

the HARLEQUIN

Ladette Randolph

Boy in the Cornfield, 1969

Ivory Williams woke that night to the slam of a car door. Outside the house, she heard men talking, their voices raised but not loud enough for her to hear what they were saying. Cars and trucks lined the long driveway to the farm house, among them three State Patrol cars, lights flashing, filling her bedroom with a throbbing blue light. It was late summer, and she went downstairs in her pajamas, knowing, but not caring, that she was too old to be seen without a robe. When her father saw her standing at the kitchen door, he shouted, “Get back to bed!” His voice was gruff and impatient, and edged with some other emotion she didn’t recognize. She thought later it must have been fear.

Her mother met her on the upstairs landing. “Your father didn’t mean to be harsh with you. There’s a boy that escaped from a van. They were taking him to the correctional school in Kearney. He got away and ran into the cornfield here by the house.” As she spoke, her mother pulled her robe tighter. “Just stay in your room. Everything will be all right.”

The look on her face mother’s face suggested she didn’t really believe what she was saying, and Ivory watched as her mother went downstairs and locked both the front and the back doors, something Ivory had never seen either of her parents do, even when leaving on an overnight trip. This, more than anything else that night, made her afraid. She didn’t go back to bed. Instead, she watched from her upstairs bedroom window as men with flashlights spread out across her father’s cornfield, and though she couldn’t see them for the tall stalks of corn, she watched the play of their flashlights as they moved in a line down the dark rows. She didn’t know why she turned to look out the window on the other side of her room, but when she did, she saw in the milo field below, not 500 feet from where all those men were searching for him, the boy crouching there. His hair was blonde, the color of corn tassels, Ivory thought; his clothes were too dark for her to make out. She couldn’t see his face, but she thought she could feel the beating of his heart, the panting of his breath. He was like the cornered animals she’d seen: pheasants in ditches, rabbits in the underbrush, deer in the woods, frightened and confused by the presence of people.

At the exact moment Ivory was thinking about him in this way, the boy sprang to his feet and leapt from one row of milo to another with the same suddenness of those frightened animals. His movement so startled her that by the time Ivory caught sight of him again, the boy was through the milo field and across a gravel road into the neighbor’s cornfield.

She watched him run until she finally lost him in the darkness. All the while, she realized, she’d been holding her breath. She was shaking and her heart was pounding, as

if it were her being hunted. She never once considered calling out the open window to her father and the other men searching. Instead, she urged the boy on his way. She hoped desperately he wouldn't be caught, as though he were a boy she loved. She imagined then she did love him. She imagined he'd caught a glimpse of her there in the window and he'd fallen in love with her, too, so that he was running for both of them. Running across the dark plains toward freedom.

The previous year, the milo field where she'd spotted the boy had been planted in corn, and that fall, after the corn had been harvested and the cold had set in, Ivory had mentioned to her mother that the corn stalks left in the field looked like broken bones. Her mother had surprised her by agreeing and had gone on to tell Ivory about a dream she'd had years before about that same field, their long driveway to the highway. "In the dream, I remember, I was wearing an apron, working in the kitchen," her mother told her, "I looked out the kitchen window and saw a man walking down the driveway toward the house. At first, I didn't recognize him, but when I did, I took off my apron and ran down the driveway to meet him. We hugged, so happy to see each other again after all those years. He'd come looking for me." Despite being curious, Ivory didn't interrupt to ask who the man was, surprised that her matter-of-fact mother would talk about a dream of hers in this way.

"Before I knew it," her mother had gone on. "I was walking away from the house arm in arm with him, forgetting everything and everyone, but just as we reached the highway, I stopped and said to him, 'I can't do this. I'm married now. I have a baby.'" Her mother told Ivory she'd woken up then, and later she'd guessed it was her way of saying goodbye.

"Who was the man in your dream?" Ivory asked.

"He was a boy I was going to marry. A long time ago."

"Why didn't you marry him?"

Her mother was quiet for awhile. "Because he never came home from the war." Lately, Ivory had been feeling like her father, who was often curt and distant, wasn't her real father, and her mother's story seemed to solve a riddle for her. "Was he my real father?" she asked.

"Of course not," her mother said, upset with her. "Why would you ask such a thing? Your father is your father."

Outside now, the moon was only a sliver against the dark sky. The stars were like pinholes of light against the darkness. They reminded Ivory of the backdrop they'd made for the Christmas program at church. She thought about the boy, knowing that he would be skirting the edges of their little town, that he would soon find himself in the swales and valleys on the other side, that he would soon be in the country where her Grandpa and Grandma Blevins lived, that he would run until he reached the county line and from there, Ivory couldn't guess where he might go. He would run from field to field, she thought.

He would finally collapse in one of them in the soft earth between rows of corn, knowing he would be safe from discovery there, and he would sleep. He could go a long way without being seen this time of year. As she thought about his path, she urged him on through those fields and pastures, through woods and riverways. She urged him on through the whole western country and on to the coast of California.

She didn't stop there but saw him onto a ship, where he could stowaway, where he would be discovered but much too late to be returned.

Early the next morning, she dressed and went outside. She searched the milo field where she'd seen the boy the night before, and she found his footprints in the damp, dark soil. From there, it was easy to track his progress by the damage he'd done to the milo plants. When she reached the gravel road on the other side of the field, she lost his footprints. Broken cornstalks in the field across the road indicated where he'd entered. She followed his path as though he were just ahead of her. She ran and didn't feel tired. She ran and felt no confusion about where the boy had gone. She ran and ran and as she did, the fields that had been full of grain at the start of her journey began to ripen. The stalks in the field grew dry. The hot summer air grew cooler and still she ran. By the time she reached the fields on the other side of Sweetwater, she was running through fields ready for harvest, and then through fields already harvested, their broken stalks sending up grain dust as she ran through them, the boy's footsteps easy to see before her now.

She encountered only one person in her travels, a farmer on a gravel road, who asked her where she was going so fast. "I'm just running," she told him, not wanting to give away the boy. "You must be Chester William's granddaughter," he said, and she told him she was. "You're a long way from home. You need a ride back?" She shook her head no. "Aren't you cold?" he asked, and only then did she notice the snow. "I'm fine," she said. She didn't feel the cold at all. The man tipped his hat to her, and she went on her way, following the boy's footprints through the snow.

Her tennis shoes were wet, and her shorts were torn where she'd caught them on a barbed wire fence she'd climbed over, but she felt neither cold nor tired as she followed the boy's footprints to the driveway of a house. She saw the boy's steps in the deep snow that had drifted across the drive. The sycamore trees lining the drive were bare, their white trunks like exposed skin beneath the tatters of their gray bark. She trudged through the deep snow by placing her feet in the steps the boy had made. Her hair blew in the cold wind.

It had been daylight when she'd first come upon the driveway, but now as she reached the house, it was dark. The porch was lit and inside a picture window she saw a family gathered to celebrate Christmas. Though the window was closed, she heard them laughing. A dark haired girl played the piano while two other girls, one much older than the other, danced together. A man with a mustache sat on a red velvet sofa beside a fair-haired woman holding a baby. In one corner of the room, a round red-cedar tree was lit with candles and decorated with colored paper chains and strings of popcorn. Beside the tree sat a very old man in a rocking chair. No one else in the room noticed Ivory, but the old man looked up and nodded as he saw her through the window.

He must have said something to the others, because the dark haired girl who had been playing the piano, swiveled around on the piano stool and looked out the window. They all turned then to look at Ivory standing on the porch. They smiled as if they'd been waiting for her and beckoned her to come inside. The girl playing the piano jumped up and ran to open the door, pulling Ivory inside and yelling into the wind. "Come inside.

It's a blizzard out here," and Ivory saw how the snow was falling hard and the wind was howling around her.

The girl brought Ivory inside and the family greeted her without surprise. "Get her some warm clothes," the woman said, and Ivory's new friend took her hand and led her up a steep unheated stairway to a second floor bedroom. The dark haired girl laughed and chattered. She talked about nothing really as she searched through the drawers of a bureau. It was only as the girl handed Ivory dry clothes, that she felt for the first time her own cold, wet things.

"Why is your room so black?" Ivory asked. The black wallpaper was covered with large flowers in deep reds and dark pinks. The furniture had all been painted black, as had the wood trim and the floorboards.

The dark haired girl stopped talking. She looked at Ivory, her blue eyes suddenly very sober before she smiled and shrugged. "I like it that way."

After Ivory was dressed, as she followed the dark-haired girl downstairs, she recognized the girl as her own mother. They arrived back to the fireplace, back to the candlelit tree, back to the table where an extra place had already been set for her. Everyone welcomed her, except the old man, whom she recognized now from pictures she'd seen of her Great Grandfather Nathaniel Blevins. Only he looked at her with suspicion, as if he knew she wasn't meant to be there.

When the older woman asked Ivory what had brought her out on a night like this, they all listened closely as she told them about the boy. She told them how he was on the run, how he was in danger of being caught, how she hoped he could avoid capture, but that she hoped she would find him first. She told them how she'd followed him to their house.

Everyone except the old man nodded around the table when she'd finished her story. "You'll find that boy upstairs," the woman said. She gestured and the dark-haired girl took her hand and led her back up to the black bedroom. "If I'd known what you were looking for," she said as she opened a small door in the low wall beside the bed, "I'd have shown you here first thing." The girl held the door open for Ivory who paused before ducking her head to enter.

Once inside, Ivory stood up in an enormous room filled with hanging clothes. The racks of clothes went on and on. When she turned to thank the girl for her help, she and the door were both gone. She wandered between the racks of clothes looking for evidence of the boy, just as she'd looked for evidence of him in the rows of grain. She expected to be stopped by a wall, but instead one room became another, so that even if she'd wanted to get back to the black bedroom again, she couldn't have found her way. She'd almost given up hope of finding the boy again. She seemed to have lost his trail when she finally found his footprints on the dusty floor. In the quiet, she heard him breathing. She felt his beating heart. His path had led him here, and he'd stopped running. She guessed he was asleep somewhere in the room among the racks of clothes, that he finally felt safe after his long run.

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