

Between the Rows

| Margaret Osburn

The head is a very dark place. This according to Uncle Jess. From that, and a little more of his talk, I pictured a shadowy world: a thicket with trails snaking off to places folks shouldn't go, but can't help when they do. Then Grandma butted in, saying, "Don't pay him mind. Jess's head is total dark. Nothing celestial to light the way."

I'd never heard her sound so disgusted, as if there might be something wrong about him, which was hard to believe, as he was the one who'd brought me here, to a place I never could have imagined in my wildest mind. Now all three of us stood at the top of a wooded ravine, the night sky nearly squeezed shut by tree branches roped with fireflies. It was better than any Fourth of July show, but then Grandma said, "I don't want the two of you together out here alone. Time we got back to the house."

That was the start of all of it—darkness having its hold on me.

First time I snuck out, I lay in the grass outside the big window. That's where I heard the relations say, "What a shame, a girl without a daddy." But I knew that was only part-true. I had a daddy. Grandma had two sons, Jess and Jimmy, whose real name was James. I hadn't given up on learning his whereabouts. All I wanted was someone to give me a hint of hope, since Momma had already moved on with her secret boyfriend.

In the dark and warmth of the summer night, honeysuckle perfumed the air for miles and the grass had its own good smell and was thick and soft, but full with chiggers. And those next nights, it was the chiggers that caused me to move farther out into the darkness.

From between the garden rows, families of little mice chewed at the ripening tomatoes and I caught a whiff as an oily possum snuck by me. Then the scream of a bobcat settled over the Georgia countryside that stretches to the sea. Seemed there was a whole world of dark waiting to get to know me. I listened as the coyotes yipped and the owls whoo, *whoo... whoo... whooed*.

I might have felt ashamed for sneaking out so much, but I didn't. Then, one night as I lay there looking up at the night sky, he found me. And when he stood over me, he blocked out the stars. But I never thought I might be in trouble. When Uncle Jess bent his knees and reached out, I sat up, expecting he was going to pull me out of the rows and toss me over his shoulder and carry me back into the house like he'd done a time or two, saying I was a sack of potatoes. But he didn't. He said he'd known all along what I wanted. And his big hand set to patting around in the dark. Even with me doing my part to stay out of its

way, that big hand seemed to touch me about everywhere before it found a spot in the dirt to shoulder his long frame in next to me between the rows.

With him stretched out against me, I could feel his coarse denim against my bare arms and his wiry beard all over my face, even though he tried to tuck it back under his own chin. His breath hung in his beard and it blocked all the good smells of the night.

"Jimmy," he whispered. Only Jimmy isn't my name. And when I tried to say this, he quickly put a heavy finger to my lips. He *shushed* me until I could taste the tobacco on his dirty ole finger. "I got things to tell you," he said.

That night in the garden rows, I fell asleep inside Uncle Jess's head.

When morning came, there wasn't nothing different to see about me, but the white, plate-sized blossoms on my grandma's night-blooming vine hung limp and heavy, like used supper napkins, and I knew where my daddy had gone.