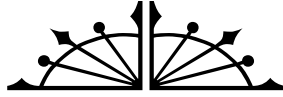
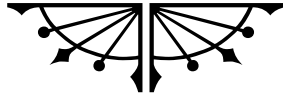


Mayfield

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To Laura Jean



Part I.



Chapter 1.

AFTER A BODY DIED, it rattled. That's what Jerd Jackson said. But Jerd, who lived with his people across the Sycamore River, said a lot of things, most of them not true. Mayfield knew better. His ma hadn't rattled after she died. Stock still, she lay in bed without any of the little noises or twitches of a living person.

Against his better judgement, he peeked around the curtain that hung in the bedroom doorway as his grandma, holding the bedsheet up with one hand, plied the damp washcloth with the other. She worked quickly and matter-of-factly, her wire-rimmed glasses halfway down her long nose. Tall and lanky, when she bent over to work her back curved into a letter "C."

"You gave me a fright," Grandma said when she saw Mayfield standing there. "Go out and get me some sage sprigs. Fat ones. The fattest you can find—and not too dried out."

That evening, after everybody had come and gone—to pay their respects and drink coffee and eat crumble cake—a hot wind

descended on Dry Creek, raising dust devils along the wagon road beyond the farmyard gate.

The afternoon had passed slowly for Mayfield, who had been made to sit quietly indoors. He'd gotten through it and had his supper, only to find himself in the same chair again, its hard back pushed up against the kitchen table. The wind gusts shook the thin, board-and-batten walls of the house.

A pair of shoes, hand-me-downs from Tom Jackson, Jerd's older brother, lay next to his feet. Along the opposite wall was the narrow bed Grandma slept in. Everybody called it the front-room bed. Before she fell ill, Ma had taken to calling it the daybed but that didn't stick. Grandma kept it tightly made. Mayfield was not to sit on it.

Above the bed, Grandma had hung a calendar. Each morning, Pa took the dull flat pencil he carried with him in his shirt pocket and marked off the day with a light "X," much to Grandma's annoyance.

The calendar had the words HOME SWEET HOME in golden lettering across the top, and the months and days of the year, and a little girl hanging out her wash to dry on a windy day. Her straw hat lay on the ground. It had been carried away by the breeze, along with the wash. In the sky above were the words to a rhyme, printed in bright red ink.

Mid pleasures and palaces

Tho' we may roam

Be it ever so humble

There's no place like home!

“Your pa grabbed up a shovel and went to the clearing,” Grandma said as she worked over the dish basin, cleaning the supper plates. She set the last plate in the drying rack, wiped her hands on her long white apron, and turned, sleeves rolled up to her elbows, to face her grandson. “You’ll get grow into them.”

Mayfield watched the muscles and tendons moving beneath the skin of Grandma’s forearms as she crossed them over her chest. He wanted to get up and run. Anywhere—away to the clearing, where Pa was digging the grave, across the river to Jerd Jackson’s house—it didn’t matter. Instead, he sat in the chair and sulked.

“I’ll wear my old shoes.” Mayfield knew that he couldn’t. His old shoes were too small for him, and he’d been going barefoot. He liked tramping across the fields in his bare feet. It was much easier to scramble over the boulders that way, along the upper stretches of Dry Creek.

“Fiddlesticks! You’re ten years old, boy. You can’t go barefoot forever—certainly not to church. Some things you have to do. Doesn’t mean you have to like it.”

“I’m eleven years old,” Mayfield said.

“Already? You do seem short for eleven years old.” Unfolding her arms, Grandma took the kitchen lamp down from its place on the corner shelf and set it on the table. The wick had already been scrolled up and trimmed. Grandma had shaped it into a point. Ma had always kept the wick trimmed straight.

“I don’t need any old church shoes. Me and Pa and...Ma...” Mayfield said, haltingly. He felt uneasy, speaking of her out loud. “We hardly ever went to church.”

“He did his level best to keep you and your ma away from us Budes,” Grandma said, lifting the lamp’s globe from the bowl. “Holing you all up here on Dry Creek. That was his choice.” She took the matchbox down from its place on top of the pie cupboard. “How I prayed for her, though! I watched her sleep—did you know that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, indeed.” Grandma took out a match and struck it against the side of the box with one fast stroke. The rims of her spectacles glinted in the light of the flame. “Things are changing, boy,” she continued, starting the lamp and shaking the match out. “You’ll need to do as your grandpa and I see fit. What your pa thinks—I don’t give a fig. It’s off to bed with you.” The flame was high and smoky. Grandma scrolled the wick down before setting the globe back in place.

“You ought not to talk about my pa that way, *ma’am*,” Mayfield said under his breath. Grandpa and Grandma were forever shaming Pa. Shaming and chastising him for things, some real, some not. If he ran off to town to drink liquor, they shamed him for it. And they shamed him even when he hadn’t, all the same. It was true, what she’d said about Pa holing them up over the years, and how he’d tried his best to hide it when Ma first took sick. Mayfield hardly blamed him for it. He might have done the very same thing, if *he* was Pa.

“*Ought* not to?” Grandma’s face had turned bright red. She’d heard what he’d mumbled, and Mayfield braced himself for a slap. It didn’t come. He sensed a catch in her voice, as if she were about to cry. But Grandma steadied herself before she did.