Sketch

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Black Panda

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He looked at her a moment longer, gradually lowering his eyes and resting them between her breasts. Then he casually slid out of the booth and stood up.

"Neither do I," he said.

SARAH, child, will you please run outside and get the clothes off the line before it rains," the voice echoed through the old house.

Why did she always have to say Sarah, child? God, doesn't she know that I'm sixteen and that Jim Bode has taken me out on three dates this month? Why, just last week he took me to the County Fair and won me that black panda bear. I sure wish she'd . . . her mind wondered as she pulled the homemade clothespins off her pale red dress. Gee, I sure looked nice in it last week, even if it was a little faded when I got it from Sis. I guess it's just like everything else around here—old and run down.

The wind whipped up the dry dust and blew it past her. Whipping, her long hair flew back over her rounded shoulders, revealing her elephant-like ears. Bowing out from her face, her nose slid between two blue eyes. Her boney fingers
tightened around two clothespins as she glanced down the long line of clothes still remaining. The wind flapped her face with the bib on grandfather's overalls as it churned the gray clouds faster. Nothing looked clean. There—the first drop of rain. Her legs ran faster as she hurried to finish the clothes. Why didn't one of her sisters come and help? Finishing, she luged the water-stained basket back to the house. She wanted to run, but the brown splintered sides of the house made her sick and ashamed inside. Her left foot hit the first step; the board bent and creaked. The aged screen door flapped in the wind. Each step brought her closer to the inside.

"Hey, someone come and open the door for me," she yelled, hoping not to wake Pa. No one came, so she held the basket tight against her hip with one hand and slowly tugged the door open. "Oh, darn it. There goes Mom's white blouse. Boy, she'll be mad. Why couldn't it have been mine?" she whispered disgustedly to herself. She picked it up and hid it under the gray sheets. She skipped over the deep groove that had been worn in front of the door.

"Well, what took so long? Don't ya know you've got a whale of a lot of work to do! I never seen the such. You're the slowest gal I've seen. Why your sisters ain't never been so slow as you!"

If only Ma knew what I was thinking. Why does she always compare me to my sisters? I ain't never gonna get married... at least not like Mary Ellen... she had to. It sure feels funny to know our own sister had to...

"Sarah, child, for God's sake, get to the kitchen. You know your Pa likes to eat on time... Hurry up now... and leave that basket of clothes in here."

Oh, no. Sarah trembled at the thought of Ma finding her blouse. Maybe, I'd better tell her what happened... That won't do any good. Ma'll just say there ain't no excuse for...

"Sarah, get out in that kitchen and get supper started," Ma commanded like she was a lady sergeant or something. She ain't the easiest person in the world. Her voice can cut like a knife sometimes. I guess that's cause Pa don't work no more. He says he hurt his back last spring while fixing the
barn door. I can't remember seeing Pa any place except asleep or eating. My brother Tom does all the farmin' now. Anyway, I guess that is about why Ma is like she is. Oh, it ain't all Pa's fault. Ma babies him too much. She oughtta scream at him once 'n awhile.

"Sarah! Sarah! How come my blouse is dirty?"

"I don't know," Sarah said meekly, shifting her weight from left to right and back again.

"Did you let it fall out of the basket?" Her voice increased and reached the same peak as her glare.

"No," Sarah replied, not really lying. "The wind blew it out and before I could . . ."

"Don't let it happen again," she snapped, cutting her off. "You know I ain't got time to be washing everything two or three times. With your grandfather here . . . it's just extra work all the way around. He just eats and gets in the way all the time. Now get in that kitchen!"

Sarah choked and began to busy herself in the kitchen. Grampa was sitting near the stove; his eyes gazed into hers.

"What's the matter, Sarah?"

"Oh," Sarah sighed, trying to hold back the tears by sniffing, "Ma's in a row cause one of her blouses fell out of the basket before I could catch it."

"Ya know how your Ma is," he said knowingly. His cracked voice choked as he watched Sarah making the supper bread. "I know things around here get discouraging, but . . ." His eyes followed her hands as she pushed and pulled the floury dough. She glanced up, her hand covered with the sticky mass.

"I know that, Gramps," she answered to his unfinished statement. "I try to keep my head up, but sometimes Ma just can't understand that other people have feelings, too." She reached behind the stove for the starter. "I want to be like this some day . . . to start everything fresh . . . but you know, I'll always be tied to all of this 'cause this is where I had my beginnin's."

Gramps' eyes shone with sad recognition. He knew what Sarah said was true. "You know, Sarah, I wish there was something I could tell you that would make things easier for you, but your ma don't leave anybody much self-respect
around here. I'm too old to matter much any more, so it doesn't hurt me as much as the rest of you. I've seen my time, but I still have a little way to go.” His head drooped. She could tell that he was lost somewhere in a lonely memory.

By now the rain splashed against the window, leaving little streams running down to the sill. Her face pressed against the window. She watched the old oak tree bend. “My, how funny to see that old tree bend,” she said, remembering her childhood notion of how sturdy the old oak was. “It ain’t never blew so hard around here before,” she observed as she saw her mother standing in the kitchen door.

“Child,” her mother emphasized, “you had better have supper ready by the time your pa wakes up or your hide will be tanned.”

Sarah turned from the reflection in the window, “Ta hell with Pa. He ain’t never done anything around here for so long. He can just wait ’til I get it fixed and if he doesn’t like it, he can . . .”

“One more word out of you and . . . I’ll do the swatching myself,” Ma threatened, advancing toward Sarah.

“What’s the matter, Ma? Can’t ya understand what Pa is?” Sarah picked up the bowl from the stove. It slipped through her hands and broke on the floor. “There!” She bawled and ran from the kitchen. “It’s just like everything else around here.”

Sarah ran blindly down the hall to her room. The door isn’t far. Inside, she turned and locked the door. Safe.

She sat on her bed. Her eyes searched the small room. Why can’t I get out of here? The pounding rain outside pushed the walls closer together. The tattered wallpaper seemed to pull itself off the walls. The curtains rustled from the cold draft coming through the crack above the little window. She fell over and buried her head in the once-clean pillow. She listened to the pounding on the door. “Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Tom. Will you let me in?”

“Is there anyone with you?” she asked as she walked over to the door.
“No, I'm alone,” his deep voice replied. She opened the door a crack and peered out.

“Okay, you can come in.” His dark hair was a mess. “Have you been out in that storm?” she asked, trying to evade his blue eyes.

“Well, not really. The biggest storm is going on in here,” he joked with a strange seriousness, “and I missed most of that this time.”

“Tom, did you ever think about just leaving this place?” she looked at him with hope. “I mean, why don’t you and me both leave? We ain’t got anything here to keep us.”

“Hold on a minute. You forget, I’m the one that’s doing the farming now. I can’t just pack up and leave with the crop coming and all.”

“Now wait, you wouldn’t be doing the farming now if Pa was. There ain’t that much the matter with him. He’s just plain lazy and will sit around and let somebody else do it for him if he thinks they will. You could be out there in the world working at a good job if Ma and Pa hadn’t tied you down to this place.”

“Now, Sis, things aren’t that bad.”

“All I know is I ain’t going to be tied down here and be treated the way they do. Look at Gramps, just look at him. I ain’t going to end up like that. Ma just doesn’t give him a minute’s peace. God knows he deserves it.”

“Well, if you’ve made up your mind so strong, I ain’t going to try and change it.” He got up from the wooden chair and left.

Sarah sat there and looked at her black panda. His big ears had heard just about everything. I wonder what he would do if he were real. She thought about what she would do as she put on her coat and scarf. I’ve just gotta get out of here. I don’t want to be like Gramps. I guess he just takes it ‘cause he hasn’t got anyplace else to go. I sure wish Tom would remember the time we climbed that apple tree together. I got up there and was afraid to come down. He had to carry me. I got the biggest apple, though.

“Good-bye, Tom,” she whispered on her lips as she closed the door. She inched her way down the path, clinging to her black panda.