

One day Mabel abruptly hung up the phone after talking to her father. She grabbed Cassie and braided her hair tight before bundling her into her pickup and taking her with her out to the country. Mr. Farrow was complaining again that neighbors had stolen water from his trough, and since her cousin, Duke Farrow, wouldn't get involved, she'd promised she would go out and have a talk with Verley Hoffman. Mabel talked to herself on the way. "How come Duke cain't take no responsibility fer his uncle! He's a whole sight meaner than I am! He could put a scare into Verley, that's fer sure."

They traveled over some good bumps on the way, Cassie's stomach doing pleasurable flip-flops over the hills of the dirt road.

"That was a good one!" Cassie squealed, after they had flown over one exquisitely stomach-floating rise. "Let's go back an' do it again!"

Mabel ignored her and drove without talking. Finally they turned into an opening in the barbed-wire fence. They had to drive a long way into the property, then Mabel turned off the engine. They sat for a minute as their dust settled slowly into the dust of the farmyard.

They were at the Hoffman farm. A few scrawny chickens eyed them warily, but no humans were in sight. Tumbleweeds, looking as if they had taken root, crowded just outside the fence enclosing the yard, and tall piles of sandy dirt were banked against every outbuilding. Mabel got out of the pickup and waded through the dust to the front door, her cotton dress sticking to her broad backside. Cassie saw a skinny woman come to the screen door with a baby in her arms; soon a man in dirty overalls joined them. The wind was kicking up again, and Cassie could hear their voices but not their words.

A little girl slipped out of the cabin, and Cassie climbed down from the pickup cab. She had seen Lally Hoffman before, in town. Lally was about her age, maybe a year older, and she had straight brown flyaway hair. She was real skinny and dressed in a faded calico print dress that reached almost to her ankles.

"What you wanna do?" asked

Lally. "I don' know."

“We got baby pigs.” This was offered tentatively, as if it might not be up to Cassie’s standards of entertainment.

But Cassie had never seen baby pigs. “Where are they?”

“Come on.” Lally was barefoot, but for once Cassie wasn’t, and her shoes scuffed up the dirt as they walked around to the back of the cabin and down a gentle slope to the pigpen. This stood—or leaned—next to a tall windmill and water trough. They stood silently contemplating the sow and a dozen baby pigs nuzzling her in the dried mud.

“We keep it wet from our own trough.”

It sounded like Lally was making this statement to the world. Cassie hadn’t thought about where the water came from; she only knew she had never seen anything cuter than the way the baby pigs pushed and squealed next to their mother. The little girls stood close together, leaning on the railing and gazing at the squirming little black-and-white-spotted porkers. They were grunting as they suckled, emitting high-pitched squeals unlike anything Cassie had ever heard. Especially the ones that had lost their place.

“They’re nice,” was all Cassie could think to say. “Where’s the daddy?” she asked finally, thinking of Jim, her current favorite of Daddy’s bird dogs and sire of the puppies at home.

“We et ’im.... Your daddy’s got the drugstore, han’t he?”

“Uh-huh. I get ice cream all the time. When you come to town I’ll give you some.”

“We only come Sattidays. Whenever I go to school I come right home on the bus. I don’t git to town much.”

“Do you like livin’ in the country?”

“I never knowed nothin’ else. I reckon I do. Pa says we may not be able to stay.”

“How’s come?”

“The land ain’t payin’. There han’t been no rain, and the wheat didn’t come up last year, an’ my pa couldn’t buy no seed. My cousin an’ aunt an’ uncle in Cimarron County done left for Californ-y.”

“Where’s that?” asked Cassie.

“You know, where they make the movies. There’s lot o’ crops there to pick. My cousin and her folks and little sister done left last month. Lots o’ people’re goin’.”

Cassie thought Lally was pretty. She had big shy blue eyes and wispy hair that blew all around and in her face. Her gesture of reaching up to brush it back was graceful and slow, and her face and arms wore a light covering of dirt.

“I got puppies at my house,” Cassie said. “You wanna come see ’em?”

“I don’ know. Pa don’t have gas to come in, ’cept Sattidays, like I said. But I’ll ask. Pa ain’t in much of a good temper lately, though—he’ll prob’ly say no.”

Just then a black dog with a stick in his mouth ran up to the girls, dropped the stick, barked, picked up the stick again, and ran away, looking back, daring them to chase him. They ran after him down to the sandy pasture, then chased him back together, running arm in arm.

On the way home Cassie sat up close to Mabel, confiding, “Lally’s nice—nicer’n Fiona is sometimes. She might come see my puppies, ‘cause I saw her pigs.”

“Don’t think they’ll be havin’ those pigs much longer. Don’t think they’ll e’en be thar much longer.”

“How’s come?”

“Those folks is pore—they’re tenant farmers, y’know. The land don’t pay no more, an’ the bank’s takin’ it over. That’s just ’tween you and me.”

“Lally says they might go to Californ-y—California.”

“Might’s well. Seem like lots o’ folks goin’. Buck’s e’en talked ’bout it.” Mabel’s neck got red; then the bright scarlet traveled up into her face. She swung the pickup violently around a curve.

“If he went, would you go, too?”

“Heck, no, chile! Don’t you know I hafta stay here an’ take care o’ all you Fields? Not to mention my pa, who allus seems ta have somethin’ fer me to fret over. Like the poor ol’ Hoffmans usin’ his water. I don’t see how he’s goin’ ta prove they’s usin’ it. He’d hafta git th’ sher’ff out there night and day to watch ’em! And it ain’t like they don’t have more’n one mouth to feed.”

They arrived back home, and Cassie jumped out of the truck to go visit Sadie’s and Jim’s puppies. They were getting big now, jumping on the fence and trying to get out to play with her. Their legs were getting longer, and so were their ears and tails.

She hated to admit it, but Lally’s pigs were cuter.