

JUMP

I remember the day she was born, in the back bedroom with the windows closed up against the heat. Aunt Hilda, she sent me off to the kitchen table and told me to set there. Ma had been crying out, but then she stopped and it got real quiet. I was watching a fly crawl to my hand so I could smite it, just like the Hand of God they talked about at Sunday school. You had to be real still to catch a fly, and when the baby cried out and made me jump, it flew away. I was peeved for a minute, but I ran to the bedroom door, asking could I come in and see the baby. Aunt Hilda jerked up my arm and hissed, "You need to mind yourself from now on, Missy Jean."

After that Ma was puny all the time and took lots of naps. Some days she was almost her old self, but other times she stayed in bed with the shades drawn. I learned to cook by running back and forth from Ma's bedroom to the stove, doing what she said until the meal was done. As the eldest, I was in charge.

Astrid grew up stronger than I ever was, and she always brought the ribbons she won to show Mama. Such a fuss our Ma made over those ribbons! My papers never caused so much stir, no matter how good the grade. Pap seemed pleased with my schoolwork, but he didn't like to go contrary to Ma.

Astrid was invited to parties and such; I was happier to stay home and help with things. I believe Pap was grateful for my efforts. He had all he could do in the fields, what with how hard it was to keep hired men on. He'd come in through the woodshed door at the end of each day looking like Adam molded from clay, with just his eyes showing white out of the dust that coated him.

I kept to myself mostly, but one boy, Frankie Sorenson, he caught my eye. Anyone could see how clever he was. I was hoping he admired me, even though he never said so.

Astrid was crazy for horses. She got a job mucking stables at that fancy Grinwald place ever' day after school. They didn't pay her much, but they allowed that she could practice jumping with her favorite horse Cyclone when her work was done. She should have been home helping with our own chores, not leaving it all for Pap.

In the dry years, nothing would grow and the cows wouldn't give. Pap couldn't keep a man on board, so we girls had to help in the fields. Astrid would duck inside whenever she could get away with it, claiming that Ma needed her. That's how come I was the only one out there the day Pap collapsed. I can't see how Ma always blamed me. He was gone by the time I got to him.

After that Ma never left her room at all. Come the day that Astrid fell, she'd been outside showing off, just like she always did when there was a young man around. I was sponging Ma when I heard my sister say, "Watch me, Frankie, I'm gonna jump the fence." I glanced out the bedroom window and caught sight of Frankie Sorenson staring at her so admiring, it made me want to spit.

Off she took astride our mare Nella, rounding the paddock twice before coming up on the fence. The horse didn't clear it, of course, I could have told her that old nag didn't have the legs for it. But she didn't ask me, and she wouldn't have listened anyways.

The house was filled up for a while afterwards, with all the church ladies bringing ever' kind of covered dishes. When the doctor said Astrid wouldn't walk again, Ma let out a scream like a rabbit caught in a snare. I was the one had to shoot the horse.

My sister brought it on herself; I feel bad saying so, but there it is. I'd rented out the fields and sold the cows by then, which was a good thing. I had my hands full taking care of the both of them until Ma finally died. Now it's just Astrid and me.

Ever' morning I see to her washing and dressing, set her comfy in her wheelchair, give her a bowl of oatmeal. Yesterday she was wishing for an apple strudel. I didn't even answer. I got enough to do day in and day out, never mind add baking to my chores.

So this morning she asks, "Can we go into town to play bingo at the church tonight?" That sounds alright until I think on how she'd get all excited, and I'd have my hands full putting her to bed. So I tell her no. And she stares straight at me with a queer expression. I don't know what to make of that look, I'm just telling you how it was.

I've spent my whole life doing everything for her. I wheel her to the front window in the morning and the back porch when the afternoon sun is too strong. I cover her lap with a robe when the evening chill sets in. What more could she want of me?

Well, today she tells me. "Take me upstairs, Jean," she says. "I haven't been up there since I was fifteen years old."

So I do like she asks. I settle her on the sofa, and up I go with the chair first, then I come back and gather her in my arms as soft and careful as holding ripe peaches. I trudge up the stairs with her, and at the top I settle her in her wheelchair and turn to go. I

swear that's how it all happened. As God is my witness, I never thought what she would do next.