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THAT EVENING I put together a meatloaf the way my grandmother liked it—half onion, half tomato sauce, with a pound or two of salt and pepper. And I oiled the skins of the Russets before roasting them so they would be crisp as November Winesaps. T.J. loved crunchy potato skins. When she hobbled in from her long day of overtime, I was slicing the green beans and the oven was playing bubbling-fat music.

“Oho,” she said with a craggy smile. “Somebody’s buttering me up.”

“Just the potato skins.”

“Perhaps you ought to cook dinner more often, if you want to slip something by me. What’s up?” She took a bottle of beer from the refrigerator and slumped into the captain’s chair at the head of the table. “C’mon. What’s going on, Jeri?”

I dumped the green beans into a pot, turned up the flame, and sat down. “It’s nothing. I mean, I’m not trying to get anything by you. I just hoped we’d have a nice dinner. It’s been a long week for you.”

“Hells bells, what do I have to do on a Saturday that’s more fun than fighting a broken down printing press?” She took a slug of beer and peered at me. “And?”

I went over and covered the beans. “I volunteered today.”

“For what?”

“The Freedom Rides.”

Reaching out with knobby ink-stained fingers, she drew the newspaper across the table toward herself. “Is that so?” she said, starting to read. Her deformed hands rested on either side of the paper. She wore cheap flashy rings and I remembered her telling a friend that for many years she wouldn’t wear rings or bracelets because she didn’t want to call attention to her arthritic knuckles. “But then I realized something,” she’d said. “I figured out rings and bracelets call attention to themselves. They take attention *away* from my hands.”

“It *is* so.” I turned down the flame on the beans. “I volunteered.”

“Smells like that meatloaf’s about done,” she said without looking up.

We ate in silence, T.J. leafing through the newspaper she never had time for in the morning before she went off to her lithographer’s job at six. She was justifiably, I thought, proud of being one of the few women to crack that union. Standing less than five feet tall, she nonetheless held her own with the men, hefting massive boxes of paper and tinkering with the mechanics of a balky multi-ton offset press. Although she had no talent for engineering, fear and pride kept her at it until she completed each job, mostly on time. Having stood all day on legs roped by varicose veins, she eased the pain every evening by drinking several beers. Still, I’d never seen her drunk.

“What about the Indians?”

I was staring out the kitchen window at a street lamp that

had been flickering for at least a month. "Huh?"

"I said what about the Indians."

"What *about* the Indians?"

"Aren't you going to do something about the Indians?"

"What Indians?"

"The American Indians. Been cooped up on reservations, had their land stolen, had their kids kidnapped and put in Indian school a thousand miles away. Those kids got beat up for speaking Indian. What about them?"

"I hadn't planned on doing anything about Sacco and Vanzetti either, T.J. And there's no such language as Indian."

"Don't get smart with me, young lady."

I stood up.

"Where you going?"

"I'm going to wash the dishes. And then I'm going to bed."

"It's only seven o'clock. You sick or something?"

"No, I'm not sick or something. I'm just going to bed."

"Well." She drummed on the table with her stubby nails. After a moment, she got up and turned off the water I'd been running to fill the sink. "Listen to me, Jeri. You're still underage. I could stop you."

I turned and met her eyes. "But you won't." I turned the water back on.

She sank back down at the table and resumed drumming. I went over to wipe the oilcloth. The newspaper was neatly stacked. I noticed that because T.J. is normally the world's least tidy person.

I picked up the stack. "Through with this?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeah."

I stuffed the paper into the garbage and finished wrapping up the meatloaf.

"That was good, Jeri," she said. "A good dinner. Thank you."

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On Sunday I stayed in bed, pulling apart Oreos and drinking soda. T.J. knocked in the morning. I called out, "I'm reading," and she went away. In the evening she knocked again and I said, "I'm not hungry." She told me through the door that she was going out.

Half-empty bottles of flat root beer covered the nightstand. I'd stacked the cookies into towers, re-reading a deciduous copy of *Red Badge of Courage* and wondering which Henry Fleming I would turn into if they set fire to a bus I rode. When I'd had enough of that, I rolled onto my side, pulled my knees into my chest, and dozed.

Molly Whuppie skipped into my dreams. My hero when I was a child, Molly rescues her three sisters from an evil giant. I listened to her story on my 78-rpm record so many times, the record grew scratchy. Rita—which was what T.J. and I called my mother—smashed it during one of her spells. I'd bawled and kicked the wall until T.J. took me out for ice cream and told me Rita would be going back into the hospital.

Half-awake, in my head I replayed the breathless narrator's voice: "And he ran and she ran and he ran and she ran and they both ran . . . until at last they came to the bridge of the single hair and Molly Whuppie ran across but the giant could not. . ."

At two in the morning I heard T.J. locking the door of the flat and considerably padding barefoot past my bedroom. But she must've spotted my light because again she knocked, and this time she opened the door.

"You awake?"

I lay on my side, my teeth gritty with cookie flecks, *Red Badge of Courage* face down on the floor.

"I need to ask you something," she said. I just hoped she wouldn't bring up the Indians again. "Can I sit down?"

I nodded and she plopped onto the bed.

“Have a good night?”

“Mmm hmm. Jeri?”

“Yes?”

“Have you thought this through? I mean, have you thought about what this will mean?”

“What will it mean?”

The corners of her mouth drew down. “What about college? I thought you were going to college.”

“What made you think that?”

“Your grades were always so good—”

I pulled myself up and stuck two pillows behind my back. “There’s no money.”

“Lots of people work their way through, missy.”

“Yeah, well, I suppose they have some idea of what they want to do with their education.”

“I thought you wanted to be a doctor.”

“What’re you talking about? When I was five?” I scrambled to my feet. “T.J., I’m going to do this. I have to do this. Frankly, I hoped you’d be proud of me. I really thought you would.”

“You did not.”

“Okay. I didn’t. But why can’t you? Won’t I be fighting for things you believe in—?”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, Jeri, but we don’t have much in the way of justice and equal rights here in L.A., either. Of course, that wouldn’t be as exciting as going two thousand miles away to wave your mighty sword around.”

“Oh, brother.”

“Well, it sure seems awful spur-of-the-moment.”

“It’s not,” I lied.

“Okay. Just tell me this: How will integrating bus stations change things for colored people? Most of them don’t have

the money to take a bus across state lines anyway.”

“You have a better idea?”

“Jobs. That’s what Negroes need. Good jobs and good wages.”

“You’re kidding.”

She squinted hard at me. “You do know how important jobs are, right? This isn’t just about you wanting to get away from that basement and have a little adventure?”

I ran my fingers through my chopped hair. “You don’t get it.”

“I get it, all right. You signed up because somebody spoke some mumbo jumbo and you got swept away.”

I huffed, “You think Negroes need good jobs? Fine. But I don’t see you lifting a finger—why don’t *you* do something for a change?”

She closed her eyes. “You’ve got a smart mouth on you, Jeri Turner.”

“Yeah, and I know where I got it.”

“I’ve done things,” she muttered. “I’ve done plenty of things you know nothing about.”

I sat next to her and put my arm around her shoulders. She stiffened. T.J. never liked to be touched. “That was a bad thing to say—and it’s wrong. I’m sorry I lost my temper. I know about the stuff from the fifties, McCarthy and HUAC, and you’re the bravest woman I ever knew. It had to be awful scary when you risked losing your job, when you had me and Rita to look after. You’re a good person.” She sniffed, as if rejecting the compliment, but I felt her body soften. “But, T.J., please—give me a break. I want to be like that, to stand up for what’s right the way you have. And I want you to be on my side.”

“Damn it to hell, I should never have told you that story.”

“I hope you’re not thinking if something happens to me, it’s going to be your fault because you told me.”

“If something happens to you, it doesn’t matter whose fault it is.”

“Okay. But, just so you know, your story has nothing to do with me going.” I reached into the drawer of my nightstand and drew out a slip of paper. “Will you sign this for me?”

T.J. scanned it. “This says you’re eighteen.”

“I know what it says.”

She shook her head, but she held out her hand for the pen. After she signed it, she dropped the piece of paper in my lap as if she didn’t want any more to do with it. She stood up and looked down at me grimly. “You’re Rita’s child so I can’t tell you one damned thing.”

I got up and kissed her lined cheek. “No, T.J. I’m *your* granddaughter. And that’s the reason you can’t tell me one damned thing.”