Rose-Johnny

By Barbara Kingsolver

Rose-Johnny wore a man’s haircut and terrified little children, although I will never believe that was her intention. For her own part she inspired in us only curiosity. It was our mothers who took this fascination and wrung it, through daily admonitions, into the most irresistible kind of horror. She was like the old wells, covered with ancient rotting boards and overgrown with weeds, that waited behind the barns to swallow us down: our mothers warned us time and again not to go near them and still were certain that we did.

My own mother was not one of those who had a great deal to say about her, but Walnut Knobs was a small enough town that a person did not need to be told things directly. When I had my first good look at her, at close range, I was ten years old. I fully understood the importance of the encounter.

What mattered to me at the time, though, was that it was something my sister had not done before me. She was five years older, and as a consequence there was hardly an achievement in my life, nor even an article of clothing, that had not first been Mary Etta’s. But because of the circumstances of my meeting Rose-Johnny I couldn’t tell a living soul about it, and so for nearly a year I carried the secret torment of a great power that can’t be used. My agitation was not relieved but made worse when I told the story to myself, over and over again.

She was not, as we always heard, half-man and half-woman, something akin to the pagan creatures whose naked torsos are inserted in various shocking ways into parts of animal bodies. In fact, I was astonished by her ordinariness. It is true that she wore Red Wing boots like my father. And also, there was something not quite womanly in her face, but maybe any woman’s face would look the same with that haircut. I am sure that was what did it, even though her same head of hair, on a man, you wouldn’t look at again: coal black, cut flat across the top of her round head so that when she looked down I could see a faint pale spot right on top where the scalp almost surfaced.

But the rest of her looked exactly like anybody’s mother in a big flowered dress without a waistline and with two faded spots in front, where her bosom rubbed over the counter when she reached across to make change or wipe away the dust.

People say there is a reason for every important thing that happens. I was sent to the feed store, where I spoke to Rose-Johnny and passed a quarter from my hand into hers, because it was haying time. And because I was small for my age. I was not too small to help with tobacco setting in the spring; in fact I was better at it than Mary Etta who complained about the stains on her hands, but I was not yet big enough to throw a bale of hay onto the flatbed. It was the time of year when Daddy complained about not having boys. Mama said that at least he oughtn’t to bother going into town for the chicken mash that day because Georgeann could do it on her way home from school.

Mama told me to ask Aunt Minnie to please ma’am give me a ride home. “Ask her nice to stop off at Lester Wall’s store so you can run in with this quarter and get five pounds of laying mash.”

I put the quarter in my pocket, keeping my eye out to make certain Mary Etta understood what I had been asked to do. Mary Etta had once told me that I was no better than the bugs that suck on potato vines, and that the family was going to starve to death because of my laziness. It was one of the summer days when we were on our knees in the garden picking off bugs and dropping them into cans of coal oil. She couldn’t go into town with Aunt Minnie to look at dress patterns until we finished with the potato bugs. What she said, exactly, was that if I couldn’t work any harder than that, then she had just as well throw me into a can of coal oil. Later she told me she hadn’t meant it, but I intended to remember it nonetheless.

Aunt Minnie taught the first grade and had a 1951 Dodge. This is how she referred to her car whenever she spoke of it. It was the newest automobile belonging to anyone related to us, although some of the Wilcox cousins had once come down to visit from Knoxville in a Ford they were said to have bought the same year it was made. But I saw that car and did not find it nearly as impressive as Aunt Minnie’s, which was white and immense and shone like glass. She paid a boy to polish it every other Saturday.

On the day she took me to Wall’s, she waited in the car while I went inside with my fist tight around the quarter. I had never been in the store before, and although I had passed by it many times and knew what could be bought there, I had never imagined what a wonderful combination of warm, sweet smells of mash and animals and seed corn it would contain. The dust lay white and thin on everything like a bridal veil. Rose-Johnny was in the back with a water can, leaning over into one of the chick tubs. The steel rang with the sound of confined baby birds, and a light bulb shining up from inside the tub made her face glow white. Mr. Wall, Rose-Johnny’s pa, was in the front of the store talking to two men about a horse. He didn’t notice me as I crept up to the counter. It was Rose-Johnny who came forward to the cash register.

“And what for you, Missy?”

She is exactly like anybody’s Mama, was all I could think, and I wanted to reach and touch her flowered dress. The two men were looking at me.

“My mama needs five pound of laying mash, and here’s a quarter for it.” I clicked the coin quickly onto the counter.

“Yes, ma’am.” She smiled at me, but her boots made heavy, tired sounds on the floor. She made her way slowly, like a duck in water, over the row of wooden bins that stood against the wall. She scooped the mash into a paper bag and weighed it, then shoved the scoop back into the bin. A little cloud of dust rose out of the mash up into the window. I watched her from the counter.

“Don’t your mama know she’s wasting good money on chicken mash? Any fool chicken will eat corn.” I jumped when the man spoke. It was one of the two, and they were standing so close behind me I would have had to look right straight up to see their faces. Mr. Wall was gone.

“No, sir, they need mash,” I said to the man’s boots.

“What’s that?” It was the taller man doing the talking.

“They need mash,” I said louder. “To lay good sturdy eggs for selling. A little mash mixed in with the corn. Mama says it’s got oyster shells in it.”

“Is that a fact,” he said. “Did you hear that, Rose-Johnny?” he called out. “This child says you put oyster shells in that mash. Is that right?”

When Rose-Johnny came back to the cash register, she was moon-eyed. She made quick motions with her hands and pushed the bag at me as if she didn’t know how to talk.

“Do you catch them oysters yourself, Rose-Johnny? Up at Jackson Crick?” The man was laughing. The other man was quiet.

Rose-Johnny looked all around and up at the ceiling. She scratched at her short hair, fast and hard like a dog with ticks.

When the two men were gone, I stood on my toes and leaned over the counter as far as I could. “Do you catch the oysters yourself?”

She hooked her eyes right into mine. The way the bit goes into the mule’s mouth and fits just so, one way and no other. Her eyes were the palest blue of any I had ever seen. Then she threw back her head and laughed so hard I could see the wide, flat bottoms of her back teeth, and I wasn’t afraid of her.

When I left the store, the two men were still outside. Their boots scuffed on the front porch floor boards, and the shorter one spoke.

“Child, how much did you pay that woman for the chicken mash?”

“A quarter,” I told him.

He put a quarter in my hand. “You take this here, and go home and tell your daddy something. Tell him not never to send his little girls to Wall’s feed store. Tell him to send his boys if he has to, but not his little girls.” His hat was off, and his hair lay back in wet orange strips. A clean line separated the white top of his forehead from the red-burned hide of his face. In this way, it was like my father’s face.

“No, sir, I can’t tell him, because all my daddy’s got is girls.”

“That’s George Bowies’ child, Bud,” the tall man said. “He’s just got the two girls.”

“Then tell him to come for his self,” Bud said. His eyes had the sun in them, and looked like a pair of new pennies.

Aunt Minnie didn’t see the man give me the quarter because she was looking at herself in the side-view mirror of the Dodge. Aunt Minnie was older than Mama, but everyone mistook her for the younger because of the way she fixed herself up. And of course, Mama was married. Mama said if Aunt Minnie ever found a man she would act her age.

When I climbed in the car, she was pulling gray hairs out of her part. She said it was teaching school that caused them, but early gray ran in my mama’s family.

She jumped when I slammed the car door. “All set?”

“Yes ma’am,” I said. She put her little purple hat back on her head and slowly pushed the long pin through it. I shuddered as she started up the car.

Aunt Minnie laughed. “Somebody walked over your grave.”

“I don’t have a grave,” I said. “I’m not dead.”

“No, you most certainly are not. That’s just what they say, when a person shivers like that.” She smiled, I liked Aunt Minnie most of the time. “I don’t think they mean your real grave, with you in it,” she said after a minute. “I think it means the place where your grave is going to be some day.”

I thought about this for awhile. I tried to picture the place, but could not. Then I thought about the two men outside Wall’s store. I asked Aunt Minnie why it was all right for boys to do some things that girls couldn’t.

“Oh, there’s all kinds of reasons,” she said. “Like what kinds of things, do you mean?”

“Like going into Wall’s feed store.”

“Who told you that?”

“Somebody,”

Aunt Minnie didn’t say anything.

Then I said, “It’s because of Rose-Johnny, isn’t it?”

Aunt Minnie raised her chin just a tiny bit. She might have been checking her lipstick in the mirror, or she might have been saying yes.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why what?”

“Why because of Rose-Johnny?”

“I can’t tell you that, Georgeann.”

“Why can’t you tell me?” I whined. “Tell me.”

The car rumbled over a cattle grate. When we came to the crossing, Aunt Minnie stepped on the brake so hard we both flopped forward. She looked at me. “Georgeann, Rose-Johnny is a Lebanese. That’s all I’m going to tell you. You’ll understand better when you’re older.”

When I got home, I put the laying mash in the hen house. The hens were already roosting high above my head, clucking softly into their feathers and shifting back and forth on their feet. I collected the eggs as I did every day, and took them into the house. I hadn’t yet decided what to do about the quarter, and so I held onto it until dinner time.

Mary Etta was late coming down, and even though she had washed and changed she looked pale as a haunt from helping with the haying all day. She didn’t speak and hardly ate.

“Here girls, both of you, eat up these potatoes,” Mama said after awhile. “There’s not but just a little bit left. Something to grow on.”

“I don’t need none then,” Mary Etta said. “I’ve done growed all I’m going to grow.”

“Don’t talk back to your mama,” Daddy said.

“I’m not talking back. It’s the truth.” Mary Etta looked at Mama. “Well, it is.”

“Eat a little bite, Mary Etta. Just because you’re in the same dresses for a year don’t mean you’re not going to grow no more.”

“I’m as big as you are, Mama.”

“All right then.” Mama scraped the mashed potatoes onto my plate. “I expect now you’ll be telling me you don’t want to grow no more either,” she said to me.

“No, ma’am, I won’t,” I said. But I was distressed, and looked sideways at the pink shirtwaist I had looked forward to inheriting along with the grown-up shape that would have to be worn inside it. Now it appeared that I was condemned to my present clothes and potato-shaped body; keeping these forever seemed to me far more likely than the possibility of having clothes that, like the Wilcox automobile, had never before been owned. I ate my potatoes quietly. Dinner was almost over when Daddy asked if I had remembered to get the laying mash.

“Yes sir. I put it in the hen house.” I hesitated. “And here’s the quarter back. Mr. Wall gave me the mash for nothing.”

“Why did he do that?” Mama asked.

Mary Etta was staring like the dead. Even her hair looked tired, slumped over the back of her chair like a long black shadow.

“I helped him out,” I said. “Rose-Johnny wasn’t there, she was sick, and Mr. Wall said if I would help him clean out the bins and dust the shelves and water the chicks, then it wouldn’t cost me for the laying mash.”

“And Aunt Minnie waited while you did all that?”

“She didn’t mind,” I said. “She had some magazines to look at.”

It was the first important lie I had told in my life, and I was thrilled with its power. Every member of my family believed I had brought home the laying mash in exchange for honest work.

I was also astonished at how my story, once I had begun it, wouldn’t finish. “He wants me to come back and help him again the next time we need something,” I said.

“I don’t reckon you let on like we couldn’t pay for the mash?” Daddy asked, stern.

“No sir. I put the quarter right up there on the counter. But he said he needed the help. Rose-Johnny’s real sick.”

He looked at me like he knew. Like he had found the hole in the coop where the black snake was getting in. But he just said, “All right. You can go, if Aunt Minnie don’t mind waiting for you.”

“You don’t have to say a thing to her about it,” I said. “I can walk home the same as I do every day. Five pound of mash isn’t nothing to carry.”

“We’ll see,” Mama said.

That night I believed I would burst. For a long time after Mary Etta fell asleep I twisted in my blankets and told the story over to myself, both the true and false versions. I talked to my doll, Miss Regina. She was a big doll, a birthday present from my Grandma and Grandpa Bowles, with a tiny wire crown and lovely long blond curls.

“Rose-Johnny isn’t really sick,” I told Miss Regina. “She’s a Lebanese.”

I looked up the word in Aunt Minnie’s Bible Dictionary after school. I pretended to be looking up St. John the Baptist but then turned over in a hurry to the “L’s” while she was washing her chalkboards. My heart thumped when I found it, but I read the passage quickly, several times over, and found it empty. It said the Lebanese were a seafaring people who built great ships from cedar trees. I couldn’t believe that even when I was older I would be able, as Aunt Minnie promised, to connect this with what I had seen of Rose-Johnny. Nevertheless, I resolved to understand. The following week I went back to the store, confident that my lie would continue to carry its own weight.

Rose-Johnny recognized me. “Five pounds of laying mash,” she said, and this time I followed her to the feed bins. There were flecks of white dust in her hair.

“Is it true you come from over the sea?” I asked her quietly as she bent over with the scoop.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. “A lot of them says I come from the moon,” she said, and I was afraid she was going to be struck dumb and animal-eyed as she was the time before. But when she finished weighing the bag, she just said, “I was born in Slate Holler, that’s all. That’s as far from here as I ever been or will be.”

“Is that where you get the oysters from?” I asked, looking into the mash and trying to pick out which of the colored flecks they might be.

Rose-Johnny looked at me for a long time, and then suddenly laughed her big laugh. “Why honey child, don’t you know? Oysters comes from the sea.”

She rang up 25 cents on the register, but I didn’t look at her.

“That was all, wasn’t it?”

I leaned over the counter and tried to put tears in my eyes, but they wouldn’t come. “I can’t pay,” I said. “My daddy said to ask you if I could do some work for it. Clean up, or something.”

“Your daddy said to ask me that? Well bless your heart,” she said. “Let me see if we can’t find something for you to do. Bless your little heart, child, what’s your name?”

“Georgeann,” I told her.

“I’m Rose-Johnny,” she said, and I did not say that I knew this, that like every other child I had known it since the first time I saw her in town, when I was five or six, and asked Mama if it was a man or a lady.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said.

We kept it between the two of us: I came in every week to help with the pullets and the feed, and took home my mash. We did not tell Mr. Wall, although it seemed it would not have mattered one whit to him. Mr. Wall was in the store so seldom that he might not have known I was there. He kept to himself in the apartment at the back where he and Rose-Johnny lived.

It was she who ran the store, kept the accounts, and did the orders. She showed me how to feed and water the pullets and ducklings and pull out the sick ones. Later I learned how to weigh out packages of seed and to mix the different kinds of mash. There were lists nailed to the wall telling how much cracked corn and oats and grit to put in. I followed the recipes with enormous care, adding tiny amounts at a time to the bag on the hanging scales until the needle touched the right number. Although she was patient with me, I felt slow next to Rose-Johnny, who never had to look at the lists and used the scales only to check herself. It seemed to me she knew how to do more things than anyone I had ever known, woman or man.

She also knew the names of all the customers, although she rarely spoke to them. Sometimes such a change came over her when the men were there that it wasn’t clear to me whether she was pretending or had really lost the capacity to speak. But afterward she would tell me their names and everything about them. Once she told me about Ed Charney Senior and Bud Mattox, the two men I had seen the first day I was in the store. According to Rose-Johnny, Ed had an old red mule he was in the habit of mistreating. “But even so,” she said, “Ed’s mule don’t have it as bad as Bud’s wife.” I never knew how she acquired this knowledge.

When she said “Bud Mattox,” I remembered his penny-colored eyes and connected him then with all the Mattox boys at school. It had never occurred to me that eyes could run in families, like early gray.

Occasionally a group of black-skinned children came to the store, always after hours. Rose-Johnny opened up for them. She called each child by name, and asked after their families and the health of their mothers’ laying hens.

The oldest one, whose name was Cleota, was shaped like Mary Etta. Her hair was straight and pointed, and smelled to me like citronella candles. The younger girls had plaits that curved out from their heads like so many handles. Several of them wore dresses made from the same bolt of cloth, but they were not sisters. Rose-Johnny filled a separate order for each child.

I watched but didn’t speak. The skin on their heels and palms was creased, and as light as my own. Once, after they had left, I asked Rose-Johnny why they came into the store when it was closed.

“People’s got their ways,” she said, stoking up the wood stove for the night. Then she told me all their names again, starting with Cleota and working down. She looked me in the eye. “When you see them in town, you speak. Do you hear? By name. I don’t care who is watching.”

I was allowed to spend half an hour or more with Rose-Johnny nearly every day after school, so long as I did not neglect my chores at home. Sometimes on days that were rainy or cold Aunt Minnie would pick me up, but I preferred to walk. By myself, without Mary Etta to hurry me up.

As far as I know, my parents believed I was helping Mr. Wall because of Rose-Johnny’s illness. They had no opportunity to learn otherwise, though I worried that some day Aunt Minnie would come inside the store to fetch me, instead of just honking, or that Daddy would have to go to Wall’s for something and see for himself that Rose-Johnny was fit and well. Come springtime he would be needing to buy tobacco seed.

It was soon after Christmas when I became consumed with a desire to confess. I felt the lies down inside me like cold, dirty potatoes in a root cellar, beginning to sprout and crowd. At night I told Miss Regina of my dishonesty and the things that were likely to happen to me because of it. In so doing, there were several times I nearly confessed by accident to Mary Etta.

“Who’s going to wring your neck?” she wanted to know, coming into the room one night when I thought she was downstairs washing the supper dishes.

“Nobody,” I said, clutching Miss Regina to my pillow. I pretended to be asleep. I could hear Mary Etta starting to brush her hair. Every night before she went to bed she sat with her dress hiked up and her head hung over between her knees, brushing her hair all the way down to the floor. This improved the circulation to the hair, she told me, and would prevent it turning. Mary Etta was already beginning to get white hairs.

“Is it because Mama let you watch Daddy kill the cockerels? Did it scare you to see them jump around like that with their necks broke?”

“I’m not scared,” I murmured, but I wanted so badly to tell the truth that I started to cry. I knew, for certain, that something bad was going to happen. I believe I also knew it would happen to my sister, instead of me.

“Nobody’s going to hurt you,” Mary Etta said. She smoothed my bangs and laid my pigtails down flat on top of the quilt. “Give me Miss Regina and let me put her up for you now, so you won’t get her hair all messed up.”

I let her have the doll. “I’m not scared about the cockerels, Mary Etta. I promise.” With my finger, under the covers, I traced a cross over my heart.

When Rose-Johnny fell ill, I was sick with guilt. When I first saw Mr. Wall behind the counter instead of Rose-Johnny, so help me God, I prayed this would be the day Aunt Minnie would come inside to get me. Immediately after, I felt sure God would kill me for my wickedness. I pictured myself falling dead beside the oat bin. I begged Mr. Wall to let me see her.

“Go on back, littl’un. She told me you’d be coming in,” he said.

I had never been in the apartment before. There was little in it beyond the necessary things and a few old photographs on the walls, all of the same woman. The rooms were cold and felt infused with sickness and an odor I incorrectly believed to be medicine. Because my father didn’t drink, I had never before encountered the smell of whiskey.

Rose-Johnny was propped on the pillows in a lifeless flannel gown. Her face changed when she saw me, and I remembered the way her face was lit by the light bulb in the chick tub, the first time I saw her. With fresh guilt I threw myself on her bosom.

“I’m sorry. I could have paid for the mash. I didn’t mean to make you sick.” Through my sobs I heard accusing needly wheezing sounds in Rose-Johnny’s chest. She breathed with a great pulling effort.

“Child, don’t talk foolish.”

As weeks passed and Rose-Johnny didn’t improve, it became clear that my lie was prophetic. Without Rose-Johnny to run the store, Mr. Wall badly needed my help. He seemed mystified by his inventory and was rendered helpless by any unusual demand from a customer. It was March, the busiest time for the store. I had turned 11, one week before Mary Etta turned 16. These seven days out of each year, during which she was only four years older, I considered to be God’s greatest gift to me.

The afternoon my father would come in to buy the vegetable garden and tobacco seed was an event I had rehearsed endlessly in my mind. When it finally did transpire, Mr. Wall’s confusion gave such complete respectability to my long-standing lie that I didn’t need to say a word myself in support of it. I waited on him with dignity, precisely weighing out his tobacco seed, and even recommended to him the white runner beans that Mr. Wall had accidentally overstocked, and which my father did not buy.

Later on that same afternoon, after the winter light had come slanting through the dusty windows and I was alone in the store cleaning up, Cleota and the other children came pecking at the glass. I let them in. When I had filled all the orders Cleota unwrapped their coins, knotted all together into a blue handkerchief. I counted, and counted again. It was not the right amount, not even half.

“That’s what Miss Rose-Johnny ast us for it,” Cleota said. “Same as always.” The smaller children—Venise, Anita, Little-Roy, James—shuffled and elbowed each other like fighting cocks, paying no attention. Cleota gazed at me calmly, steadily. Her eyebrows were two perfect arches.

“I thank you very much,” I said, and put the coins in their proper places in the cash drawer.

During that week I also discovered an epidemic of chick droop in the pullets. I had to pull Mr. Wall over by the hand to make him look. There were more sick ones than well.

“It’s because it’s so cold in the store,” I told him. “They can’t keep warm. Can’t we make it warmer in here?”

Mr. Wall shrugged at the wood stove, helpless. He could never keep a fire going for long, the way Rose-Johnny could.

“We have to try. The one light bulb isn’t enough,” I said. The chicks were huddled around the bulb just the way the men would collect around the stove in the mornings to say howdy do to Mr. Wall and warm up their hands on the way to work. Except the chicks were more ruthless: they climbed and shoved, and the healthy ones pecked at the eyes and feet of the sick ones, making them bleed.

I had not noticed before what a very old man Mr. Wall was. As he stared down at the light, I saw that his eyes were covered with a film. “How do we fix them up?” he asked me.

“We can’t. We’ve got to take the sick ones out so they won’t all get it. Rose-Johnny puts them in that tub over there. We give them water and keep them warm, but it don’t do any good. They’ve got to die.”

He looked so sad, I stood and patted his old freckled hand.

I spent much more time than before at the store, but no longer enjoyed it particularly. Working in the shadow of Rose-Johnny’s expertise, I had been a secret witness to a wondrous ritual of counting, weighing, and tending. Together we created little packages that sailed out like ships to all parts of the county, giving rise to gardens and barnyard life in places I had never even seen. I felt superior to my schoolmates, knowing that I had had a hand in the creation of their families’ poultry flocks and their mothers’ kitchen gardens. By contrast, Mr. Wall’s bewilderment was pathetic and only increased my guilt. But each day I was able to spend a little time in the back rooms with Rose-Johnny.

There were rumors about her illness, both before and after the fact. It did not occur to me that I might have been the source of some of the earlier rumors. But if I didn’t think of this, it was because Walnut Knobs was overrun with tales of Rose-Johnny, and not because I didn’t take notice of the stories. I did.

The tales that troubled me most were about Rose-Johnny’s daddy. I had heard many adults say that he was responsible for her misfortune, which I presumed to mean her short hair. But it was said that he was a colored man, and this I knew to be untrue. Aunt Minnie, when I pressed her, would offer nothing more than that if it were up to her I wouldn’t go near either one of them, advice which I ignored. I was coming to understand that I would not hear the truth about Rose-Johnny from Aunt Minnie or anyone else; I knew, in a manner that went beyond the meanings of words I could not understand, that she was no more masculine than my mother or aunt, and no more lesbian than Lebanese. Rose-Johnny was simply herself, and alone.

And yet she was such a capable woman that I couldn’t believe she would be sick for very long. But as the warm weather came she grew sluggish and pale. Her slow, difficult breathing frightened me. I brought my schoolbooks and read to her from the foot of the bed. Sometimes the rather ordinary adventures of the boy in my reader would make her laugh aloud until she choked. Other times she fell asleep while I read, but then would make me read those parts over again.

She worried about the store. Frequently she would ask about Mr. Wall, and the customers, and how he was managing. “He does all right,” I always said. But eventually my eagerness to avoid the burden of further lies, along with the considerable force of my pride, led me to confess that I had to tell him nearly everything. “He forgets, something awful,” I told her.

Rose-Johnny smiled. “He used to be as smart as anything, and taught me. Now I’ve done taught you, and you him again.” She was lying back on the pillows with her eyes closed and her plump hands folded on her stomach.

“But he’s a nice man,” I said, I listened to her breathing. “He don’t hurt you does he? Your pa?”

Nothing moved except her eyelids. They opened and let the blue eyes out at me. I looked down and traced my finger over the triangles of the Flying Geese patch on the quilt. I whispered, “Does he make you cut off your hair?”

Rose-Johnny’s eyes were so pale they were almost white, like ice with water running underneath. “He cuts it with a butcher knife, Sometimes he chases me all the way down to the river.” She laughed a hissing laugh like a boy, and she had the same look the yearling calves get when they are cornered and jump the corral and run to the woods and won’t be butchered. I understood then that Rose-Johnny, too, knew the power of a lie.

It was the youngest Mattox boy who started the fight at school on the Monday after Easter. He was older than me, and a boy, so nobody believed he would hit me, but when he started the name calling I called them right back, and he threw me down on the ground. The girls screamed and ran to get the teacher, but by the time she arrived I had a bloody nose and had bitten his arm wonderfully hard.

Miss Althea gave me her handkerchief for my nose and dragged Roy Mattox inside to see the principal. All the other children stood in a circle, looking at me.

“It isn’t true, what he said,” I told them. “And not about Rose-Johnny either. She isn’t a pervert. I love her.”

“Pervert,” one of the boys said.

I marveled at the sight of my own blood soaking through the handkerchief. “I love her,” I said.

I did not get to see Rose-Johnny that day. The door of Wall’s store was locked. I could see Mr. Wall through the window, though, so I banged on the glass with the Hats of my hands until he came. He had the strong medicine smell on his breath.

“Not today, littl’un.” The skin under his eyes was dark blue.

“I need to see Rose-Johnny.” I was irritated with Mr. Wall, and did not consider him important enough to prevent me from seeing her. But evidently he was.

“Not today,” he said. “We’re closed.” He shut the door and locked it.

I shouted at him through the glass. “Tell her I hit a boy and bit his arm, that was calling her names. Tell her I fought with a boy, Mr. Wall.”

The next day the door was open, but I didn’t see him in the store. In the back, the apartment was dark except for the lamp by Rose-Johnny’s bed. A small brown bottle and a glass stood just touching each other on the night table. Rose-Johnny looked asleep but made a snuffing sound when I climbed onto the bottom of the bed.

“Did your daddy tell you what I told him yesterday?”

She said nothing.

“Is your daddy sick?”

“My daddy’s dead,” she said suddenly, causing me to swallow a little gulp of air. She opened her eyes, then closed them again. “Pa’s all right, honey, just stepped out, I imagine.” She stopped to breathe between every few words. “I didn’t mean to give you a fright. Pa’s not my daddy. He’s my mama’s daddy.”

I was confused. “And your real daddy’s dead?”

She nodded. “Long time.”

“And your mama, what about her? Is she dead too?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, in the same lazy sort of way Mama would say it when she wasn’t really listening.

“That her?” I pointed to the picture over the bed. The woman’s shoulders were bare except for a dark lace shawl. She was looking backwards towards you, over her shoulder.

Rose-Johnny looked at the picture, and said yes it was.

“She’s pretty,” I said.

“People used to say I looked just like her.” Rose-Johnny laughed a wheezy laugh, and coughed.

“Why did she die?”

Rose-Johnny shook her head. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Can you when I’m older?” She didn’t answer. “Well then, if Mr. Wall isn’t your daddy, then the colored man is your daddy,” I said, mostly to myself.

She looked at me. “Is that what they say?”

I shrugged.

“Does no harm to me. Every man is some color,” she said.

“Oh,” I said.

“My daddy was white. After he died my mama loved another man and he was brown.”

“What happened then?”

“What happened then,” she said. “Then, they had a sweet little baby Johnny.” Her voice was more like singing than talking, and her eyes were so peacefully closed I was afraid they might not open again. Every time she breathed there was the sound of a hundred tiny birds chirping inside her chest.

“Where’s he?”

“Mama’s Rose and sweet little baby Johnny,” she sang it like an old song. “Not nothing bad going to happen to them, not nobody going to take them.” A silvery moth flew into the lamp and clicked against the inside of the lampshade. Rose-Johnny stretched out her hand toward the night table. “I want you to pour me some of that bottle.”

I lifted the bottle carefully and poured a glass half full. “That your medicine?” I asked. No answer. I feared this would be another story without an end, without meaning. “Did somebody take your mama’s babies?” I persisted.

“Took her man, is what they did, and hung him up from a tree.” She sat up slowly on her elbows, and looked straight at me. “Do you know what lynched is?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, although until that moment I had not been sure.

“People will tell you there’s never been no lynchings north of where the rivers don’t freeze over. But they done it. Do you know where Jackson Crick is, up there by Floyd’s Mill?” I nodded. “They lynched him up there, and drowned her baby Johnny in Jackson Crick, and it was as froze as you’re ever going to see it. They had to break a hole in the ice to do it.” She would not stop looking right into me. “In that river. Poor little baby in that cold river. Poor Mama, what they did to Mama. And said they would do to me, when I got old enough.”

She didn’t drink the medicine I poured for her, but let it sit. I was afraid to hear any more, and afraid to leave. I watched the moth crawl up the outside of the lampshade.

And then, out of the clear blue, she sat up and said, “But they didn’t do a thing to me!” The way she said it, she sounded more like she ought to be weighing out bags of mash, than sick in bed. “Do you want to know what Mama did?”

I didn’t say.

“I’ll tell you what she did. She took her scissors and cut my hair right off, every bit of it. She said, “From now on, I want you to be Rose and Johnny both.” And then she went down to the same hole in the crick where they put baby Johnny in.”

I sat with Rose-Johnny for a long time. I patted the lump in the covers where her knees were, and wiped my nose on my sleeve. “You’d better drink your medicine, Rose-Johnny,” I said. “Drink up and get better now,” I told her. “It’s all over now.”

It was the last time I saw Rose-Johnny. The next time I saw the store, more than a month later, it was locked and boarded up. Later on, the Londroski brothers took it over. Some people said she had died. Others thought she and Mr. Wall had gone to live somewhere up in the Blue Ridge, and opened a store there. This is the story I believed. In the years since, when passing through that part of the country, I have never failed to notice the Plymouth Rocks and Rhode Islands scratching in the yards, and the tomato vines tied up around the back doors.

I would like to stop here and say no more, but there are enough half-true stories in my past. This one will have to be heard to the end.

Whatever became of Rose-Johnny and her grandfather, I am certain that their going away had something to do with what happened on that same evening to Mary Etta. And I knew this to be my fault.

It was late when I got home. As I walked I turned Rose-Johnny’s story over and over, like Grandpa Bowles’s Indian penny with the head on both sides. You never could stop turning it over.

When I caught sight of Mama standing like somebody’s ghost in the front doorway I thought she was going to thrash me, but she didn’t. Instead she ran out into the yard and picked me up like she used to when I was a little girl, and carried me into the house.

“Where’s Daddy?” I asked. It was supper time but there was no supper.

“Daddy’s gone looking for you in the truck. He’ll be back directly, when he don’t find you.”

“Why’s he looking for me? What did I do?”

“Georgeann, some men tried to hurt Mary Etta. We don’t know why they done it, but we was afraid they might try to hurt you.”

“No ma’am, nobody hurt me,” I said quietly. “Did they kill her?” I asked.

“Oh Lordy no,” Mama said, and hugged me. “She’s all right. You can go upstairs and see her, but don’t bother her if she don’t want to be bothered.”

Our room was dark, and Mary Etta was in bed crying. “Can I turn on the little light?” I asked. I wanted to see Mary Etta. I was afraid that some part of her might be missing.

“If you want to.”

She was all there: arms, legs, hair. Her face was swollen, and there were marks on her neck.

“Don’t stare at me,” she said.

“I’m sorry.” I looked around the room. Her dress was hanging over the chair. It was her best dress, the solid green linen with covered buttons and attached petticoat that had taken her all winter to make. It was red with dirt and torn nearly in half at the bodice.

“I’ll fix your dress, Mary Etta. I can’t sew as good as you, but I can mend,” I said.

“Can’t be mended,” she said, but then tried to smile with her swollen mouth. “You can help me make another one.”

“Who was it that done it?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She rolled over and faced the wallpaper. “Some men. Three or four of them. Some of them might have been boys, I couldn’t tell for sure. They had things over their faces.”

“What kind of things?”

“I don’t know. Just bandanners and things.” She spoke quietly to the wall. “You know how the Mattoxes have those funny-colored eyes? I think some of them might of been Mattoxes. Don’t tell, Georgeann. Promise.”

I remembered the feeling of Roy Mattox’s muscle in my teeth. I did not promise.

“Did you hit them?”

“No. I screamed. Mr. Dorsey come along the road.”

“What did they say, before you screamed?”

“Nothing. They just kept saying, “Are you the Bowles girl, are you the Bowles girl.” And they said nasty things.”

“It was me they was looking for,” I said. And no matter what anyone said, I would not believe otherwise. I took to my bed and would not eat or speak to anyone. My convalescence was longer than Mary Etta’s. It was during that time that I found my sister’s sewing scissors and cut off all my hair and all of Miss Regina’s. I said that my name was George-Etta, not Georgeann, and I called my doll Rose-Johnny.

For the most part, my family tolerated my distress. My mother retrimmed my hair as neatly as she could, but there was little that could be done. Every time I looked in the mirror I was startled and secretly pleased to see that I looked exactly like a little boy. Mama said that when I went back to school I would have to do the explaining for myself. Aunt Minnie said I was going through a stage and oughtn’t to be pampered.

But there was only a month left of school, and my father let Mary Etta and me stay home to help set tobacco. By the end of the summer, my hair had grown out sufficiently so that no explanations were needed. Miss Regina’s hair, of course, never grew back.