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HEINEMANN

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*The*

WATER TANK

FROM WHERE SHE SAT IN the schoolyard, Abbie thought she could see sky and toasted fields shimmer where they touched. Too hot for townball. She groaned and stretched her legs out stiff in the yellow grass, wondering why her big toes were so big—out of proportion to the rest of her feet. She was not a child one wished to reach out and touch: the nails in her blunt fingers were ragged, several red scars on the coarse knuckle-skin matched those on her knees. The brown hair at her forehead was scraggly where bangs had grown too long, and her oversize eyes were set deeply in the skull, so heavy-lidded as to make them seem half open. They called her sluggish-looking.

A bulky clump of girls sprawled around her, barefooted and dressed in faded cotton prints. They were Group Two of the sixth grade, fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds who chopped cotton half the year and learned what they could the rest: thick-ankled girls with red faces, shiny pink hands and parched hair. This year Abbie's companions were Group Two; the crude farm speech and wisdom that alienated them from the other town children fascinated her. Unwittingly Abbie gave in return what their parents wanted for them: a

town friend who would go to the University and someday marry a dentist or a lawyer, or at least return home and be a secretary in the Maiben County Bank.

The largest girl hissed the breath out of her lungs and crawled toward Abbie. "Move over," she said. "Ground's so hot I can't sit on it."

As Maybelle pulled herself up on the grey stone bench, Abbie smelled Hoyt's Cologne-and-sweat. "Better not let Miss Nash get a whiff of you, Hawkins," she said.

Maybelle snorted. "Only reason she told us not to wear it's because she's after Raymond Walters herself." Raymond was the oldest and tallest boy in Maiben County Elementary: seventeen and six feet. Group Two came to school that year with frizzled hair and compacts, which Miss Nash thought she had put a stop to immediately. "The younger children," she had said in one of her numerous private talks. "They all look up to you older girls, and you have a great influence on them for good or evil. Let's make it good, shall we?"

"She can't do anything to me," said Maybelle belligerently. "I'd smack her in the can with a grubbin' hoe." The girls snickered.

"Well, better stay away from her today. Saw her eating that chalky stuff again, so she's got indigestion."

“Miss Nash can go feel herself. Say, Ab, hear about Louise Finley? Everybody was talkin’ about it on the bus this morning.” Maybelle’s blue eyes gleamed.

“Naw, who’s she?”

Maybelle waved a pink finger toward the high-school building. “She’s in ninth grade. Mildred’s big sister.”

Abbie nodded. Mildred Finley was a pop-eyed fourth-grader from Mexia who caused a sensation the first day of school by not knowing how to flush a toilet. “Yeah? What about her?” asked Abbie.

“Well—hey everybody, wake up! Yawl heard about Louise Finley?” The limp cotton dresses moved closer. Maybelle hunched over them and said: “Louise Finley’s gonna have a baby, and I know who the daddy is!”

The girls shrieked and Maybelle was rewarded. Her round arms squashed down all who-told-yous and where’d-you-hear-thats. “Furthermore,” she said, “Louise’s being sent to a home in Mobile for unwed mothers tomorrow. ’Course her daddy sent the sheriff after the Eddards boy—he’s the one done it. Way Mr. Finley found out was Louise told Dr. Simmons about it, and he told him and my daddy and I heard Daddy tellin’ Mamma. Mamma liked to broke a blood-vessel and said the Christian shame of it, those Finleys ought to be destroyed by the State, an’ said it was that

Mr. Finley's fault because he let that girl run wild all over the place, an' said Mr. Finley'd never be able to hold up his head again!" Maybelle licked her lips. "Tell you one thing," she said slowly, "that Mildred and Louise Finley'd better not show their faces in the Mexia community any more. It's a disgrace to this county, that's what it is!"

Abbie felt sick. "Louise's only about your age, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Few months younger, I guess."

When Abbie was puzzled her eyes opened wide and she rubbed the back of her head. "But Louise can't be having a baby. She's not even married, Maybelle."

Maybelle grinned at the girls. "Oh yes she can, stupid." Taking a deep breath, she added softly: "Listen, honey, you can have a baby any time after you're twelve. Hell, I coulda had one at eleven. . . . You have a man against you and—Abbie, ain't you started yet?"

"Yes. Last month."

"Well, then you oughta know about it."

"What do you mean, Maybelle? Know about what?" Abbie's sweaty hands twisted her dress hem into a dirty wad. Her stomach churned and a dull heaviness crept into her shoulders. Maybelle's blonde plaits seemed to stand out sharply against the sky, the high-school building behind her shifted a little.

“All right,” the plaits wagged, “get this and get it straight: If a man touches you after you’ve started you’ll have a solid baby!” Maybelle smacked her palm on the bench.

The color left Abbie’s face, and she heard her own voice come from inside the high-school building. “You mean if a boy asks you to—?”

“That’s right. And if you do it you’ll have a baby,” the plaits nodded triumphantly. “That Louise Finley—hey, what’s the matter Ab?”

She awoke, feeling a soggy cloth against her face and Miss Nash’s halitosis on her eyelids. Abbie felt herself being pulled from the ground. “I’m going to send you home for the balance of the day,” said Miss Nash. The record clicked back into place: “Can you get home all right by yourself?”

“Yessum.” Abbie lived around the corner from the school, only a short walk.

“Tell your mother you got a little too hot out here,” Miss Nash’s stiff white false teeth grinned at her.

Arms on hips, Mrs. Henderson waited until Abbie climbed the steps and entered the cool dusky hallway. “Have you been fighting again?” she asked. “Miss Nash called and said you were on the way home, and you’d tell me about it.” Mrs. Henderson pushed her down the hall.

“I fainted, Mamma.”

Her mother's frown faded. "Oh. I'd better get you something. Go lie down."

She spit most of the milky ammonia-and-water back into the glass, turned on her stomach and lay silently until Mrs. Henderson left the room.

As the door creaked shut Abbie closed her eyes. She trembled violently under the sheet; a tight mass worked its way up her windpipe, and she opened her mouth to let it out. *Oh, God, she prayed, don't let me—don't let me! I'll do anything if you won't let me—!* The heaviness in her shoulders crept slowly down her arms; her knees and thighs ached. *Please, God, I want to die. I didn't mean to. I didn't know—*. Oh God. They would send her away to Mobile and she'd never see them again. There was that Ames girl once. . . . The Ameses left Maiben County and never came back. . . . Everybody in the county knew the Hendersons; they would have to go away over to Barbour—no, Uncle Dick lived there. What would they do without her? She saw her father walking home from work, looking down the street for Abbie to run meet him and seeing nothing but Brantley's Store. He went in the house and took off his straw hat. Mother, he said. In the kitchen, Jim, she said. When Mr. Henderson touched her, she cried. They sat

alone in the livingroom night after night wondering what had happened to Abbie in Mobile. . . .

Abbie groaned and let out another lump. Every dirty word she knew sang in her brain—what did they really mean? There it was: she was going to have a baby, all right. O God, what would her mother and father say?

What of Ed Dennis? He didn't mean to, he wouldn't if he had known. Until today, she had forgotten Ed Dennis with his pants unbuttoned hugging her, so long ago. No, it was last Tuesday afternoon. They had been playing kickball in the backyard and, tired, had dropped to the ground behind the carhouse. "Abbie," he had said. "Let me see you. I just want to see what a girl looks like."

Now if they found out the sheriff would put him in the ratty town jail, because of her. Poor Ed, nothing wrong with him. They had known each other since they were born, and that time Ed sliced his leg halfway up Abbie took him a get-well present. She thought of everything about Ed Dennis: his father ran the Cas-A-Loma filling station on the edge of town and had two fingers missing; his mother was a Nazarene; he had two grown sisters. . . .

She jerked on her back and stared at the knotholes in the blue wooden ceiling. Count the cracks, she thought, like