

On the New Hope Road

We live in a little house a few miles from town. The house stands alongside what people call the New Hope Road, a narrow paved two-lane used mostly by farm traffic – pickup trucks and tractors, and the occasional combine or cotton stripper. The house is bordered on the front by a patch of hard, mostly bare ground we call the front yard, which extends away from the house and ends in a ditch beside the New Hope Road, and on one side and in the back by a farmer's field. On the other side of the house, on the side toward town, there are tall trees around a house where an old couple lives with many adopted stray cats. There are no other houses nearby. When I stand on the front porch of our house and look around, there is little to see except for the surrounding fields.

The house is small, a front room and a kitchen in the back, two bedrooms and a bathroom, wooden floors, old linoleum. There is little color. The house is old, its interior faded into shades of gray with the passing of the years. It is a tired place.

My mother comes home from the hospital with another brother, and now there are four of us boys. We play together and fight, and entertain one another in various ways. Our father is away at work most of the time. My mother stays home with my brothers and me, and she cooks meals for us in the little kitchen. In summertime, the evaporative cooler drones endlessly from its place in a window of the front room. In winter, my brothers and I crowd around a gas stove in the living room on chilly mornings.

Clotheslines in the backyard are strung between leaning metal poles. Clothing and sheets and towels blow in the wind there, spare clothespins swinging from the wires. There is a barbed-wire fence between our yard and the farmer's field, and a large propane tank that hunkers next to the house, its skin cool to the touch. Mostly, it is quiet on the New Hope Road, except for the wind. The wind is always blowing, brushing the wheat fields with an enormous invisible broom, then rising in dusty whirlwinds that spin and dance across the long rows of cotton.

My father brings home some fireworks around Christmas (or maybe it's the Fourth of July), and he shows my brothers and me how to light the Black Cats and Roman Candles, making my mother nervous. There is a bad storm one night, and we go to the neighbor's cellar. My father buys a new red Chevrolet pickup and all of us pile in to go show it off to our grandparents. And there is Eula Faye.

Eula Faye and her pack of scruffy kids are our distant neighbors. They live in a shoddy little place a mile or so away, also on the New Hope Road. Eula Faye's husband is a cowhand for one of the ranches, or maybe he works in the oil fields, but either way it means pretty much the same thing: a steady dose of the hard life. Sometimes, Eula Faye will drive up to our house and she and my mother will retire to the kitchen to talk about the local goings-on, of which there are not many. Eula Faye is not like my mother.

My mother is 23 or 24 years old. She is small and pretty. She cares to fix her hair almost every day, washing it at the kitchen sink and putting it up in rollers. She wears modest sleeveless blouses that she makes herself, and those pants that are too short to be pants but too long to be shorts. When we go to town, she wears a skirt and black shoes with a low heel. She is a "good" girl from a proper but poor family, and she probably has never in her life said a bad word, had a taste of beer, or kissed anyone except my father.

Eula Faye is in her 30s and looks older. She will pull out a chair from the kitchen table, dig a rumpled pack of cigarettes from a blouse pocket, and ask if there is any coffee. My mother gets the ashtray she keeps for Eula Faye off the top of the refrigerator and pulls the percolator from beneath the sink. My parents don't smoke cigarettes or drink coffee, two things Eula Faye does to great excess. I sit at the table with them sometimes, or loiter nearby just to examine Eula Faye and note the differences between my mother and her. The two of them will sit and talk, my mother drinking Kool-Aid or sweet iced tea and Eula Faye throwing back coffee and blowing streams of smoke from the side of her mouth. She squints and tilts her head to the side a little, then rockets the smoke across the room. Sometimes she blows the smoke out of her nose, a tired, faraway look on her face. I can tell Eula Faye is what people call a rough customer. She and my mother do not have much in common, but there is no one else around for either of them.

One time when Eula Faye is visiting, my mother gives Eula Faye's kids and my brothers and me each a piece of hard candy. One of Eula Faye's little kids starts choking on his piece of candy right there in the kitchen. My mother and Eula Faye finally notice him, by which time his face has turned purple and he has fallen down, twitching, on the kitchen floor. My mother jumps up from the table and is saying "Oh my God, oh my God!" Eula Faye puts her cigarette down and goes over to the boy. She jerks him off the ground, hoists him into the air by his ankles, and slaps him hard on the back until a slobbery chunk of candy shoots out of his mouth and bounces under the stove. Then she turns him upright and lets him go. He plops onto his back on the floor, gasping for air, and then rolls over and begins groping under the stove for his candy. He eventually finds it and puts it into his mouth again. Then he jumps up and runs off somewhere. Eula Faye is pouring more coffee into her cup as he runs off, blowing another stream of smoke at the wall, like nothing has happened. I guess she has seen a lot worse in her time.

I wonder if my mother ever despairs of someday becoming Eula Faye, of growing hard and worn from living out here in the country with a pack of barefoot kids and a husband who is always off somewhere working. I wonder what she expects from her life, if it is turning out like she might have dreamed or hoped, and if she is happy out here on the New Hope Road.