

## One True Friend

**F***ilthy gypsy.* That's what most people call her. Whether they mean to or not, everyone turns mean when a freak passes by. Some people show it right away, gawking at the gypsies' little rolling house. They stare, as if a two-headed cow ambled down the road in front of them. And whether the oddity turns to acknowledge the glare or keeps on its patient way, eyes forward and weary from walking, the people gawking on narrow porches or knee-deep in scraggly fields spit and jab the air with a fist or spade. *Filthy gypsies! Go on outa here, you thievin' tramps!* Sometimes their meanness is this vulgar, but most of the time, it is mute: good people



holding their tongues until the freaks pass, breaking eye contact and closing the door while local bullies do their work.

Late September 1905. Anina breathes in the other scents of dry grass and wood smoke as she follows the wagon up the main road into town, an easy walk after the five-hour climb her family has made since dawn. Oak leaves piece the sky over her head, a quilt with a sky blue background. Bees hover among ripe apples and pears rotting in clumps on the ground. She is behind the wagon, so she can't see much of what's ahead, but Anina sees enough to know this town is probably not much

different from the dozens she's seen already. It will have a general store and a church, probably a few houses with fences to divide the front yard from the street, a post office and a boarding house, a livery and a train station. Anyone who sees their wagon will think a medicine show has come to sell tonics or do magic tricks. Given Mama's genius with herbs and roots, she could blend the dry poultices and brew little bottles of herbal syrups and have Pa front the show as Doc Cottrell. But that would be deceitful, and Mama sang religiously of the merits of a clean heart. Mama could never sell the medicines herself because folks wouldn't trust a woman's wisdom, at least not for anything but fixin' stew or birthing babies. "Soon as you make a life built on foolin' people, even if it's to get past their own ignorance, you stain your heart in a way that can't be cleaned." Whatever the people in this new town decide about Anina Cottrell, her pa and her beautiful mama, their curiosity will last a little while and then turn to something darker, much darker than the boredom that settles in when the novelty of something new wears off. When Pa says it's time to go, Anina will choose a blue square on her patch quilt, a cool blue to match this sky, and stick an autumn red leaf there, to match these trees. That will be the square to mark Lee County, Virginia. On the way into a new town, she always hopes for something pretty to remember it by.

Anina likes to sing when she walks, playing her voice as a counter melody to the rattle of the wagon. It's kind of like talking when there's no one to answer back.

"Sing 'Wildwood Flower,'" Pa calls over his shoulder. Anina knows he will whistle, the notes flitting like a hummingbird around her head:

*I will twine and will mingle my raven black hair,  
With roses so red and the lilies so fair,  
The myrtle so bright with its emerald hue,  
And pale wildwood flowers with petals light blue.*

Her goat, Fannie Rose, pulls against the lead, trying to reach one of the crushed apples. When Anina finally yields, Fannie Rose stretches her lips around the fruit, chewing like an old woman.

Once they reach the edge of town, Pa hitches the wagon in an open stretch of grass, well off the road. Looking just like a little cabin on wheels, the wagon holds every comfort the Cottrells need to make a gypsy life. When Pa and Mama decided to take up this journey, Pa had used the wagon bed as a foundation and built walls and a roof. He scrolled a miniature cornice and trimmed the door with a wide, polished

frame, the initial “C” carved in the center like a little welcome sign. Anina doesn’t remember this from seeing it made; she wasn’t even born yet, but she’s watched Pa make so many beautiful things, she knows just how he would have done it.

When she was a little thing, just old enough to start asking questions, Anina asked him if his pa had made a house like this one, too. Pa’s face had darkened a little, his mouth set with some old bitterness, and then he’d told her about a circus he’d seen as a boy. The ringmaster wore a fine suit trimmed with gold and scarlet threads, and after the show, he climbed into the grandest wagon Pa had ever seen, the sides painted bright and swirled with gold and crimson to match the cuffs on his coat. Pa lived in a little shack with tar paper walls and stained blankets covering the door. There were no windows, so at night he felt like he was trapped underground. To get himself to sleep, Pa thought of that ringmaster, rolling like a ragged king from one town to the next. He would imagine the wide sky open in all directions, and clean air swirling past his face. He imagined the sound of the wheels turning, taking him into the world. After he married Mama, Pa bought a wagon and made his own house on wheels, fine enough to rival any circus train. He never told her where that house was he lived in as a boy, but she was pretty sure he would never go back there. And that he was never sorry to be living this way. Anina always wondered whether Pa was chasing some star or running from a shade, but she hadn’t asked what drove him forward. In her secret heart, she feared she already knew.

Inside the rolling house, Pa had built small cupboards to hold tools, dishes, and staples. He cut small windows and fashioned wood shutters that swung open to let in sweet air or hold out freezing rain. In one corner, he had put a stove, so tiny it seemed something for a dollhouse, and ran the stovepipe right up through the roof. Finally, he planed a long board for a bed, narrow as a little girl. Pa had hinged the plank to the side of the wagon, about a foot off the floor, tapping a short peg to each corner. Of a night in the fall and winter months, Pa would heat round stones in the fire and then lower the bed over them to keep his little girl warm. Every night, Anina slept under one window; Pa and Mama slept under the other one, the stones tucked against their feet. Of a morning, Mama would roll up the feather ticks and lift the plank so it pressed up flush with the wall. With the beds put up, the inside of the wagon was roomy and clean. If it rained, Anina played with blocks, wood scraps Pa

had cut and sanded for her, or stones round and smooth as marbles. Mama had a little chair by the stove and a small table. While rain drummed the roof, she taught Anina the Psalms or arithmetic, filling her sewing basket with long strips of lace like rulers to measure their time.

People call them tramps. Anina tries to ignore the names but it's hard for a child, even a young girl who's grown almost to ten years old, to turn her cheek to vile words hurled like rotten vegetables against the clamped shutters of the wagon. She tries to forget the children, wide-eyed and curious, who beg to climb inside the funny wagon. She tries to forget the grown men and women who sneer and call her Pa a tramp and her Mama worse. Mama tells her every night, that they are God's children and that the whole earth is their home, not just one little patch marked out by a rickety porch or swinging gate. Mama spreads a patchwork quilt over Anina at night and points from one square to the next, telling stories about all the places they've traveled. Anina fingers the knots at each corner, tied with course wool thread, imagining them as dots on a map. Mama stitches a little picture of something memorable to the square marking each village: Coalgood, Harlan, Wallens Creek, Pinesville, Bailey's Switch, Sloan's Valley, Bethelridge. Better than tintypes that fade or ruin easily in the sun or rain, Anina's quilt calls to her mind a catalog of pictures: a nest of robins she watched hatch and fly away in Wallens Creek, a raspberry bush so loaded the branches seems to spring up with relief after she and Mama picked all the fruit, a clock tower in Pinesville with a face as big as the moon. *See*, Mama says, *home is everything we like about everyplace we've ever been*. But something in Anina whispers, *no, home is someplace we ain't found yet*.

Anina leads her goat into the shade and knots the rope around the base of a large maple tree. Fannie Rose pulls at clumps of grass around a large maple, stretching her lips greedily.

"Don't you never stop chewin'?" Anina scolds, nudging the goat back toward the tree. Just beyond the maple's shade, the little town hums and rattles, its colors amplified in the autumn light.

The Cottrells have plodded day by day for weeks across the rolling, rocky ground of eastern Kentucky, Cumberland Mountain taking up more space on the horizon every day, and now they are low on supplies. Yesterday, three small coons tried to steal some of Mama's apples. Anina scolded them away, and felt her stomach clench with envy. *Least you have each other*, she thought. *You must be sisters*. She loved their bandit faces

and meticulous paws, but for all their greedy mischief, she had to chase them away, banging a pot with one of Mama's big spoons.

Just up the road, three kids chase each other around a tree, reminding Anina of the coons she chased into the woods. *If I had a sister*, she thinks, *I'd never be lonely. And a sister wouldn't care that I'm different from other people, because she'd probably be a little bit like me.* Anina knows she'll probably never have a sister, but she hopes that someday she'll find her first and truest friend; she is only ten years old and still a believer in dreams.

The Pennington Gap General Store is busy, crowded with folks eager for bolts of calico, spices, and small bags of candy. Anina and her mother, Marisol Cottrell, go inside to trade lace, goat cheese, and ginseng for staples. Anina loves the smells of coffee, tobacco, lavender soap, and peppermint. Her eyes feast on the glass jars of licorice, peppermint sticks, caramels wrapped in wax paper, and lemon drops.

"Can I get a little candy this time, Mama, just a little bit?"

Mama glances at the caramels. "How many rounds of goat cheese you bring in to trade today?" she asks, knowing full well how much Anina has pressed.

"Three."

Mama concentrates, as if she is counting the pennies they'll bring. "I guess that earns you three of those peppermint sticks, one for each cheese."

The merchant tips the jar and draws out the candies, six inches long and thick as Anina's thumb. She sticks one in her mouth and turns it in a slow circle, savoring the mint candy. "Pa likes licorice," she says, pointing to the glossy braids.

Mama smiles but shakes a quick no. "We'll make some fritters with those apples in the wagon soon as we find a place to camp. That'll slake his sweet tooth."

The store is crammed floor to ceiling with dry goods: buttons, spool thread, cake soap, nails, gun powder and shells, vials of vitamin B oil and liniments, shaving soap and razors, candlesticks, leather gloves and saddlebags. Huge sacks of flour, cornmeal, and sugar line the floor, and cans of turpentine, castor oil, and molasses glint on the shelves. Everything in the store is so close, a person might stand in the middle of the room and stretch her arms to touch the packed shelves on both sides.

Anina can predict the list of items her mama will get in trade. They

need candles, matches, sulfur, cornmeal, cotton thread, vinegar, sugar, and salt. Mama will also barter for flour and cornmeal, soda powder, and coffee, maybe a little cinnamon, too, if she really plans to make those fritters. Anina reaches into the barrel of green coffee beans, running them through her fingers like river pebbles. Once they set up camp for a few days, Mama will spread the beans on a tray in the sun, blanching them till they turn brown and fragrant.

After the merchant's wife cuts ten yards of calico and six yards of gray flannel, she wraps the bundle in brown paper, tying it with a piece of string. Anina sticks her finger in the twine to hold it tight but keeps her head down, avoiding eye contact with anyone. Mama chooses buttons to match the brown and yellow fabric. Anina touches the kerchief covering her head and resists the urge to brush her hair away from her face. Despite the crisp breeze outside, the store is toasty from sunlight and too many people crowded into a small space. She would be cooler without the scarf, but she doesn't dare take it off.

Pa is next door trading deerskins and two walnut rockers he crafted when they were camped in Bell County, Kentucky. His list of supplies is predictable: shotgun shells, sandpaper and nails to make more furniture, and a five-gallon canister of lamp oil. Anina watches him through the store window glass. She can't hear the conversation, but she can tell trade is going well. Pa's movements are lively and relaxed, his eyes crinkling at the sides as he talks with the merchant. Apparently the man hasn't noticed the unusual wagon parked at the edge of town or realized Pa is the one driving it.

At the front counter, a girl with cinnamon-colored hair and matching freckles looks longingly at the glass candy jars. She is barefoot, and the edge of her dress is frayed. Anina feels bad about the candy in her mouth and the two others in her hand. She drops her eyes to avoid the girl's hungry gaze and slips the extra peppermints into her apron pocket. She is only inches away, but the girl doesn't meet Anina's eyes, although Anina is pretty sure she wants to. Anina's mama, Marisol, steps around the girl to make her other trades at the front counter, naming the items she still needs while the merchant's wife makes notes in a wide ledger.

Swallowing hard, the girl turns abruptly from the candy jars and bumps against Anina. Knocked off balance, Anina tips the barrel of coffee beans.

"Clumsy fool," her mother scolds. Anina thinks the woman is being too harsh since the girl didn't mean to make Anina stumble, but then she realizes the woman is referring to *her*.

Keeping her back to the scowling woman, the girl scoots a few inches to the right, making a little space between herself and Anina. Finally making eye contact, she crosses her eyes and then mouths an imitation of her mother's reprimand. Anina doesn't know what to think.

"Don't touch nothin', Ruby Jenkins," the store clerk barks. "Your Mama got barely enough money for coffee and cornmeal."

"I got it right here," the woman growls, her fist around a dirty wad of muslin. "I ain't a thief so don't call me one. I'll pay for what I take." Then she bends close to Ruby's ear. Her jaw is tight, like she's ready to bite. "Don't you touch nothin', you hear?"

Ruby keeps her arms stiff at her sides, her hands in fists. Anina hates the way the women are speaking to Ruby, treating her like a mangy old possum. She spins the peppermint stick with her fingers, pursing her lips into a small "O" around the candy. She feels the other pieces in her pocket and then holds one out to Ruby.

"You can have this'un. Reckon I don't need three."

Ruby hesitates, but Anina pushes the candy into her hand gently, "Here. You'll like it."

"Whatcha givin' away your candy for?"

"I like sharin'," Anina answers. "Don't need no other reason, do I?"

Ruby's mama sees the exchange and pinches Ruby's shoulder. To the merchant she says, "She got it from that one there, you see?"

The merchant waves her hand, annoyed by the irritation of the woman's loud voice. "Do your business, Trulieu and move on. I got other customers to tend."

"You dress funny," Ruby says, glancing at Anina's scarf and heavy shoes. Lots of people in Appalachia, children especially, go all year without shoes, but Mama never lets Anina roam barefooted. *We ain't uncivilized*, she says. *Besides, your feet gotta get you where we're goin'.*

"Ain't funny where I come from," Anina says, and then sucks her breath in sharply. She has no idea why those words burst across her lips. She has no idea where her family came from, only that they are going somewhere new all the time.

"Where's that?" Ruby blinks, rubs dirt out of her eye.

"Clear across Kentucky," Anina sweeps her hand in the air to suggest distance. "Farther than that even. So far off that you can't even see Cumberland Mountain from there."

Ruby listens, crunching the end of the peppermint stick.

*Suck it slow*, Anina thinks. *Make it last a long time.*

As if she hears Anina's thought, Ruby swallows the candy bits in her mouth and then licks the remaining stick like an ice cream cone. Then she stops, squints her eyes a little, and leans in close to Anina's face.

"What that round yer eye? Your Pa hit you?"

Anina can't imagine being struck in the face by anyone let alone her Pa. She shakes her head no and opens her mouth to defend him, but Ruby interrupts.

"Ain't no nevermind. I see now it ain't a bruise. It's too pretty for that."

Now Anina blinks, thinking surely she heard Ruby wrong. Pretty? Could she really think the birthmark was something pretty to look on?

"What you called?" Ruby blinks, worrying the seam of her dress.

*A name instead of a nickel*, Anina thinks, feeling like Ruby has just asked her for something shiny and smooth.

Ruby's mama sneers, her chin jutting forward. "Mind your business, Ruby. Strangers got no need to know nothin' 'bout you."

Anina keeps her chin down so that her hair falls across her eye and left cheek. As long as their eyes didn't linger, most people think she's just shy. She knows to address Trulieu instead of Ruby, show respect to this woman even though she's dirty and impolite herself. "Anina Cottrell. Pleased to meet you, Ma'am."

At that moment, a man enters the crowded room, his arms heavy with a large wooden crate and a box of matches balanced on top. Lifting the crate over the heads of the girls, he tips it a little and the matches fall to the ground. Anina bends to pick up the little box, absently tucking her hair behind her ear so she can see what she's doing. When she stands back up, Ruby's mama sees her face and gapes. A birthmark, as large as a handprint but shaped like a five-pointed star, frames Anina's left cheek and eye.

Ruby spins the peppermint on her tongue, studying Anina's face like she's some amusing new creature come out of the woods to make mischief. But Trulieu scoffs, clamping Ruby's shoulder as if a dog has burst into the store and threatened to bite her child. The merchant reaches for the box of matches but stops when he sees Anina's birthmark, his empty hand outstretched.

Another woman with her arms full of wrapped parcels pokes Ruby's mama on the shoulder. "Ya'll see them gypsies camped out by the liv'ry? Bet this girl's among 'em. Prob'ly reads cards or rolls chicken bones in the dirt!"



Ruby's mama sucks in her breath, her lips pulled tight against her teeth. She glares at Anina as if she knows all the truth there is to know about Anina and the other tramps who are surely skulking around town with her. "Come in here to take things you can't pay for, that's what you're up to. Thievin' . . . yes, that's what you're up to." She stabs the air with her finger, speaking to everyone in the store. "Y'all better watch 'em. Slick and quick as the devil, that's what these tramps are."

Mama hands the store clerk a bolt of lace and a small pile of coins. She lifts the wrapped parcels to show she has finished her business there.

Anina shifts her weight, ready to turn quickly and slip out with Mama, but she can't take her eyes off Ruby twirling her curly hair on her finger. Anina knows the best thing would be to go right back to the wagon and wait there for Pa to finish his business with the tanner and blacksmith, but she wants more than anything to talk a while with this little girl and lick the peppermint candy until it disappears clean away. So she crosses her eyes to make Ruby laugh and then glares right back at her mama.

"She's marked," the woman hisses, jerking Ruby by the arm to pull her away from Anina. "And they come in here to steal from honest people while we're doing our business." Then the woman spits on the floor in front of Anina. "What kind of spell you castin' on my daughter?"

Ruby pulls at her mother's elbow. "Ma, stop," she pleads.

Most days, Anina can convince herself she doesn't care what other people think. But the words always sting same as dirt in her eye on a windy day. The birthmark on Anina's face sets her apart from other children, and it is moments like this when she can hardly stand the loneliness in that void.

When she was an infant, the birthmark had been small and faint as a tea stain. The midwife told Mama it was just a trauma of labor. The baby's blotchy complexion would even out, she promised, and the mark would disappear same as a bruise healing under the skin. But it didn't disappear. By the time Anina started walking, the mark was even more pronounced, a star red-brown like a muddy creek bottom.

The woman's eyes are daggers jabbing the air. She has Ruby by the wrist, ready to push her out of the store and away from Anina forever.

"I didn't do nothin'," Anina says. Mama has always insisted that Anina turn the other cheek, literally, hiding her face and letting the insults fall away. But Ruby has been nice to her. If given the chance, the girls could probably become real friends. Ruby peers around her mother, locking eyes

with Anina.

“A freak is what you are. A sideshow to keep our attention turned so we won’t see what the rest of your gypsy tribe is stealin’,” Ruby’s mama hisses again.

Anina’s fingers tighten around the peppermint stick. She’d like to poke it in the woman’s eye.

“Witches and demons, sneakin’ like snakes right into our beds.”

Anina has never talked back to a stranger, but her anger is just too big this time. The woman reeks of unkindness, and Anina can’t stand to be called hateful by someone like this. “If anyone’s a witch, then you are, not me!”

The woman raises her arm to strike Anina, but in her haste she bumps one of the narrow shelves with the back of her hand. An oval mirror and two bottles of lavender water shatter on the floor.

“She’s cursed me!” the woman shrieks.

Mama steps quickly between Anina and the seething woman. “That mirror fallin’ was just an accident. Nothin’ more than your own clumsiness.” She apologizes to the merchant for the commotion and lays two more coins on the counter. “This should make it right. We won’t bother you no more.”

Ruby tries to thank Anina for the peppermint, lifting it slightly, but her mama slaps the candy from her hand. It breaks among the lavender water and mirror shards.

“Don’t look on my child with that eye!” Trulieu Jenkins leans forward, close enough that Anina can see the remnants of a bruise and a small cut on her lip. She pauses as if to turn pages in her mind, the thin, whispery pages of a Bible. “The thief comes to rob, kill and destroy, but the Lord laughs at the wicked for He knows their day will come.” Her words slash the air.

Mama reaches across Anina’s chest, pulling her daughter against her own body. “And the Lord says, ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.’”

Ruby’s mama flinches, suddenly mute. Before anyone can say another word, Mama steps around the gawking crowd and pulls Anina out the door.

With her eyes burning, Anina pushes past Mama, down the steps, and into the street. Running blindly, she collides with a tall man wearing filthy overalls and a dented black hat. He shoves the girl away from him,

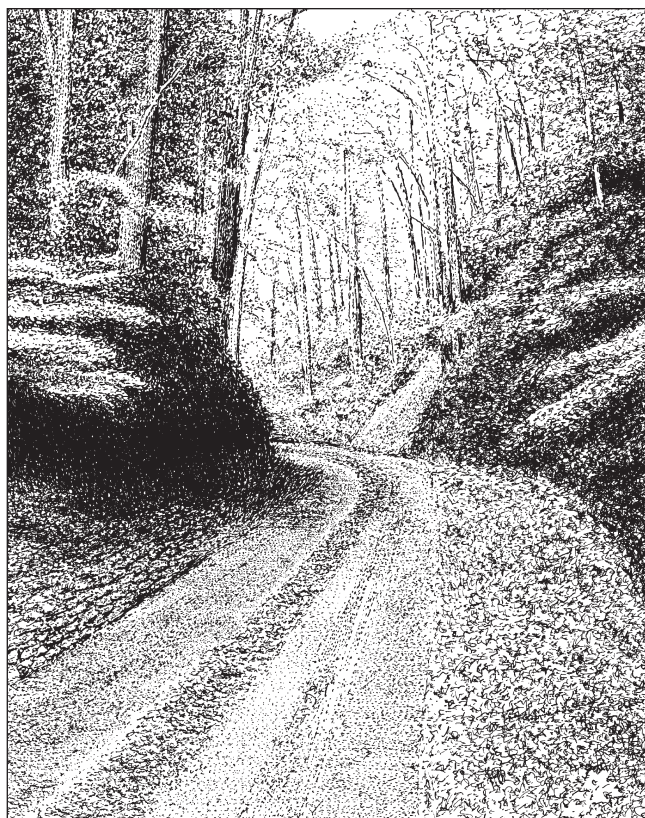
knocking her onto the ground, and slurs an insult. Mama rushes forward, but Anina springs up to run away. Her heart pounds in her ears, matching the pace of her feet on the road, and she hears Mama calling her name. But she doesn't stop or turn around.

Anina wanted to believe her birthmark was a feature as natural as eye color. But secretly she feared it *was* a curse. She felt different *inside*, marked by things she couldn't name or understand. Sometimes she heard whispers, like other people's thoughts caught in her own head, and recognized landmarks or buildings in places she had never been before. She had dreams of the night sky tearing like a piece of silk caught on a nail and a shard of light slipping through the hole straight into her hands. The dreams were so real; she awoke every time believing the world was about to end.

Pa called her pretty, but Anina thought she looked patched, the star a piece of auburn silk used to cover some flaw in an otherwise ordinary face. Strangers always seemed to think the mark was a sign, and because they didn't understand what the sign meant, they decided it was a sign of evil.

She ran until her lungs burned and her eyes stung with salt and dust. She was probably half a mile out of town, alone on the road out of Pennington Gap. Stopping finally to catch her breath, Anina bent forward, kneading the pain in her side.

Shaking with anger, she stooped to pick up a rock and then flung it



against a tree, her heart thudding in her ears. A short while passed, long enough for her heart to stop pounding in her ears. She heard shoes crunching and the steady clip of Fannie Rose's hooves on the road behind her.

"They think I'm a witch," she said without turning around, "but they're all dirty, mean devils. I hate them, ever' one of them!" Anina spoke through clenched teeth.

"You shared your candy with that little girl. You hate her too?"

Anina was too angry to be comforted. Forgiving other people's meanness was just too hard. "I'm just ugly," she snarled. "No wonder people is always 'fraid of me."

"Now that's a lie you're tellin'." Marisol touched Anina's shoulders and kept her hands there so the girl could not turn away again. "You got to look at yourself truthfully."

"And what is the truth about my face?" Suddenly, Anina was angry with Mama, too, even angrier than she'd been when the woman in town called her a witch. Mama mixed talcum powder with gritty, red dust to darken Anina's complexion and make the red birthmark less noticeable whenever they went into a town for trade. But the powder smeared when Anina sweated and caked in her eyebrows. Fannie Rose bumped against Anina's body, trying to coax her attention, but Anina shoved the goat away. "Why do you make me cover myself with this awful powder if you're not ashamed of how I look?"

Mama dropped her arms and took a small step back, as if Anina had shoved her, too. She gasped, "Your whole life, people have stared. I just wanted to protect you somehow."

"So this mark *is* something bad!" Anina had stopped crying, but her fists were balled into knots.

"I never meant . . ." Mama looked away from Anina to the small patch of sky showing through the hickory branches. Nearby, a creek gurgled over rocks that stuck up like elbows bending the water this way and that. "I never meant to shame you," she said, her voice catching on the word. She paused again, and then grabbed Anina's wrist. Pulling her toward the sound of water, Mama led Anina through the trees. When they reached the creek, she looped Fannie Rose's rope to a sapling and then stepped right into the running water. "Here, wash your face."

Anina stood on the bank, blinking and confused.

"Come on! Wash your face." She cupped the water, holding it out for

Anina like an offering. “Wash it all away, ever’ last speck.”

Anina bent over the clear water. If she turned so that only her right cheek showed in the reflection, she looked like any other girl: small nose, hazel eyes, coarse brown hair, and smooth skin muddied by the dirt and talcum powder. She cupped water with both hands and splashed it on her face. She scooped it again and again until her skin tingled, the red powder washed downstream with most of her anger. When she looked at her reflection again, the red-brown star bloomed across the left side of her face. She traced it with her finger, and then remembered the sneering woman in town. She slapped the water fiercely.

Mama knelt beside Anina. “When you were born, I thought you had some sickness.” She hesitated and then touched Anina’s chin to turn her face. “I feared you’d die before I could even give you a name.” A squirrel crept along the edge of the creek, its nervous tail flicking.

“You thought there was somethin’ wrong with me.”

Mama nodded yes. “I wanted a baby more than anything. Then you came, and I was afraid to even look on you. I thought maybe if I never held you or smelled your skin. . .” She covered her mouth with a clamped hand. She looked like a woman on the verge of confessing a terrible sin. “. . . then maybe I could take it if you died. Maybe I could forget you was ever mine.” Mama’s fingers shook. What would it be like, Anina wondered, to want something all your life and then finally get just a broken version of that thing?

Mama dabbed water on her own face and spoke again. “For a long time all I could see was the mark. That’s why I made you wear the powder.”

“Because you think I’m ugly.” Anina picked up a small rock and threw it hard, but the squirrel darted away, unharmed.

“No! I thought if we covered it, people would see how pretty you are. And then the mark wouldn’t matter.”

“It’s the only thing that matters ’bout me.” Anina’s throat was so tight she could hardly speak.

A turtle inched along the bank, dragging its little house through the dirt. Mama picked it up and set it in the flat of her hand till its feet and head came out to probe her skin. She set it down gently, exactly where it had been, now pointed toward the water. “People are easily deceived. And they get scared when things happen they can’t explain.” A cloud of gnats hovered briefly between them. “I don’t believe in curses, but a kind of mystery has followed you your whole life.”

“Even when I was a baby?”

“Even then. It’s like you have a secret window on the world. And you see things all the rest of us are blind to.”

“Like Joseph, I guess, with his dreams.” Anina knew that story better than all the others in the whole Bible.

“Yes, and he suffered terrible for them. Some gifts are hard to bear.”

Anina touched her face. “This ain’t a gift. It’s just a mistake in how I’m made.”

Mama climbed up the narrow bank and wrung water from the bottom of her skirt. “If you keep tellin’ lies about yourself, Anina Cottrell, you’ll start believing them.”

“Everybody I meet turns wicked or mean just from lookin’ at me.”

“Not everyone. That little girl asked your name. She made you laugh—I heard it.”

Anina pictured Ruby, smiling with the possibility of real friendship. “But people are afraid of me—afraid of *this*.” She pinched her left cheek.

Mama sighed. She reached forward and placed both hands on Anina’s face. “That’s why you have to be smarter than they are, smarter than I was when you was born.”

“How can I be smarter?” Anina asked, wiping her nose with the edge of her skirt.

“Don’t be fooled by what’s on the outside of a person.”

Anina was certain that what she’d seen on the outside of Trulieu Jenkins matched what she couldn’t see on the inside. But Ruby was different. She was bright as wildflowers and wide open to the fact that Anina was different. Ruby hadn’t flinched when she saw Anina’s birthmark. She hadn’t seemed surprised by it at all. Anina reached for Fannie Rose’s rope and followed Mama back to the road. She knew she’d probably never see Ruby again, never get the chance to find out if they could be friends, but she couldn’t stop wondering what that would be like. She had never had a friend, just Mama and Pa. She loved them and went all cold inside if she thought even briefly that either of them might ever leave her, but they were her parents, and they could never be what she needed a friend to be. As she and Mama headed back down the hill to join Pa, Anina thought about Ruby’s freckled grin. She held on to that memory and let herself, for just a moment, hope that someday maybe she would have a friend like Ruby to call her own.