

Come to Me

by

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My five-year-old cousin, Caleb, hobbles from a line of tall weeds, all thinned out along the clay road. There's a limp in his step. *Come to me, little cousin; I see you crying.*

I sit in the grass and wait for him. All afternoon, I've whiled away the hours, pulling pokeweeds, splitting the stalks with green-stained fingers, swirling the vinegary taste of the plant with my tongue, imagining a pretend family.

Here comes Caleb, his walk sideways with some kind of hurt. When he gets near me, he cries louder. Grateful, relieved. He sits beside me in the crushed-down weeds, scuffs off both his corrective shoes, and holds up his right foot. He must wear his thick-soled shoes every day, but he keeps them untied, the tongues and laces loping over his exposed soft baby skin.

"I got a bite out there, Willa," he says and points to the dim woods, no sunlight inside. "A snake. I got a snake bite." Caleb smells like play, his hair full of summer sweat and dark things, too. The ankle is red, and the blood dots trickle bright. I kneel down and hold his foot in my hand.

I command, "Sit still!" I don't like how the bite is looking, his foot puffing all around. Blue jays argue, wrestle in the willow trees along the path. They debate the bite, all the threats in the world. The sun is behind the house now, but the top of Caleb's head still shines with heat. I'm hot, too. I go down on my knees and put my mouth to Caleb's heel, suck at the small punctures. There is the taste of blood and tin in the venom. I draw more and spit it into the grass. Caleb is quiet, concentrating.

"Is it gonna kill me, Will?"

"I don't know. It might."