

***Sparrows* excerpt from chapter forty:**

After midnight last night I was sitting up next to Stevie, with an orange lollipop hanging out of my mouth, forcing my eyes to stay open. I like to collect the orange sugary juice from it on my tongue and leave there for a minute before I swallow it. I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore and was awakened by Stevie laughing at me because I was drooling orange lollipop juice all down my chin and on to my shirt. I woke up and finished off the lollipop by crunching it down then fell back to sleep on the green couch with springs poking me in my back.

I even dreamed of lollipops, armies of them, marching across the yellow table in the kitchen while Joseph is standing in the sink wearing a doctor's coat and counting. He was on number 342 when my dream drifted to something else: a drain of swirling gray water and my mama screeching off in the distance that she "can't have nothin'!" I don't know what else I dreamed. I think it was just a fuzzy gray screen in my brain the rest of the night, like when the TV channel goes off the air so there's nothing but a mess of gray moving around on the screen.

So, I'm sitting here next Mama with my eyes shut tight and thinking about how things aren't better, mixed with thoughts of marching lollipops, when for some reason, I ask her if we got anything for breakfast. I know we don't. And I know that asking her can send her off into a fit of some sort, either screaming or crying or a mix of the two. The moment I say it, I wish I hadn't, but my mama surprises me by sitting silent beside me. She's not saying anything, and I would have thought maybe she just fell dead sitting up there next to me on the couch, but I can hear her rustling around in the ashtray that's full of old cigarette butts on the side table. I can hear the scrape of the match on the match box, making that match smell that I like. I can even hear the little flame light the cigarette butt when Mama sucks in on it to get it going. I can hear her breathe out the smoke. I can smell the smoke that smells different than a brand-new cigarette. Mama says low, "It's better than nothin'."

That's one of Mama's favorite things to say. When we have only a can of beef stew between the four of us to eat, she says it. When we have to borrow water from the neighbors, she says it. When we don't have money even for toilet paper and we have to use newspapers to wipe ourselves with, she says it. When the lights are turned off and we're seeing around in the dark with a candle at night, she says it. And if the utilities are cut off and we don't have a candle to light up the room, we just sit in the dark side by side on the couch, all four of us Mama on one end, then me next to her, with Stevie next to me, then Joseph draped over across me and Stevie's knees like a blanket. We just sit there like statues in a dark museum and listen to each other's lungs breathing and stomachs growling. Mama says, "Well, it's better than nothin'. It's better than dyin'."

And Stevie says, "Is it?"