

Picnic Jugs

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

The car was a two-tone black and white Chevy, a thick little bubble of a car with grillwork that changed from sinister to jolly in a blink. The driver glanced at his daughter, a girl of ten who gazed beyond a limitless stretch of Oklahoma prairie to the zenith point on the horizon. Crows darted around the windbreak trees, stunted evergreens planted in straight lines between the fields. The August sun was high and a sharp wind cut through the open window. The girl's eyes were set as if she might be focused on some steady thought. Cropped light hair blew directly back from her face and one leg rested across the other knee, her body giving in to the easy rhythm made by the car and the road. Cardboard boxes stacked on the backseat shifted a little with each bump. One slid too close to the edge and toppled over, spilling leather work gloves on the picnic jugs on the floorboard below.

"Lucy, check the backseat honey. Something fell." Lucy turned around and raised herself up on her knees and reaching over put the gloves back in their box. She slipped a hand inside one glove and felt it with her other hand. The glove was rough and stifled the fine coordination of her fingers. She wriggled them around inside but the stiff lined leather hardly moved. She turned around and sat again, the glove still on her hand, and ran it over her bare legs. Her hand, numbed by the glove couldn't feel her leg. It might as well be someone else's hand, she thought, and she shivered in spite of the heat.

"Do men wear these now in summer?"

"I expect they do when they work."

"They're so hot," she said, and all of the sudden the glove seemed suffocating. She jerked it off, feeling relieved like her hand had just been given a deep breath.

"We'll stop up ahead." Her father pointed to a grain elevator shimmering through the heat, not far up the road. "How many have you sold so far?" He was referring to the picnic jugs. He paid her a nickel for each one she sold.

"Eight, but it's only Tuesday."

"Oh already eight." She was an amazing little salesman. She could always persuade people to buy a jug. When she started going with him on the road, he'd taught her how to sell. He had a way with the people who owned the small stores, he'd told her the first day. Even if they were unfriendly at first, he knew how to break the ice and make them like him. It was like a game. You size them up, figure out as soon as you see them what to say, what angle to take.

With women it was easy. He talked to them about the bolts of fabric he carried along. This is beautiful gabardine, he'd say. It would make a beautiful dress. The women seemed to listen to him intently, but their eyes were on Lucy. Sometimes she thought they looked at her with pity. Most of the time when they bought something, they smiled at her when they said yes.

The men were a little harder for her father. It was as if they knew he was down on his luck, knew he was on the road because it was the last alternative he had. Sometimes she thought they could tell about the car accident five years ago. But their regard wasn't softened by knowing that. They saw a man who didn't own a store, who didn't own a farm. Who drove a beat-up car and carried his daughter around the countryside when she should have been in school. It wasn't their business to know why.

The car came to a stop in the gravel lot by the elevator. Dust hung in the air as they got out. Lucy opened the back door and lifted some boxes and put them on the trunk. Her father leaned against the car for a minute. "No point in getting out the cloth. Be only men here." She nodded and swinging a picnic jug in each hand led the way up the platform to the door. She stopped in the doorway and three men sitting inside turned to look at her.

"Do you have family reunions to go to this month? Nearly everybody has them in August," she told them as she stepped inside, her father following behind.

