

The Good Bits

Sophia Tang

Back home after the funeral, Momma couldn't let Little Lucy's skin go pink again under the scorching sun, so she drew the blinds and set a wet cloth on the back of Lucy's neck. I'd go to Poppy's Market in her stead. Momma threw me the old red beret and slipped the folded list, a few bills, and a couple coins into my shirt pocket. One hand pressed hard over my pocket; I waved bye to Lucy with the other.

The heat was a slap the second I stepped off the porch. It was the humming kind, the air shimmering above the blacktop like a pan left too long on the stove, making the shadows twitch. It settled on my skin like a stubborn itch. Air, too hot to breathe.

The town stretched out before me, lazy and yawning under the heat. Slagton always smelled a little sour in the summer, like hot pennies, or water left too long in a hose. But there were good bits, too. Like Miss Bette's honeysuckle tangled through her yard's wire fence. And the arches near the courthouse to escape the heat's grip for a while. Or the non-stop cicadas up in the branches, louder than they had any right to be. I had climbed up the trees a few times to snatch them by their wings, and they would wrangle themselves out with a crinkle in their metallic films.

Poppy's Market sat squat on the corner, the faded green paint on its wooden siding peeling away like old skin. A hand-painted sign swung

gently from a rusty chain above the door. The concrete step up to the entrance was worn smooth in spots where feet shuffled in and out through the creaking screen door. Underneath the pale red awning, a couple of faded plastic chairs sat pushed against the wall, empty and waiting for someone to rest a minute in the afternoon's long, slow heat.

Inside, it was cooler but stale. The overhead fans spun in droning circles. The produce sat near the front in old crates lined with wax paper, and the fruits and vegetables were either too ripe or not ripe enough. I saw the peaches shriveling and the watermelon glazed by a toughened, bitter rind. A chalkboard sign read "Eggs - 2.25" and "Tomatoes from Bette's yard." I wandered through the dusty aisles with Momma's list. Bread, milk, eggs. I scratched out her penciled words. I passed the pickle jars and let my finger skim the chilled glass, pausing at the mustard shelf, its squeeze bottles lined up like yellow soldiers.

Miss Teresa was behind the counter in her usual cardigan, even in this heat. She kept a cup of melting ice near the register, water trickling down the side. She gave me a look over her glasses. "Your momma still sewing up that hem?" she asked, picking up the loaf of bread and giving it a squeeze.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

The HOWL

<https://thehowlmag.org>
thehowlzine@gmail.com
[@thehowlmagazine](#)

“Mm.” She punched the register’s keys like she was mad at them. “You got change or am I breakin’ a five?”

I handed her the crumpled bills, soft from being folded in my pocket too long. As she bagged the food, I eyed the candy rack near the counter. The lemon drops were cloudy in their twisty wrappers, and next to them sat those licorice ropes I hated because they tasted like medicine, but I checked on them every time anyways. Maybe I could sneak one quickly, though I never dared. Miss Teresa seemed to notice everything.

On the slip Momma gave me, she had scrawled a question mark next to *batteries or glue maybe*, telling me to figure it out myself. So, I crossed the square to Winslow’s, the corner store with the blue awning and windows so clean you could catch your face in them.

Winslow’s wasn’t as fancy a shop as in the movies, but it was fancy for here. The floor didn’t creak, and the whole place smelled like cinnamon and plastic wrap. They had those vintage carpets on some parts, which made Momma scoff and tell me they looked like a tomato soup spill. I thought the reddish orange was nice along with the dark blue, but Momma didn’t like it when I said those things. I put my face into the standing fan near the door until the sweat in my hair turned cold, the bag of groceries sagging on my forearms.

The store had everything in neat little rows. Sewing kits in tins, hairbrushes wrapped in plastic, pens in boxes that cost too much, and those greeting cards with glitter that came off on your fingers. Along the back wall, a glass

case displayed watches, combs, and a snow globe. It contained a small Christmas tree rising from the silver base, and snow sprinkled down gently whenever you turned it over.

Behind the counter, Mara Winslow perched on the stool, her chin in one hand, a red lollipop twirling in the other. Her legs swung beneath her, not quite touching the floor. She had a dress with tiny white daisies and new yellow ribbons in her stiff-looking braids. The fan above her spun with a loose rattle, stirring her hair every few seconds as she read her magazine that had shiny pages and perfume strips.

I smoothed the bottom of my shirt and straightened my back.

“Oh,” I said, trying not to look surprised.

She pointed at the list in my hand. “Is that for your mom?”

“Yeah. I’m getting batteries. Or glue.”

“You look hot.”

“I am,” I said. “Momma made me wear this beret.”

She grinned. “That’s rough.”

I nodded, looking at the rhinestones on her collar so I didn’t stare at her face. Those little things caught the light like water.

“My daddy’s coming back from Chicago,” she announced after a moment. “He said he’s bringing me something for my birthday. Maybe a necklace.” She pulled her braid forward and pretended to show me where it would go. “He always brings good stuff.”

“Like from a department store?” I asked.

“Yeah. The big one. The one with the glass stairs. He says they got ice cream machines in the toy department.”

I tried to picture that. “Wow.”

The HOWL

<https://thehowlmag.org>
thehowlzine@gmail.com
[@thehowlmagazine](#)

"You can come to my birthday, by the way," she said suddenly. "It's next Saturday. We're doing it at the town hall. Not in the backyard like last year. We're getting a cake from that bakery in Weston and everything."

"Yeah?" I did my best not to smile too hard.

"Yeah. There's gonna be ice cream. And soda. My uncle's bringing fireworks if it doesn't rain." She kicked her heels a little harder and stuck the lollipop in her mouth. "Here," she pointed at the batteries, "you can just take them."

"Are you sure?" I fidgeted with the bills in my pocket, feeling the guilt pinch my throat.

She rolled her eyes. "It's fine. My mom says your mom is good for it. Don't bring it up to her, though."

Then, behind her, Mara's mom poked her head out from the back room. Her hair was pinned back too tight, and she pressed her pink-lipstick lips into a thin line. She stared at me, then the counter, then Mara. She narrowed her eyes a little and disappeared again.

Mara didn't even look back. "She's mad at everyone lately."

The little bell above the door bid me goodbye as I stepped out. The dirt road looked yellow under the light, almost golden, and for a second, it made me think of fall. Not this heat-thick, bug-buzzing summer, but real fall, when the leaves turned bright, and the wind made you zip your jacket halfway. But this yellow was the sickly kind. Dusty, hot, too thick, it only made me sweat and squint.

I remembered last year's Harvest Fair, when the yellow had been real, and everything smelled like hay and popcorn and caramel apples. Mara had worn a pink dress with a big

satin bow at the back, and shiny shoes that clicked, even on dirt. I gave her the corn cob I'd won in a ring toss. Later, sitting on the edge of a hay bale, she tore little pieces off her funnel cake and handed them to me, and I told her I'd build her a house one day with a porch swing and a fence that didn't squeak. She said she liked purple curtains, and I said okay, we'd have those too. We could have two kids, maybe three, and I'd name one after my favorite baseball card. She laughed and got powdered sugar on her nose.

Her mom showed up just before the raffle drawing, and her face looked tight, like she'd bitten down on a sour apple. She didn't say anything to me, just eyed my mud-splattered shoes, and clacked away with her heels and Mara.

Then I remembered what Mara said today, and maybe that's why her mom was mad now, about the batteries, the glue. Or maybe just at me.

By the time I got home, my neck was slick with sweat and my shoes had gravel stuck in the soles. Momma glanced up from shelling beans as I set down the grocery bag, telling me to wash my hands before I touched anything. Little Lucy was napping on the couch, her thumb still pressed to her cheek like she'd fallen asleep mid-thought.

I crept past, up to my room. It was hotter up there, and the curtains stirred a little from the open window. I opened the drawer under my bed where I kept things nobody else really cared about. Inside were crumpled papers, bottle caps from glass sodas, a rock that looked like a

The HOWL

<https://thehowlmag.org>
thehowlzine@gmail.com
[@thehowlmagazine](#)

bird, and the little glossy magazines that came in the mail sometimes. The ones with kitchen gadgets and bracelets and “As Seen on TV” in giant letters. You just called a number, and it arrived at your house in a box with bubble wrap. Momma always threw hers out, but I kept this one, and sometimes I called in an order of all the toys I’d circled, only to hang up. I flipped through the catalog, past appliances and clothes and gadgets for “elegant living,” until I found the page. It was a little square in the corner, easy to miss –

hair barrettes, lined up like candy. Momma kept her fancy ones in a glass dish on her dresser. I liked to slide them into her hair, even when they snagged. They held Momma’s flyaways when she bent over the sink or scolded Lucy. They held Mara’s bangs to the side, the little green one she wore on Wednesdays shaped like a leaf.

The magazines were seven in a set. One for each day of the week, I thought. I pictured giving them to Mara on her birthday in a little box, maybe wrapped in tissue paper. Mara would open it real careful, and I’d tell her which one was for Sunday, which was for Monday.

That thought made something sweet and ticklish sit under my ribs.

I turned the page, careful not to wrinkle the corner, and underneath was the postcard. A skyline on the front, tall and silver-gray, all corners and windows. *Chicago*. The letters were big and bold and blue. The sky behind was pale orange, like it was pretending to be a sunset. I didn’t remember when the postcard came exactly. Long ago enough for the corners to soften and curl. On the back, the writing was short, slanted, not quite messy but rushed. My

father’s name, signed at the bottom. Above that, he’d said he was doing great, that the city was big, and that he hoped we were doing fine, too. I flipped it back to stare at the buildings again. It looked impossible, the kind of place you couldn’t walk to, even if you tried for years.

But people from this town went there.

And they didn’t always come back.

I flopped on my bed. I tried to smooth down the corner, but it kept curling back up. Maybe a year after the card came, I heard Momma crying in the kitchen. She hardly cried and would tell me not to either, because it made the whole place depressing. Lucy and I had been on the hallway floor with the empty cans I’d taped numbers to so we could pretend it was bowling, but she kept knocking them over too early. But Momma’s crying made Lucy stop, like something had tilted in the house.

Then another woman spoke. Some church lady, by her voice. The hall was shadowed, the kitchen bright from the afternoon sun, leaking through the windows. They were talking fast, their words sliding under the clink of dishes.

Something about people saying things. About how she should be ashamed. About “that man,” and how when he left, he didn’t even—

I stepped into the room. “Is it Daddy?”

Momma turned like she’d been caught doing something awful. Her eyes were red and too bright, and her face looked thinner, like all the air had pressed out of her. Her mouth opened, then closed. I said something else—I don’t remember what exactly. Why he didn’t come back, or if he missed us. Or maybe just if she missed him. I didn’t think it was a bad question.

She slapped me.

The HOWL

<https://thehowlmag.org>
thehowlzine@gmail.com
[@thehowlmagazine](#)

The church lady gathered her cardigan like she couldn't wait to leave the air behind.

Momma tucked Lucy in early that day. Later, she came into my room and set a warm cup of milk on the nightstand. She sat on my bed and smoothed my hair with a trembling hand. Her touch was soft, and her thumb brushed once along my brow like she was wiping something away, though my face was dry. I told her it didn't hurt, though later in the evening, my ears did ring a little.

Dinner was baked chicken. Clearing the dinner dishes, I poked wing bones with my fork, watching the grease pull on the plate. Then Momma brought out a plate of canned peaches for dessert, sliding around in syrupy circles. She made biscuits too, though they came out flat and too brown on the bottom, so she didn't eat hers. Little Lucy's peachy face was sticky with peach juice and crumbs. The fan on the counter wheezed in slow circles, too weak to cool, but loud enough to keep conversation away.

As we dug in, Momma sat down with her stack of bills and reading glasses, flipping through them half-heartedly as she chewed. Lucy was singing to her biscuit, something soft and garbled. It reminded me of Daddy's voice when he used to hum through his teeth, bent over the sink with the door open.

"I wanna move to Chicago," I said. I kept my eyes on my fork and tried to look serious.

Lucy smacked a peach onto her biscuit and giggled at the splash.

Momma blinked once, then gave a little noise in the back of her throat. "Mhmm. Don't we all."

"I mean it," I said. "I wanna live up high in one of those buildings with windows everywhere. Like the kind in the snow globe."

"You seen the price of snow globes lately?" She didn't even glance up, just reached for the salt and tapped it into her gone-cold chicken like she was seasoning the conversation.

"I'd wear one of those city coats," I went on, warming her up to it. "The ones with buttons all the way down. And I'd have a job where you get to hold a clipboard. And take elevators. And drink coffee."

"You already act like you drink coffee, with all that talkin'."

I grinned, just a little, and stabbed a peach half. "Daddy lived in Chicago," I said, as if I'd just remembered.

Her chewing slowed, then stopped. She didn't look at me, but she set her fork down gently. "Yup," she said after a beat. "He sure did."

"I bet he wore a coat too," I said. "And maybe—maybe he even had one of those apartments where he could see the whole city if he opened the window."

Lucy leaned over to show me her empty peach bowl, her nose shiny. "More," she chirped.

Up on her feet now, Momma poured out of the second half of the can with a sigh. "Eat your food, Cal," she said.

I didn't say anything else about it. I dipped a biscuit corner into the peach syrup and watched it swell up. The dimming sunlight cut the table in half, and it reminded me of Mara's blonde hair. Above us, the lights flickered once before settling. Outside, the cicadas were screaming.

The HOWL

<https://thehowlmag.org>
thehowlzine@gmail.com
[@thehowlmagazine](#)