

Adaptation

by Paul de Denus

It was a show of solidarity I suppose, back when we didn't even know what the word meant.

In the summer of '62, my sister Hanna fell and cut her knee on a metal tent peg. We'd been chasing around all morning long, my sisters and I, round and round the oversized tent our Uncle Remeé had raised behind our house, a canvas monstrosity that served as his current place of business for secretive dealings. The 'sugar shack' he liked to call it. Hanna had tripped the rope and sliced her right knee at that soft spot just below the cap. Against the backdrop of Hanna's hollering and wailing to holy hell, Becca and I, carted her up, slow as molasses to the house using a wide piece of cardboard we'd found next to the shack. I remember Becca telling her to hush down, to not make it worse by drawing unwanted attention. The only attention I was sure about was the switch whipping our mother was going to hand out for being so careless, playing where we shouldn't have around Uncle Remeé's private endeavors. But the whipping never came, not even a yelling spell. All mother gave us was a disengaged stare. It was a defeated expression, a look that settled on her face with a simple ease and even more troubling, took hold and remained there.

Sam McCall, a part-time nurse at the sawmill, came and sewed Hannah's knee up, bent and bandaged it in a thick white cotton triangle. Hanna was told to stay in bed for two weeks, her leg padded and angled in the shape of the number four. Becca and I stayed with her, fetching cold lemonade and cucumber sandwiches while Hanna cried and moaned in our oversized bed, complained over and over how much the stitching itched throughout the heat of day and night and the time in between. There was only one spindle chair in our room and we sat and took turns reading stories, at times standing, propping our backs up against a wall when our butts got sore from sitting, shifting from one bent leg to the other, strangely

mimicking Hanna's bedridden appearance. At night, we'd sleep in our usual spots on the edge of the bed - Becca on the left, me on the right with Hanna in the middle as before the accident. In low light, we'd whisper up tall tales and take turns stroking her hair until she fell off to sleep. Late one night, I awoke to see mother leaning in on the door jam, cigarette dangling lazily from her thin fingers, smoke drifting out the door and escaping down the dark hall. She stayed quiet, only stared at us as if revisiting lost time in her own dreamscape and sadness. "Take care of your sisters," was the last thing I heard her murmur before I fell back to sleep.

Our mother vanished the day Sam McCall came back to recheck Hanna's stitching. No note, no nothing except Uncle Reme's reassuring rant that she needed some time to get things together. We'd have to fend for ourselves for a while which we'd done half our lives anyway. Uncle Reme kind of disappeared too, spending most of his time in his sugar shack, making occasional short runs into town, then longer ones down to the valley.

By the fall, Hanna's knee had healed up nicely. Becca and I made sure she exercised the knee, our confederation of three squatting and preening like pretty ballerinas flexing our knees in tandem and giggling at our awkwardness until we hurt. In quieter moments, we'd wonder to what place our mother had flown off to and when if ever, we might follow.

