

My name is Andy. Really, my name is Andrea. It's a name my Mama read in some book, and she thought it sounded sweet and dainty. I can be sweet, but there ain't nothing delicate about me, and besides, I don't like sissy stuff. It's the fall of 1930; almost two weeks into November, the cold is beginning. My birthday was getting closer, and that was making me excited.

My Daddy is a farmer and sells hogs when it's time for new shoes or to pay off Doc Ramey for when my brother was sick. Mama raises a garden and cans all that stuff and some fruit from the little orchard behind the house. I have four brothers: James, Robert, Edward, and Henry. They drive me crazy, but they come to my rescue when needed, like the time that nasty little Billy Mitchel punched me in the face because I called him a hateful little pinhead. Granny and Pa, my Daddy's people, live up around the bend from us, up by the school house, and Mama's people, Ma'am and Pap, live across the holler from the church. That's all I can think of to tell you about me, so let me start telling you my story.

It was turning colder. You could sit on the church steps, watch the leaves falling, and feel the chill in the air. The big old oak tree that shaded the front of the church building held on to its leaves until spring, but the maple and sycamore trees were shedding leaves faster than I could count them. I made it a point to stop by the church every afternoon as I walked home from school. Sometimes, I would walk around the church, sit on the back stoop, and look at the cemetery. It was peaceful back there, but it sort of gave me the willies, so I never stayed there very long. But I could sit for hours on the front steps looking up and down the road, imagining what it would be like to take off walking to somewhere far away. That was my dream. I wanted to go far away and do something big. Maybe be a movie star, a singer, or one of those women who could plug all those wires in a board and talk to people all over the world. My options were many, and one day, I'd hitch a ride with a stranger passing through, and I'd be gone.

My birthday comes in November, and Mama always made sure I had a warm hat and gloves for winter. She knitted them for all of us, but she always wrapped mine in brown paper so I could open them first thing on my birthday. Daddy would whistle Happy Birthday to me while everyone else would sing, and the night of my birthday, Mama would fix chicken and dumplings for supper. I didn't have to help clean up because that was my special day, so I would sit by the fire while Daddy read the Courier-Journal newspaper, and my brothers would scuffle and sometimes fight over something stupid like boys do. This birthday night, Daddy told me he had a little something else for me, and he handed me something wrapped in brown paper, just like my hat and gloves. I opened it as quickly as I could, and my breath caught in my throat when I saw what it was. I was holding a Photoplay magazine with Miss Jean Harlow's picture on the cover. No one I knew was ever that pretty. Even my Mama couldn't hold a candle to Miss Jean Harlow, and Mama won a beauty contest when she was fifteen. I hugged my Daddy, then practically threw myself on the floor by the fire and started reading.

My birthday was on Saturday, and Saturday night was bath night. I was not too fond of that in the winter. The routine never changed in all the time I lived there. Daddy brought a wooden tub into the kitchen, and Mama heated water on the wood cook stove. I got to go

first because I was the only girl and the youngest. I thought I would freeze and die when I got out of that hot water, but I never did. I would sit by the hearth in the parlor, combing my hair so it would dry before going back to my bedroom. In really cold weather, Daddy would heat a brick on the fire, wrap it in a cloth, and put it under the cover at the foot of the bed. That, I am sure, was the only reason I didn't freeze on those cold winter nights. My brothers slept two to a bed, and they were in one big room. My room was next to theirs. Mine was a small room with a single bed, a table with an oil lamp, a small chest of drawers, and a clothesline draped across the back of the room where I could hang both of my Sunday dresses.

The only day we all ate breakfast together was Sunday morning. On other days, Daddy and the boys were up tending to the animals and had eaten their meal. I would eat what Mama had kept in the warming bin. But, on Sunday, the chores got done early, the boys and Daddy washed up, and we sat down as a family to eat. We would have homemade biscuits, sausage, and sausage gravy, scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, fried apples, sorghum and fresh churned butter. Mama usually asked the blessing, and sometimes I would open my eyes and look at my Daddy. He would look at me and wink. I knew not to tell Mama that Daddy and I were not listening to her pray. It was our secret. I suspect she knew because almost before she said, 'amen,' Daddy was slopping gravy on his biscuits.

This particular Sunday morning, we were all dressed in our finest. I had a pretty pink dress Mama made from some material Miss Molly Brady gave her. My black coat was made of wool and came from the Montgomery Ward catalog, along with the school shoes for my brothers and me. I wore my new hat and gloves, and Henry had cleaned and polished my shoes last night. Daddy put chairs in the back of the wagon for my brothers and me so we wouldn't get dirty sitting on the floorboards, and he helped Mama to her seat next to him. Then he grabbed the reins, made a clicking noise with his tongue and teeth, and our mule, Old Jenny, started trotting up the road to church.

We go to a Methodist Church, where the Reverend Mr. Martin Simpson is our preacher. This Sunday morning, Reverend Simpson had positioned himself on the church steps, so you had to speak or knock him off the steps to get by. I liked Reverend Simpson, okay. Sometimes, he talked too long, and sometimes, he scared me when he spoke about my soul being thrown into a hot, fiery furnace. My brother Henry said he did that to scare the hell right out of me and make me a better person. If Henry was right, I should be a much better person, but maybe Henry just said that to make me stop asking questions. For the last few months, I have tried to stay clear of Reverend Simpson because back in the summer, he talked to me about changing my life. I like my life just fine and don't want to be changed.

Reverend Simpson shook my Daddy's hand and said something about our hogs and how it would be a good day for a hog killing if it wasn't the Lord's Day. He made small talk with everyone, and then he came to me.

"Have you thought about what I mentioned a several weeks ago?" He leaned over and put his face close to mine. I could smell his aftershave and the peppermint chewing gum he used to hide his cigarette breath.

I was stuck and had to talk to him. "A little." I lied.

"Would you like me to speak to your parents?"

"No!" I said that quicker and louder than I intended. "I will." Before he could say anything, I said, "I will today."