds know her and she drops broken bits of yesterday's bread for them to eat, drops the bread thinking her mamma won't see; and Pippa counts the birds, knows if ever there's one missing. And she sees the tracks of jackrabbits in the dry dirt and she checks the vegetable garden, making sure the right number of cabbages are still there and the green-feather tops of carrots and the potato plants all standing in a row.

A day like any other, at first.

Later, the radio speaks through the steam and the warm sweet smell of carbolic, and it says the day will be hot and dry, and the wind small as the blown breath of horses that only walk. And it begins then: Pippa frets.

'Can it ever be too dry?' she asks her mamma. And she says maybe she should bring water to the vegetables and she must see that the hens have water, too, and what if one day the well gave up only dirt?

Pippa holds one end of the wet sheet from her bed, and her mamma holds the other, and mamma twists the cloth tight like she's arm-wrestling the farm laborers that help bring in the harvest at the end of summer, and the water cannot stay in the cloth so spills in silver twisted cords and runs dark into the dirt-floor. And then they shake the creases from the bed-sheet, Pippa's sheets and then mamma's; and that done, mamma hangs the sheets on the line to dry and they billow like clouds come down to earth and the drying won't take long.

Pippa in her faded pink flower-print cotton dress, and her barn boots still two sizes too big, her chores done and she's back swinging on the wire fence at the edge of the grass meadow and she waits again for the train. The air is so warm the world ripples like liquid, like Pippa is watching it through happy tears. And she looks up at the sky, and she's singing then, and waiting and waiting for the train.

But today the train does not come and that's the difference in the day, the difference that could not be seen at first, a pattern unravelling.

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I made a mistake there. I did not mean to say that the train did not come. I can think of no reason why it wouldn't. Not on such a dry, still day. So let me alter what I said and let me say instead that the train did come, throwing smoke like churning clouds into the air and thunder rolling under its iron wheels, and Pippa breaks into a smile when she sees the train and in her head she hears her mamma saying, 'There now, no need to worry.'

But as the train slows, and it nears the bend in the track, Pippa sees *he* is not there, the man who could be her da if he wanted to

be. He's not there on the footplate of the engine, not dropping a shovelful of coal into the long grass at the side of the track, or candy wrapped in folded cloth, or lemon-scented soap for her mamma. A different man it is who stands up front and he does not see Pippa swinging on the fence at the edge of the paddock, or if he does, he does not smile or wave or sound the whistle of the train.

Pippa knows then. She knows that there is a reason for her worry. It is like she has been expecting this day. Like she knew it would come. She runs back across the grass meadow and into the shotgun house, as much as running can be when the girl wears barn boots that are too big for her feet, and in breathless tearing words she tries to tell her mamma. The radio is on and the dog is suddenly excited and he leaps between the girl and her mamma, barking and thinking it is a game or something like a game.

'Mamma, he's not on the train today.'

That's what I meant to say before, not that the train did not come, but that the man did not come, for there can be a reason for the man not being on the train, but trains run to timetables and clocks, and men with watches on chains in their waistcoat pockets make sure everything keeps to time; trains never do stop except at stations or briefly for cows on the line or trees when they have fallen and so I meant to say that the train came but the man did not.

Pippa's mamma tries to comfort the girl, as she does when Pippa worries over the number of eggs under the hens, or when she frets over what the weather will bring, or when she cries with fear that a jackrabbit might be caught in the trap. Her mamma tries, but fails, for she too is worried now – a little, she is.

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A day passes and a night and another day. Pippa tosses in her sleep and frets when the sun is up – not over eggs under hens or jack-rabbits in at the carrots, or the number of birds on the fence, or milk not in the pink squeezed teats of the cow. Pippa frets over the train coming and the man who could be her da not on the footplate of the train, not waving or dropping gifts in the grass beside the train track. And Pippa's mamma can do nothing. There are no words to smooth the furrows on Pippa's brow.

Then one late evening there's a knock at the door of their shotgun house and her mamma looks up from her darning and she looks at Pippa who has not moved and mamma's face is all questions and no answers.

At the door is a man and he's scrubbed up clean – as clean as a working man can, and he has his hat balled in his hand. He says he's sorry to call so late but he was wondering if there was a space in the barn where he could lay down his head and maybe a bit of bread they could spare and a bowl of soup or stew.

Pippa's doesn't recognize the man, doesn't think he could be her da or anyone. Her mamma sets a place at the table and she asks the man to be seated. She fetches the bread and a bowl and a spoon and a tin cup and the coffee pot and some milk.

'Maybe you've got some work I can do in the morning, some way I can pay you back for the stew and the coffee. Fences needing mended or walls? Or fields needing ploughed or animals that want seeing to.'

'We've got hens,' Pippa says, 'and they have eggs that need fetched from their nests and the cow wants milking morning and afternoon but she needs a gentle hand. And the jack rabbits are to be chased from the carrots and cabbages and the traps to be checked. And water brought from the pump-well.'

Pippa and her Mamma don't see that the dog does not bark, but under the table nuzzles the man's hand and licks his fingers and sits close enough they share in each other's warm and smell.

'Do you have a name?' asks Pippa's mamma.

He nods and between mouthfuls of bread and stew and coffee he says his name is Will.

Pippa looks up and she half closes her eyes, as if she can see him different, looking past the clean and the scrubbed.

He reaches sudden into his pocket and pulls out something wrapped in sooty cloth. He unpicks the folds and lays on the table a bar of lemon-scented soap wrapped in blue waxed paper. From the other pocket he takes a second sooty cloth and unwraps a bar of chocolate and he lays this in front of Pippa.

She sees then and her mamma sees also. He is the man from the train under all that cleanness and Pippa does not know what to say or where to look or how to behave.

In bed that night – Will is sleeping in the barn, insisted on it. 'It's only proper,' he said – so, in bed that night, after Pippa's mamma

has finished telling bedtime stories of magic beans and lamplight wishes and rainbows and pots of gold, Pippa does not ask for the curtains to be left open so she can see the stars, does not wonder if the sun will come up in the morning. Instead she worries over the man – as she worries when her mamma coughs and holds her chest. She wonders if he will be cold in the barn, or lonely, or if the mice will eat holes in his boots or spiders make nests in his ears or his nose. And she worries too, if he will be there in the morning when she wakes, a place for him set at the table for breakfast.

Pippa's mamma says 'There now,' and she says Pippa is not to worry so and things will be what they will be without her fretting. 'There's a pattern to dress cloth and stories and everything,' she says.

And there it is, something that immediately takes place of all Pippa's worries, and it is hope that she now has, which is something different from fretting and something she never had before, and hope puts stars in her eyes and the sun in her face and like that there is a tomorrow for Pippa to look forward to and maybe for all of us to look forward to.