

DRY SPELL

Judianne sat under the pecan tree with her knees pulled up under her chin and squinted way down the road that parted the fields of drooping cotton. Granddad said from this hill a man could see half of Oklahoma. The day was so hot the grand folks were just sitting up in the house, mopping their necks and muttering about when it had been this hot before.

Judianne was busy studying something—a little whirl of dust down on the road to the East. Maybe a mirage—a little wiggling, yellow vision that maybe wasn't there at all. Whatever it was made her stomach go funny. She squinted and blinked, then got up and started running. Yeah, it was Alice all right, in a yellow dress and white hat, and she was running now too—wobbly running in her high heels, wagging her old cardboard suitcase. Before Judianne could get all the way to the end of the lane Alice had come around the corner, grabbed her up, and swung her around. "Oh, Judi Baby! It's been a long time."

"Gran said she didn't think you were coming back."

"Crazy woman." Alice looked up to the house and stuck out her pretty red lips.

"Come on up." Judianne could feel how much she'd grown by the way she was slipping out of Alice's arms. "Did you know I'm ten?"

"You mean to tell me my daughter is ten-years-old?" Alice put her down, picked up the suitcase, and they started up the lane. She looked tired and was panting from running. Every time she turned her ankle in the ruts, she'd stop and cuss and look up the lane to the house. Once they got up to the shade of the pecan tree, she stopped and put down the suitcase. "Brought you something special."

"What? A doll?"

"I brought you a doll last time. It's Chinese Checkers. A game. You'll see. Like to broke my arm lugging it all the way from Oklahoma City." Alice was staring at the front door. Judianne could see Grandma and Granddad looking through the screens watching them climb the hill. "How're the folks?" Alice asked.

"Fine. Did you find my dad?" Judianne needed to know before they got inside.

"Huh?" Alice started for the porch. She must be teasing, had to be teasing. She opened the screen door.

"Well, look who's here." Grandma was sitting down at the kitchen table.

"Howdy, Davie. Hello, Nell."

"Hello, honey." Granddad pulled out a kitchen chair for Alice.

"How's the cotton?" Alice plopped into the chair.

"Heck, it was just dumb luck," Granddad said, his words wiggling the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "I didn't put in any cotton. Here it is June. Been less than half inch of rain since planting time." He put his hands in the pockets of his overalls and grinned. "I told them

down at the grange that I was just cooperating with Mr. Hoover's plan to limit the farm produce." He chuckled in that jumpy way of his.

"Well, there never were any flies on you, Davie." Alice blew on the sweaty hair that was hanging in her eyes, and started taking off her hat.

"Did you find my dad?" Judianne asked.

"Not yet, honey." Alice whispered.

"You're still telling her that?" Grandma said. "You and her better face up to the facts. I have. I hate to say it about my own son and a good Baptist, but the plain truth is, he deserted you." She looked at Judianne then back at Alice. "He's not going to just let you find him."

"Don't pay her any mind," Alice said real soft. She kept her head down but looked across the table at Grandma. "Maybe he didn't care for farm life."

"Listen, girl, he loved this farm—working side by side with his daddy."

Judianne knew this kind of talk and slid off her chair and snuck out the door. She jumped off the end of the porch and ducked under the fence in the direction of Ida Mae's house. She hated crossing the pasture to get to the little house near the road, but it was quicker to brave the bull there than to go all the way around by the road to what Grandma called the sow's shack. Mrs. Channel was a huge woman with whiskers and a husky voice. Her two kids looked just like her—Ida Mae, kind of a big lump and blond, and her younger brother, Buster, a lump too, but with dark curly hair like his daddy.

When Judianne walked into the yard, Ida Mae was standing under the Black Jack tree doing the wash in a tub she'd set on a chair. Luckily neither Buster nor Mrs. Channel was in the yard.

"Hey," said Ida softly. She was big for eleven and stood over the washtub like a woman.

"Alice is here."

"Yeah? What'd she bring you?"

"Chinese Checkers. I don't know what it is, but everybody's playing it in Oklahoma City."

Ida was wringing out her daddy's shirts. The stomach of her dress was soaked and the hem dripped on her bare feet. Judianne picked a shirt out of the tub and said, "Do you want to come up to the cistern when you get done? Alice'll be taking a nap. We can talk and I'll bring the Chinese Checkers."

"Maybe," Ida said and looked over her shoulder towards the woodshed where Judianne could hear Mrs. Channel cutting wood. Judianne spread her feet and leaned forward trying to keep her shoes and dress dry and not drag the dangling shirt in the mud around the washtub. "Gemme that," said Ida, grinning. She took the dripping shirt and with one big twist wrung it almost dry. Then with a sure shake, she flipped it onto the clothesline.

"Pow, pow!" Buster ran towards them with his 22. "Ya wanna see ma gun? I just blasted me some frogs."

"Go on, show off," said Ida Mae. He strutted across the yard and kicked old Buck who yipped and dragged himself under the porch.

"Buster!" Mrs. Channel's husky voice was always startling. "You kick that dog one more time, and I'm gonna skin ya." The woman stood by the house with a load of wood in her arms.

"Get on back up your hill, girlie. Ida Mae's workin'." Judianne took the road home this time.

"Did you get 'round the bull, honey?" Granddad had been rocking on the porch, smoking and watching her trudge up the lane. Grandma sat beside him in a kitchen chair hemming a new blue dress for Judianne. Alice was already taking her nap.

“That's another thing,” Grandma was saying to Granddad, “he pays you rent to keep that dern bull in the pasture after the cows is all sold to slaughter.” Judianne had long ago figured out that the sow wasn't nearly so aggravating to Grandma as her husband, the impractical Mr. Channel.

“I think he may be hoping to have some cows again,” Granddad offered.

“You know he cain't buy more cows.” Grandma's strong fingers punched the needle into the thin cloth and snapped it through.

“I said he was hoping.” Granddad sucked his cheeks in pulling on the cigarette.

“Failure is what he is.” The words came hot out of her mouth. “He's growing snap dragons and sweet peas and got no shoes on his kids.”

“Now, Mother, farming ain't his line of work. The man's a joiner.”

“Well, he didn't join hisself up so good, did he?” Grandma laughed hard, squeezing the spite out of her joke.

Judianne didn't know what a joiner was except no one had any use for one in this part of Oklahoma. She knew Mr. Channel did odd jobs for widows and single ladies who needed a screen door mended or a step replaced. And long ago she'd watched down the hill while he made flower boxes. He'd hung them on the side of his house where she could see them from her bedroom where she and Alice would be sleeping together tonight.

“He should scrap them flowers,” Grandma said frowning down the hill. “It ain't practical—big, strong, young man like that fussing with flowers.”

He wasn't practical. That was for sure. When the hailstorm knocked the old gingerbread off the church, Mr. Channel worked six days with his coping saw cutting new trim and never

charged a cent. Everyone agreed it looked nicer than before. And he was very strong. She had felt it up close.

She and Ida Mae had lain head to head that day staring up at the sky from the shade of the forsythia bushes behind the cistern. Judianne was trying to braid all the hair together, Ida's pale straight hair with her own dark curls. It was hard, not being able to see and the grass getting mixed in.

“If you could be anywheres right now,” Ida Mae had asked, “where would you be?”

Judianne closed her eyes. “In a boat on a lake wearing a long pink dress and a white straw hat with a pink taffeta ribbon. And little gold fishes in the lake to nibble on my fingers.”

“Hello, girls.” It was Mr. Channel, almost standing over them. She sat up like a shot yanking apart the braid. She tugged her dress over her bare legs and rubbed the sore spot on her head. The man stood there, a grin on his tan face. He held a huge bucket of water in each hand. She was breathing hard.

“Ya gonna water the bull, Dad? Can we help?” Ida asked.

“Sure, Buttercup. You too Rosie.”

Rosie? Where'd he get the idea her name was Rosie? Ida Mae took hold of one of the bucket handles her daddy held, and Judianne took hold of the other. She wasn't really carrying any weight. This was baby stuff. As they walked, Ida and her daddy were laughing and joking. Luckily the bull was down by the road when they crawled under the fence. But as Mr. Channel spilled the first bucket over the edge of the dry trough, the bull raised his head and started toward them at a gallop, the sun glinting off its horn. Judianne froze.

“Ah, he's got the scent,” Mr. Channel said. Her knees shook, and she grabbed the man's sleeve. She opened her mouth to scream, but before it came out, Mr. Channel picked her up. He was laughing and shouting at Ida Mae. “Come on Buttercup, let's show Rosie how we gallop.”

That was the only time she had been up close to him—up where she could smell the sweat and see how his dark hair grew in waves on the back of his neck. He'd carried her in his arms like a little baby.

She was leaning on the arm of Granddad's rocker now, staring down at the pasture. Her own daddy would have done that—carried her—saved her from the bull. Sometimes she thought Alice wasn't trying hard enough to find him. “I'm going inside to see Alice,” she told the folks.

“It was murder on that bus, hot as blue blazes.” Alice was just wearing her slip. She pushed over a little in the bed so Judianne could climb up beside her. This was the best part. Alice reached into her open suitcase and pulled out the blue silk bed jacket. It was kind of pinky-gray now because they had had it so many years, but it had a little pearl button at the neck and ruffles for sleeves. Judianne put it on over her dress and untied her shoes while Alice fluffed the pillows against the iron bedstead. They nestled back and Alice handed her the lipstick and the beautiful green hand mirror. Judianne studied her face a long time.

“You got my big eyes, see honey.” Alice put her face right next to Judianne's and turned the mirror so she saw half of two faces—one big eye each. Oh, wonderful! The eyes did look alike—sort of green with little bits of dark gold near the middle.

“Gran said I had my daddy's eyes.”

“Shoot! You ain't got nothing from him. You're all me.”

Judianne looked again. She must have something from him—her ears, her nose, maybe something Alice hadn't noticed yet.

“You going to get dolled up?” Alice looked down where Judianne was hiding the lipstick under the sheet. They could hear Granddad's rocker creak on the front porch. Grandma would be getting up any minute to start supper, but they'd hear her drag in her chair. Judianne opened the scratched silver case and brought the big red stump to her mouth. In the mirror it looked redder than ever. When she touched it to her lower lip, it stuck and kind of tugged the lip. “That's enough,” she whispered and closed the case. She turned and sat up in front of Alice who lifted the edges of the ruffled sleeves as though they were little wings.

“You look like a angel.” Alice smiled so pretty, her big green eyes shining. Judianne should have said, “Thank you, ma'am,” but she couldn't get a word out.

“Hey.” Alice bounced back against the pillow. “Why did the little moron take hay to bed?”

Judianne settled back. “I don't know. Why *did* the little moron take hay to bed?” She was smart. Year to year she remembered how to do these.

“To feed his nightmares. Get it—mares.”

“Ha!” She did get it. She really got it. She doubled over with laughing. Alice laughed too and the old bed springs cackled. Alice was back. They'd do this every afternoon during her visit. “We can all go to church tomorrow,” Judianne said. Alice would be the only woman there with real high heels on. These farmer's wives didn't have any style. Alice said that every time she came.

“Y'all still got the same old hypocrite preacher?”

“Alice! Don't say that. Grandma loves Preacher Ledbetter.”

“Grandma's got a blind eye where that old geezer's concerned.”

“She sees as good as you and me. She's making me a new blue dress?”

“She showed it to me first thing. You want a stick of gum?”

Things would have been fine, but this time Alice stayed too long. Judianne could tell. Grandma talked about how much work there was to keep house and cook and wash for four people on a farm. Granddad worked at Bailey's feed store till four then drove home in his Model T, but there was something wrong with him too. He just sat around the house like him and Gran weren't speaking. One hot July night Judianne got up and put her ear to the bedroom wall. "It ain't right, Alice," Grandma was trying to whisper, "coming out of your dirty life to pester that child."

Alice must have been facing the other way or whispering because Judianne couldn't hear her very well. She may have said she was down on her luck, but that was obvious. Then there was a little scraping of chairs, and Judianne hopped back in bed and pretended to be asleep. She was going to have to talk to Ida Mae.

Alice didn't go with them Sunday mornings to the preaching. Judianne wanted everyone to see Alice in the pink dress with the lace around the neckline. Five Sundays now Judianne had had to go when she wanted to be home alone with Alice.

Preacher Ledbetter was a short, stiff man who always stuck his turkey wattle chin up in the air. Judianne had noticed he rose on tiptoe as he got angrier and redder in the face. The Baptists yawned and beat the air with the fans from the funeral parlor. She swung her legs and looked out the window at Mr. Channel's decoration on the eaves. Preacher was really giving it to them—telling the farmers they were being punished, that he knew about their sinful ways—

cheating and blaspheming. Then he took out after the women and girls for being loose and for tempting men. He said it wasn't going to rain till all the sinners came forward and were saved. Finally he got all sweet again and said a little about generosity and the deacons took up the collection. She put in her penny.

“Grandma,” she asked on the way to the car, “what's a dirty life?”

Grandma looked like she'd swallowed the wishbone. She grabbed Judianne's wrist and dragged her behind the spirea bush. “Listen, child!” Her teeth were clenched tight. “Don't you ever, *ever* tell anything you hear at home to anyone, ever! Do you know what I'm talking about?”

Judianne looked down at her hand which was turning blue; she nodded.

After Sunday dinner Judianne dried while Grandma washed. Then she headed out the back door. “Where're you off to?” Grandma called. Judianne stuck her face back in the screen door. “I got to talk to Ida Mae.”

“Oh, no you don't. You get in here and play with that new contraption your mother gave you.”

Judianne came in slowly. Gee, it was hot. The sun was still on the front porch. They could crawl under the bushes and be cool back by the cistern. Nothing to do but sit on the back steps. Alice was having her nap. Maybe Grandma would give in if she put her head down on her knees like she was crying.

Was Alice what Preacher called a harlot? Anybody who'd sat through as much preaching as she had knew that a harlot was a bad woman—probably one who smoked cigarettes and drank whiskey. But she'd never seen Alice do either. Something was wrong.

The fussing at night kept up. But Grandma really whispered now. When Judianne pressed her ear hard to the front room wall, it sounded like a couple of snakes going at each other. And during the day there weren't any hints. If Alice didn't ride into town with Granddad, she just laid up in bed and read her magazines. And whenever Judianne looked up from dinner, or her work, she saw Grandma's old worried eyes looking back.

Grandma began to make her a new yellow dress to start school in. "Stand still, honey." Grandma snipped real ticklish around the sleeve hole. "Now raise your arm. That's better. Your teacher's going to like this one. You'll see. Maybe I'll put a little ruffle on the cuffs if I've got enough—it was a hundred pound sack."

"But these pins are pricking!"

"Stand still!" burst out Grandma. Then softer, "Let me look a little longer, Judianne. Don't you know you're all I've got in this world?"

Grandma found more and more chores for her every time she wanted to get away to see Ida Mae. "Don't you fret about that Channel girl waiting for you cause she can just wait."

One afternoon while Grandma had her head over the kitchen drain washing her hair, Judianne went out back past the garden to the forsythia bushes behind the old cistern. There in the grass lay Ida Mae sobbing and holding her welt-covered legs.

"What happened?"

"Oh, Ginia, we was up to the Rabbs," Ida Mae sobbed.

"Yeah, I can see you got a lickin', but what did she catch you at?"

“I wasn't doing nothing, just listening. She said my name. I heard her. ‘When I was expecting Ida Mae,’—that's what she said. I can't help it if her and Aunt Ethyl talk about stuff I'm not supposed to hear.”

“What'd you hear?” She bent down to inspect Ida Mae's legs. Those were Mrs. Channel's marks all right. “Come on.” Judianne crawled in under the cover of the bushes and sat down against the low wall of the cistern. Ida Mae crawled in behind her and lay her head in Judianne's lap.

“You're the main one I'm not supposed to tell,” said Ida Mae staring up into the branches. “Mama said if I told you, she'd send me to McAlister.” They had better drop it. Mrs. Channel really would send her only daughter to the state penitentiary.

“Let's talk about going to Hollywood.” Judianne put her arm across Ida's waist. “Tell me what you're going to wear.”

“Ginia, your ma don't whip you, does she.”

Judianne didn't say anything.

“Well she don't. She's the nicest lady that ever lived and pretty. She's prettier'n Myrna Loy.”

“No, she isn't.”

“Yes, she is, and she don't yell. Oh, Ginia, when I grow up I ain't gonna have no kids lessen I treat them just like your ma treats you. Sweet. That's what she is.”

“Lands, Ida, you don't know her.”

Ida looked up into Judianne's face. “You're just selfish.”

“Selfish!” Judianne cried. “You've got a mother and a daddy?”

Ida sat up, her back to Judianne. “Oh, Ginia, he ain't never home till after dark, and then Ma calls him a Tom Cat and a selfish bastard.”

“Ida, don't talk like that.”

“You don't know, Ginia. You live up here and your Grandma makes you pretty dresses.”

“Ida, Alice is a harlot.”

Ida Mae turned her head and stared as if she was looking at a coiled snake. “Liar!” They sat frozen, staring. A locust cried from the grass. It had been so long since she had been with Ida, and now it had all gone wrong. Finally Ida Mae sat back against the cistern wall and slowly brushed the dust off her dress. She skinned the leaves off an overhanging branch and fixed her mouth. “Ginia, do you know what 'somethin' on the side' is?”

“No.”

“Well, it's something a man gets when his wife's pregnant.”

“I know what pregnant is.”

Ida opened her hand and all the little leaves fell into her lap. “Do you know what ‘foolin’ around’ means?”

“Not working?”

Ida Mae brushed the leaves onto the ground, and let out a long breath. “Ginia, my mama thinks my daddy is your daddy too.”

“No, my daddy's named Roy. He left here before I was born.”

“Yeah, well think about why he took off. Mama told Aunt Ethyl that nobody ever knew, but her, and she was only telling Aunt Ethyl now cause she was afraid your mama was going to stay. And then she heard me and got the strap.”

Judianne sat awhile under the bushes after Ida went home to do her chores. Something on the side? What? The leaves on the forsythia hung limp and dry. Roy should come home and straighten everyone out. After awhile her stomach began to feel bad, so she got up and walked to the house.

She opened the screen door carefully and closed it without a sound. She moved quietly along the wall and took her place at the dinner table without scraping the chair or bumping the table. Granddad just watched her. Grandma, her hair, dark as iron, dripping on her dress, was dumping pickles out of a canning jar into the blue bowl. She looked at Judianne over her glasses. “What have you been up to, young lady?”

She must be double silent—for herself and for Ida Mae. “Nothing.”

Grandma slowly sat down in her chair without taking her eyes off Judianne. “You were out there with that Channel girl.”

Judianne had to be careful with her face.

“You were out there telling tales and shaming your family.” Grandma's big fists were pressing the table, and her eyes were darting from Granddad to Judianne.

“Davie, she's been out there telling that little cuss stories that'll ruin us in this county. I could never face the preacher.”

Judianne looked to Granddad for help. Grandma's voice was rising. She was talking about pulling up stakes and how she'd like to die.

“Now, Mother,” Granddad soothed, “there is always a good chance that Ida Mae can keep a secret.”

“Yes, sure,” Judianne said. “She won't tell anybody.”

“Nonsense!” Grandma's fists came down so hard the pickle bowl jumped.

The next day Judianne was dying to see Ida Mae. She knew Ida wouldn't blab about Alice, 'course not. Though it would be nice to hear her promise. But when she started out the back door, Grandma stopped her. "You stay away from that Channel girl, you hear."

"Try and make a little hill around the roots like this, honey," Granddad said to her as he ladled water from the bucket and packed the dirt around a tomato plant. The sky had been overcast for three days, but there was still no rain. They each worked a row, Granddad stopping now and then in order not to get too far ahead.

The gritty wind blew Judianne's bonnet back from her face; it burned her cheeks and matted her curls. "It's not holding very well," she called ahead to him. The red soil she had piled up dried so fast it began to blow away so the little white hairs on the roots showed. What could they do?

Grandma didn't ask about the garden or talk about rain. She stayed in the house and sewed. She had finished the flowered dress and cut out another. She said this cloth had been bought in a weak moment and saved for a long time. It was not sacking, but a solid red chintz from the dry goods store. She measured every part of Judianne a dozen times.

She even stopped complaining about Alice not helping. Judianne pressed her ear to the bedroom wall at night. They were whispering, but she could tell that Alice was having her way for a change.

On Saturday Alice stood on a chair and reached into the square door in the ceiling that went to the attic. She dragged out an old suitcase and a box of Judianne's baby toys. "We've been here too long, Baby. Pick out all the things you want to take with you." This was crazy. What about school starting in three weeks? Judianne ran out onto the porch.

“I don't know what's going on, Granddad.” He turned his face away and lit a cigarette. “What are we going to do?” she asked. She could hear his raspy breathing. He put his arm around her waist and drew her close but didn't say anything. She waited, listening, then pulled away.

At supper she said to Alice, “Can we all go to church tomorrow, please?”

“Okay, hon. We can go there, then straight to the bus depot.”

Grandma looked up. “That'd be real nice, Alice.”

It looked like the fighting was over, but when Grandma announced after supper that she was going to take some of the pound cake to poor Mrs. Witty, she spoke the words into the air above Judianne's head. This was crazy too. Grandma almost never drove the Ford; in fact Judianne had never seen her crank it. But as Judianne watched from the porch, Grandma took the crank in her big hands and fired the starter the first time. Without looking back, she climbed in and drove away.

Judianne lay in bed listening to Alice breathe. “You'll wear the pink dress?”

“Sure.” Alice fell asleep, but Judianne stayed awake until long after she heard Grandma tip toe in the back door.

At church Judianne looked for Ida Mae so she could say goodbye, but the Channels must have come in late and sat in the back. Alice was so pretty. Everyone stared at her. It would be fun to get on a bus with her. Judianne had wanted to sit next to her in church, but Grandma had crowded in between, so Judianne had to lean forward every time she wanted to look at Alice who was sitting on the aisle. For the first time ever Granddad hadn't felt like coming to church.

“God spoke to me” Preacher began very softly in that way he liked to sneak up on the congregation before shouting at them. “As I knelt in prayer with my Bible in my hand, held just

like this over my heart, God spoke to me. Yes siree. And He said ‘Clyde, my servant,’ and I said ‘Yes, Lord.’” The preacher’s chin was pressed down into his soft neck like he was trying to look like a little boy. She had never heard him sound so happy. She gazed out the window. Maybe Preacher would talk about judgment until judgment came, and they could all go to heaven together—Grandma and Granddad and Alice and Ida Mae and herself—rising, holding hands, through dark rainy clouds into a heaven where it rained every day and filled lakes and ponds where girls floated in little boats. She was staring at Mr. Channel’s decoration on the eaves. She wished she had done something like that to leave here for people to point to and say, see that.

Preacher was shouting now. “Yea, as Jesus our Savior drove the money changers out of the temple!” People were turning in their seats to look, some muttering, Amen. “God instructed me! Hallelujah!” Preacher sang out, up on his toes now, his chin stretched up as high as he could get it. A banty rooster. “To drive this unrepentant sinner out of our church, so that His blessing may rain down on the saved. That haughty woman,” Preacher pointed at Alice, “who has been living right here and never, never came forward to be saved, no siree--” Judianne froze. “That one! A harlot!” roared Preacher.

Alice, shaking like an old lady, grabbed the pew in front of her and pulled herself up. She turned to Judianne. Her face was white, her big eyes full. Judianne reached for her, but Grandma shoved her back into the pew.

"Why doesn't it rain?" she asked Granddad who was sitting in the rocking chair with the quilt around his shoulders. All afternoon and evening no one had said anything since coming back from church. Judianne was watching out the front window just trying to breath, just trying

to swallow. She knew she wasn't going to see Alice. The old cardboard suitcase was gone from the car by the time she was able to run out of the church. Alice could never come back, ever.

"Preacher said it would rain."

"He'll think of something," Granddad said.

She looked down at the empty road. It was getting dark. She heard a man's faint shout. She squinted and saw something in the road—a light thing bobbing in the darkness like a sail floating in the night. The calling got louder, and she realized it wasn't a man, but Mrs. Channel dragging Ida Mae away.

Judianne whirled around and faced him. "Granddad, God didn't really tell Preacher to do that!"

Granddad leaned forward to stand up and stared at her. "Honey, you got to put all this behind you."

"And I know Ida didn't tell. So who was it?"

Granddad, dragging the quilt behind him, shuffled into his bedroom and shut the door.

"Eating put-up tomatoes in August!" Grandma almost spit she was so disgusted.

Judianne stared at the tomatoes in her bowl. "Come on child, eat. Mush alone won't hold ya."

Granddad's cough rang like a hammer from his bedroom. He didn't come to the table anymore. He had worked more than a month without pay before Mr. Bailey closed the feed store. Everything was drying up. Mr. Channel had sold all his tools, Granddad said. He left the money with Mrs. Channel and went West to pick oranges. Buster was left in charge of the bull. Granddad often pulled his hand through the air to call Judianne to his bedside, but she didn't go. He smelled bad.

“Is Granddad going to be all right?” she asked Grandma in the kitchen.

“Get on with you now,” Grandma said softly. “Play with your doll.”

Judianne went into the front room and sat in Granddad's rocker. “Granddad is going to die.” She said the words quietly for herself. “And I don't care.” The truth burned her cheeks. Before he had always been on her side all her life. She rocked hard fighting down tears. But when she lost her mother and was stopped from seeing her only friend, Granddad hadn't done a blamed thing to help her, and now he was going to die. “Granddad,” she gasped and ran to him. “Granddad!” He pulled her to his bony chest.

The congregation had shrunk. The Rabbs had gone West. Some of the other neighbors had moved away to live with relatives and, of course, Mr. Channel was gone. But everybody who was left came to the funeral.

Judianne almost didn't recognize Ida Mae standing with her mother and Buster on the church steps before the service. Ida Mae was taller and thinner so that her dress hung short and wide. Her hair was dark with dirt, but her face was clean, and when she saw Judianne standing in the churchyard, she grinned and started back down the steps.

“Ida!” Judianne darted forward, but Grandma grabbed her hand. She spun and fell, pain hot in her shoulder. She dusted off her Sunday dress and tried not to look embarrassed. Ida, half way down the church steps, looked away.

Judianne and Grandma took their seats in the front pew since they were family. Preacher started out slow. Judianne hadn't looked at him since Alice left and was never going to let herself see him again. She looked out the window at Mr. Channel's fancy carpentry. He'd called her Rosie. Where was he? Picking oranges—reaching up with strong, brown arms—laughing.

All the men were gone, Roy long ago. Mr. Channel. Now Granddad. She squeezed her eyes shut. Oh, Ida, help me.

After the service some of the women came back to the farm with Judianne and Grandma. They stood in the kitchen around the widow and muttered about God's will and made coffee and served yellow cake. Judianne rocked in the dim front room. She could smell Granddad's cigarettes in the quilt on the back of the rocker. She breathed deep and tears came down. She rocked and rubbed her sore shoulder and listened to the women.

“Lands sakes, look at that!” The voices in the kitchen were suddenly chirping. “Oh Lordy, Emma, look at them clouds. Feel that breeze.” “My God, why did You wait so long?” “Shush up and just be thankful.”

Judianne went out on the front porch. The afternoon had turned dark. Purple clouds rolled in from the East—tall clouds, big as mountains, were pushing across the sky. The pecan tree danced and bowed. Dry leaves gusted up and the stiff wind blew her Sunday dress.

Some of the women were coming around the house from the kitchen door to get a better view. No one saw Judianne as she jumped off the porch and ducked under the fence. The wind whipped the dirt into little twisters as she ran. Huge drops splashed in the dust. The sky opened like gunshot over her head and water rushed down, pounding on her head and shoulders.

Her eyes strained to keep sight of the Channel's house but suddenly it wasn't there. She turned around and put up her hands to shelter her eyes, but her own house was gone too. The rain poured down like a roaring, dark room around her. She must get back to the fence. Where was the bull? “Ida! Ida!”

"Ginia!" Ida Mae's high voice blew in the storm. Judianne turned around and around. "Ida!" she screamed. And there she was, a light shape bending now at the fence. She must have come up the lane. Judianne ran and Ida pulled her under the fence.

"I didn't tell about your ma," Ida shouted in the roar.

"I know. I know," Judianne whispered over and over with her cheek pressed against Ida's shoulder and her arms holding tight. She felt the lane become a muddy river around their feet and the water pour over their heads.

THE END