

I got so sick... maybe I was being punished for deciding I wouldn't go to church. I was so sick. Daddy called for Doc Ramey to come. We don't have a phone, but there was one at the general store up the road, and they let everyone use it for important business. Doc Ramey came later that day and said I have bronchitis; he told Mama to give me aspirin, keep me covered and warm, make a poultice for my chest, and try to get me to drink a hot toddy at bedtime. He left some medicine that I swear was made from coal oil but did stop my coughing. Thankfully, in a few days, I was back to normal.

On my first day back at school, a new girl sat across from me. Miss Atwood said her name was Lacy Cleaves, and she moved here from Chicago. I said hi to her, and she gave me a slight smile. I thought she was scared because she wasn't from these parts. Our first lesson was reading, then arithmetic, we started geography, and then it was time to eat. I watched Lacy, and she didn't reach for a box or a sack. Instead, she opened a book and started reading. Everyone goes to the back of the long hall between the buildings, where there are benches and a pot-bellied stove. It's where we eat on cold days. I didn't want to leave Lacy, so I told her to come eat her dinner with me.

"Oh, I don't eat lunch." She lowered her head so I couldn't see her face.

"You don't eat lunch?" I'd never heard of lunch. "Do you eat dinner?"

"At night, I do." Lacy kept her head down, still looking at her book.

"You sort of talk funny, do you know that?" I thought she did.

"No funnier than you." She still didn't look at me.

"We eat supper at night, and this here is dinner time." I sat back down. "And I don't talk funny."

"Why are you sitting here?" Lacy raised her head and finally looked at me. "Go eat your lunch."

"I ain't never heard of lunch, and I ain't eating it." I stood. "You sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Lacy started reading again.

I tried to make friends with the new girl, but she didn't like me. I guess she didn't like any of us since she stood to the side of the playground when we went outside at recess.

That night at supper, when I finally got to talk, I told everyone about this new girl from Chicago. Mama asked her name, and I told her Lacy something.

"Where do they live?" That was my brother Robert.

"I don't know. All I know is she does something called lunch, and you don't eat. I think you read."

My brothers laughed. "Lunch is what we call dinner. Some folks have breakfast, lunch, and dinner." Robert spoke again.

"That's stupid," I said matter-of-factly.

"It's not stupid, Andrea. It's just different." Mama was giving me a half-stink-eye. Her voice was calm, but I knew she meant business. "Many folks do things differently than we do, and they are just as smart or maybe even smarter."

"I bet they are smarter than you, Andy." That was Edward trying to be funny, but he wasn't.

"Let's try to get through supper quietly, shall we, children." That was Daddy, who pretended he didn't like to hear us fuss around the table, but I think he really did. "I heard at the mill that Arlo Higgins had folks from Illinois move in with him." Daddy put his fork down and finished chewing. "Seems like it was said that his daughter came home."

"Arlo Higgins has a daughter?" Robert seemed shocked at that news.

I knew Mr. Arlo. He was an old guy who grunted when you spoke to him and seldom had anything to say. I thought he was probably old and crabby, so I usually didn't have much to say to him. I only saw him if I went to the store with Mama or maybe the sawmill or grist mill with Daddy.

"I remember Della Higgins," Mama said. "She was a pretty girl. Don't you remember her, Jimmy?" It seemed funny when Mama called Daddy Jimmy because, for the longest time, I didn't know they had real names. I always heard them called Mama and Daddy. Then, one day, I figured it out. Daddy was Jimmy, and I thought Mama was Sweetheart until she told me her real name was Sarah. She said Daddy called her sweetheart unless he was angry with her, then he called her Sarah.

Daddy nodded. "She left here when she got to tenth grade, if I recall. Went to live with some family somewhere."

"Why?" was what I wanted to know. "Why'd she leave?"

"Same reason a lot of folks leave, dummy." Edward chimed in.

"I'm not stupid or a dummy, you big ugly crybaby."

"I wasn't crying." Edward practically screamed at me.

"Were too," I said before Daddy dropped his napkin on the table and very sternly said he wanted to eat and enjoy himself, and the very next person who said a word was going to be sent to their room without finishing their supper.

Then Mama said she might try to visit Della, and I started laughing because Daddy would send Mama to bed without her supper. At first, no one laughed, and I thought I would go without supper, but then everyone laughed, even Daddy, and we finished our supper without more trouble.

I tried to be nice to Lacy Cleaves for the next few days, but she didn't want anything to do with me or anyone else. Then, one day, at recess, I stood by her. I really wanted to play tag, but she was standing alone by the side of the schoolhouse.

I leaned against the building and asked. "Is Arlo Higgins your granddaddy?"

"What if he is?" She was close to being hateful.

"Just asking. My Daddy heard Mr. Arlo had folks move in with him. Thought it might be you."

"His name is Mr. Higgins, not Mr. Arlo."

"You go to church?" I asked. I don't know why, but I suddenly wanted to know.

"What difference is that to you?" Lacy kept looking straight ahead.

"I's thinking you might want to go with me on Sunday so is you'd learn who we are around here. We ain't bad people."

"I never said you were bad people."

"That's cause you ain't said nothing." I moved so I was standing in front of her. "I go to the Methodist Church and might be committed soon. You might want to see that." I stepped back.

"And it's the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and I bet we have a pie and coffee after the service."

"I'm Methodist," Lacy said. "Or I was when we went to church."

"I think you can still be Methodist if you want to be, but I ain't sure of all the rules." I went back to leaning against the building. "You can bring your Mama and Daddy too."

"Well, maybe."

"Good. I can have my Daddy come around to get you." I leaned over and smiled. "I have four stupid brothers, but don't let them scare you." The bell rang, and I started walking toward the door.

"I said maybe."

"I heard ya, and I said my Daddy will come round to get ya." I smiled as big as I could. "It could be a great day with preaching and pie, and don't forget I might be committed."

I ran on ahead and got seated. Something told me I had just done a good thing. I knew that was right because when Lacy came to her seat and sat down, she was smiling.

That night after supper, I heard Daddy tell Mama that Miss Della's husband had lost his job, and they had no place to live or money for food. Mr. Arlo said that Della could come back home with her family, but he didn't have money to send them. They walked and did something called hitchhiking to get here. Della's husband was looking for work but wasn't having any luck. Mama said maybe we could help them with some canning, and maybe, in a few weeks, when it was hog-killing time, we could ask Della's husband to help and then share some of the meat with them. Daddy said that was a good idea and he would mention it when he picked them up for church on Sunday.

"I never dreamed we had a little disciple in Andrea, did you?"

Mama said, "He works in mysterious ways, you know."

I sat by the fire, wondering who "he" was because I didn't know. I thought all I did was ask my new friend to come to church, and somehow caused a mystery.

I sat there for a minute, still listening to Mama and Daddy talk. It suddenly came to me that Lacy hadn't eaten dinner because she had nothing to eat. Tomorrow, I will have Mama fix a big lunch for me so I can share it with my new friend. I won't tell her I know. Sometimes you have to have secrets even from your new best friend.