

## Sunbeam

Matilda told me once - on one of those rare nights when her hair looked windswept and she let the lateness of the hour rumple her composure - that her father had “the gift of prophecy”.

“You can’t actually believe that,” I said, pulling at a loose thread on her bedsheets.

“Well, of course I don’t. My mother does.”

The story went like this: Joey Maple, 17 years old, long-limbed and optimistic, goes out one morning to milk the family cow. He’s whistling, and he’s wearing a pair of overalls, and he wastes no time getting to the barn, knowing that if he was out under the sun for too long, he’d turn a girlish shade of pink. He pulls up a stool, places a pail under the cow, and just as he goes to sit down, the stupid thing punts him right in the head. Joey lays in bed for weeks after that, moaning and seeing stars, but all he can ask is “How’s Gertie?” and “Is Gertie alright?”.

“Gertie was the name of the cow,” Matilda informed me.

“I got that. But why wouldn’t Gertie be okay?”

“Because. Gertie was pregnant,” she said, swatting at my hand.

So there Joey was, holding a damp cloth to his forehead and jabbering on about a pregnant cow. On one of those mornings, Joey’s brother Clem went in to check on him, starting at the state of his brother. *He sounded like a Baptist*, he would tell Matilda later. *Like he was speakin’ in tongues*. Amidst a fevered haze of images and thoughts, Joey comes up with a premonition. He tells Clem that he knows for sure Gertie’s baby will have nine spots. “Y’sure, Joey? Them’s a lot of spots.” But Joey was sure.

And when Gertie finally had her baby, it was slick with new life and wide-eyed as it hoofed around under the barn roof on shaky legs. And it had nine spots.

“So? That doesn’t mean anything,” I said.

“Well, *I* know that. But try explaining that to him.”

It was hard to imagine Matilda’s father ever having been like that. Jubilant and prophetic. The kind of kid who chewed bubblegum, and wore out the soles of his shoes climbing trees. Who kept his allowance in a glass jar, saving up for something quaint. A baseball glove, maybe.

When Matilda and I would walk home from school together, he was always there in the front yard, staring at the horizon from his lawn chair. For a while, I never really questioned his presence. I just tried to keep my eyes off him, staring instead at the freckles on Matilda’s chin, or the beads of sweat above her lip. Her collarbones, my shoes - whatever.

Everyone at school called Matilda “Mitzy”. She smelled like cinnamon candy, and she could get test answers from a boy just by biting her lip a certain way. She tied her hair back with red ribbons, the shade of which reminded me of ritzy sports cars - the kind I imagined people in Hollywood were driving around recklessly. Being friends with Matilda made me feel a bit like whenever I saw a perfume ad in a magazine, or when I read *Marlon Brando* or *Natalie Wood* on the marquee of the only movie theater in town. It felt vaguely glamorous. Like maybe all the beautiful and bright people weren’t too far away, because there was one standing right before me.

We were an odd pair, Matilda and I. People would squint when they saw us together, turn their heads sideways like they were appraising a pair of dining room chairs, trying to see if the two of them matched. I could’ve saved them the trouble. Could’ve thrown up my hands, said “No, we don’t make any sense together. I don't know why she chose me, either.” But she did. And for my part, I did my best to prove I was a worthy friend, carrying her books on our walks home from school, somehow never registering that this act was reserved for the more strong-jawed, chivalrous type.

Those long treks home always felt like sleepwalking. The sun hanging high above the desolate Nevada desert, the only sound for miles being the scrape of the laces of our saddle shoes dragging through the dirt. We would hold on to each other for stability, her arm thrown thoughtlessly over my shoulder, and my hand at her waist. We would laugh into each other's necks, sedate and done-in under the sun. Once we were a couple hundred yards from her house, where her father could see us, we would wedge apart, newly sober with our hands to ourselves.

On one of those afternoons, we passed the mailbox we typically used as a mile marker, and the fact didn't register. There, on the side of the road, among tumbleweeds and tufts of dust, I know if someone were to see us, they would have gotten the wrong idea. Her chapped lips brushing my shoulder, mouthing something about a boy in our grade who had the hots for her. We were only a couple feet past the mailbox, meaning Matilda's father couldn't have seen more than the amorphous silhouettes of two school girls trading secrets. But when we finally realized our slight indiscretion, we sprung apart all the same.

When we reached the Maple residence, in all its broken baseboard and chipping paint glory, Matilda's dad cleared his throat. The sound of our shoes scuffing across the desert dirt stopped almost immediately. The noise was so loud and jarring, it sounded like a car engine stuttering to life. He beckoned his daughter towards him with two fingers, spitting the shell of a sunflower seed over his shoulder. She huffed, trotted to his side, careful to avoid the spit-slick pile of seed shells on the ground, then stopped behind his lawn chair. He pointed at the horizon, and she looked over his shoulder.

"Somethin' is going to happen over there," he said, speaking with the saged wisdom of a carnival psychic. "Something is always going to happen, Matilda. Now you better be ready for it, or stay out of its way."

I stood at the cusp of their lawn, where soft desert sand met parched crabgrass, fingers folded into fists. It felt like I was intruding.

“I know it, Dad.” Matilda nodded like she understood. Then she met me back at the roadside. “Y’hear that, Dez? We need to be ready.” Her grin was forced. Apologetic, almost.

“Ready for what?” I asked. She winked at me, then took her textbooks from my hands.

“See you later, Desdamaona,” she said as she went.

“Ready for what?” I asked, louder this time. She was halfway through the front door.

And with the same cryptic lilt as her father’s premonition, she said: “Something is always going to happen.”

Her rattling laugh, accompanied by the hollow sound of my feet shuffling home. I looked at her, wide-eyed and confused. Now, I know what she meant. She was always testing me, acting like she knew something I didn’t. Like she and her father were on the same psychic wavelength. And always, I would scamper away. Fretful and flighty, like the cottontails we glimpsed picking through the desert flora on our walks home, startling at the sound of our shoes.