



©2025 Jody L. Pritzl

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher.

Cover design by Alex Zezza ([zezzadesign.com](http://zezzadesign.com))

## Chapter One

The abandoned sticks of chalk taunted me as I walked home from school. In a childish act for a thirteen-year-old, I drew hopscotch squares, representing my remaining days at Langston Middle School. I marked my release, like a hostage held in eighth-grade captivity. There were fourteen orange numbers and *FINISH* scrawled in red at the peak of my sidewalk art.

Hopping and crossing my feet on the double-boxes, I landed on *FINISH*, with no satisfaction. The jumping should have pushed out my frustration, but I was still balled up inside. I stepped into the street, near the gutter where rain ran, picking up fourteen rocks. I held them in my fists and then piled them over *FINISH*.

On the number fourteen, I plunked the first. By the seventh, I hurled bullseyes at each square. On the number one, my final rock, broke in half. Now I was ready to move on. I picked up the debris and dropped it through the

gutter grate. With the toe of my clog, I smeared out *FINISH* and the numbers 11,12,13,14. I redrew the orange box lines, placed the chalk exactly where I had found it and strutted toward home.

Plucking the *Wisconsin State Journal* that was propped against the screen door on the front porch, I dropped down onto our wood swing. I scanned the date, Friday, May 30, 1975, to make sure it wasn't yesterday's edition. Reading, I swayed in rhythm, forward and back. My momentum stopped when I saw the schedule to visit the *Freedom Train*. It was coming to Madison, near my town of Langston, and would be a summer highlight kicking off America's Bicentennial.

I held the newspaper open as I breezed in to the dining room. I smelled *Pine Sol*. Ma must be home, but her Volkswagen Beetle wasn't in the driveway. Instead, I saw Grammy Linnie on her hands and knees, scrubbing a stubborn spot in the linoleum of our kitchen floor. I dropped the paper. She was bald.

I froze in the doorway until my little brother EJ snuck up behind me, "Boo, Tottie. Why is Grammy's hair next to the bucket?"

She must have heard us, bending, resting her butt on the backs of her bare heels and reaching for the floral scarf she always wore now beside an unfamiliar gray wig. Should I help her up? Should I mop the floor? What should I say? I was used to complimenting her for being stylish.

I whispered to EJ, "Let's go play."

Grammy spoke to the refrigerator in front of her. "Tottie, take EJ to the A&W for some fries. Take a dollar from my purse."

I stepped into the kitchen. "Are you okay, Grammy?"

"Tottie, take two dollars and get him a root beer. Ask for the frosted mug, but no ice cream. Don't make it a float; the fries can be enough before supper, and bring me my change."

"Are you going to be okay, Grammy?" I picked up the newspaper. "The train is coming near us."

"Now you get along so I can finish the floor and put myself together."

Grammy's buttercream purse matched her pumps under the dining room table. I thought of handing her the shoes but she was bribing us to leave, so she must not want help. I undid the clasp of her leather wallet and put the bills in the pocket of my skirt.

EJ hadn't moved from the doorway. I put my hands on his shoulders. "C'mon, munchkin, let's go get a snack."

We made it as far as the front porch when I hesitated, looking over my shoulder.

EJ asked, "Are we riding our bikes?"

"No, we'll walk," I said.

"I need my cowboy hat."

Many of my days were peach-pickle flukes. Like my first ride with a new bike when I ran over a screw and

hobbled a mile with a flat tire. Today duplicated that. The *Freedom Train* was coming, but what was Grammy's future?

\* \* \*

As if sensing something wasn't right, that Grammy wasn't okay, EJ closed the front door like he was sneaking out. His black cowboy hat rested on the back of his neck, the brim pushed high on his forehead. I still held the newspaper, so he clutched my other hand. We turned left on Dunlap and right on Washington Street. I slowed my pace to his short, seven-year-old legs.

We were allowed to roam between the Piggly Wiggly grocery store on the south end of town and the A&W on the north edge. EJ dragged and stared at his plaid sneakers instead of peering in the window of Sly's Hardware Store. I expected him to ask if we could touch the fossils in Hank's Rock Shop, but he passed by, not curious. He must have been hungry, since he picked up speed when he saw the big orange and brown A&W sign a block away.

The restaurant, kind of a diner, was our go-to place. If Ma went on strike from cooking, she'd announce the family was going to the AW. But she'd order something silly, like the diet plate—cottage cheese and peaches on a bed of lettuce. On weekends, the high school kids hung out at the A&W, sipping a root beer for two hours. I hoped this fall,

when I started high school, I'd make a friend, and they'd ask me to hang out.

I slid into my favorite booth near the kitchen, the one without rips in the red plastic. Gawking at the food coming out helped me finalize a choice based on popularity. We were too early for the dinner rush, just a whimper lately, with so many Langston workers out of jobs and money. I had hoped for bustling waitresses, carrying trays heaped with onion rings and chili dogs, and mugs of root beer, to distract both my brother and me.

EJ stood on the seat, flipped his hat on the booth hook, and plopped down across from me. I set my newspaper aside and handed him a menu. He stared at the pictures, instead of singing his silly song about the family burger names--*Mama needs a single, Papa gets a double, Tottie gets the Teen with bacon in between, and I'm too old for the Baby Burger.*

I sniffed bacon and onion rings. The waitress came by, “What'll you have?”

I didn't need to look at a menu. “We'll split an order of fries, one water, and a baby root beer.”

EJ used his puppy eyes on me. “Tottie, can I have the bigger one, like Dad usually gets?”

My brother had witnessed Grammy not at her best, which made me generous. “Make the baby root beer a regular.”

He wanted more. “Can I get a burger?”

“Don't push me. It's too close to dinner.”

The gal took our order to the kitchen. EJ stopped flicking sugar packets on the table and rested his chin in his hand. “Tottie, why was Grammy's hair on the floor?”

I shook the ketchup bottle so the first pour wasn't runny. I was stalling for an explanation appropriate for a kid of seven. A liar I wasn't, but truth can be tricky. I went with the little I knew. “Grammy has a wig, and she isn't feeling well.”

He turned up the corners of the placemat in front of him. “Is it like a cold, or throwing up sick?”

“Throwing up sick.” I spotted the jukebox in a corner. I should ask the waitress for change, break a dollar bill to play some tunes, to take a breather from EJ's poking.

“Will my hair fall out, and I get a wig if I get sick?” he asked.

“No, your hair will grow, and someday you'll have hair on your face too, I promise.”

The waitress came with a pile of fries and our drinks. I reached, stealing a sip of EJ's root beer, and the frosted mug slipped out of my hand. EJ lunged for the napkins and toppled my water. Our waitress wiped up the spill. “You two need to calm down.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I mumbled.

EJ was full of questions. “Will Grammy's hair grow back?”

“Sure, it will.”

“Is it a tummy ache?”

“I don't know where she hurts.”

“Tottie, what train is coming?”

Grateful to not explain what I couldn't explain, because I didn't know much about what was happening to Grammy, I opened the newspaper and relaxed against the back of the booth. EJ moved the plate of fries in front of him. He poured half the bottle of ketchup on top.

“It's called the *Freedom Train*, filled with a bunch of antiques I want to see.”

“Is it free?”

In our family, ‘free’ was a favorite four-letter word, its impact understood even if you were seven. “It's not free, but you go through ten cars filled with American history, it's coming in August.”

Now I knew how my parents felt when I badgered them to explain why I had to do a chore.

“Why is it coming?”

“Remember your birthday?”

EJ puffed up. “Next one, I'll be eight.”

“Well, there is a big party planned.”

“Whose party?”

“A party for our country,” I said.

“You mean Wisconsin?”

I explained. “No, a party for all of the states, the whole country.”

“And the train is the party?”

I sighed, so many questions wearing me down. “The train is to start the party. It's going many places but stopping once here, in Wisconsin.”

Again, EJ's favorite word, “Why?”

I snapped a french fry in half and popped it in my mouth. “Cause in 1976, our country is 200 years old, which is a bicentennial.”

“That's older than Grammy.”

“Way older than Grammy.”

EJ traced the A&W logo on his root beer mug. “Is Grammy going to live to be 200 years old?”

“Nobody lives that long. She'd have to last another 140 years.”

“But she could see me grow up, right?”

“Of course. The doctors will help.” That was the second promise I'd made my brother during our snack time. I wondered if it would be kept. EJ pushed up onto his knees, saying he was done. I paid the bill and asked for a receipt to give to Grammy with her change. We were a block down the street when EJ ran back to the diner to retrieve his cowboy hat. As we skipped home, he peeked in the store windows.

\* \* \*

The yummy smells from the A&W followed us into our kitchen. Dad, still wearing his oil-stained uniform, and without moving his feet in the space, cooked and washed

dishes at the same time. Grammy had left, Dad explained. “Said she wasn't feeling up to more cleaning; your Ma took her home. Wash up. I made burgers and fries.”

EJ started to share, “But Tottie and me...”

I jumped in, touching his arm. “Let's wash our hands, EJ.”

When we came back, I showed Dad the train story. “Here's what it says: *A show-stopping, steam-puffing, whistle-tooting Bicentennial salute to America.*”

Dad was intent on dinner and directed me to help, “Slice off some cheddar cheese from the chunk.”

I was determined to see the train. “You see 200 years of history in 20 minutes.”

Dad stacked three plates next to the stove. He pressed the burgers, sizzling in the cast-iron frying pan, smashing them to make sure the blood was gone and they were cooked through. He topped the meat with a piece of cheddar, covering the pan until it melted. He handed me a plate. “This smaller one is for EJ; use the tongs to fish out some fries from the basket. Grab a paper towel and dump the rest into this pie plate; they'll stay warm in the oven.”

Before my little brother could say he wasn't hungry for french fries or anything, I smacked the plate down and whispered, “Try to eat.”

Dad handed me a plate and fixed two burgers for himself. I sat in my spot next to the window, overlooking the front yard. EJ scrunched in the corner near the

chalkboard that listed flour, green beans, butter--groceries we needed. To the right, a scrawled note to schedule EJ's checkup with Doc Starr. The radio was mounted above the chalkboard, on a shelf that Dad had made. Music played all day and night after I twisted the power knob the wrong way and broke it. Dad turned up the volume on the six o'clock news. He'd turn it lower when EJ and I pretended to be backup singers for the Top-40 hits.

I didn't take a bite before pulling the *State Journal* out from under my butt to once again pitch seeing the *Freedom Train*. "Dad, it says there's a replica of the Liberty Bell."

"Put the darn paper away, Tottie, and eat your supper," he said.

"Will we ever go to Philadelphia? Is that a possibility?"

"I doubt it."

We'd taken two family vacations, both camping trips to state parks, never leaving Wisconsin, or seeing Illinois or Minnesota. "Will we ever see the capital in Washington, D.C., or visit Edison's lab in New Jersey?"

"No plans to," he said, as he munched on his burger.

The *Freedom Train* was my chance, not to be left behind when everyone else was at the party. "But it says there is a whole car about inventions. I'll give up my allowance for a month if we can go," I pleaded.

"No reading at the supper table," Dad blurted.

I tried a different tactic than money. “I can see things I’ve studied in school.”

“Tottie put the paper down. Your burger is getting cold.”

Dad was a fan of Abraham Lincoln, so I used that to try and sway him. “Lincoln’s hat is on the train.”

Dad snatched the paper, flinging it down the back stairs. I sat up straight in my chair. I had pushed my patient, methodical father too hard and he’d lost it. “I’m canceling the newspaper; it’s a waste of money.”

“But I need it for my current events class.”

“Borrow someone else’s. Your Ma thinks of it as a necessity; I don’t. And as for the Bicentennial rubbish, it’s just an excuse to pick my pocket. Really, they should advertise it as a B-U-Y-Centennial. Trashy pieces of junk, glasses, ties, and crap no one needs. Tottie, men died for us to be free, not to force us to buy useless t-shirts, coins, and whatever else is peddled.”

EJ sucked a glob of ketchup off a french fry. Dad chugged half his chocolate milk and slid the glass away from him. “Where were you two?”

Before I could make up something, EJ piped in. “We saw Grammy without her hair, and she told us to get a root beer and.....” I pushed his chair with my foot before he said french fries.

Dad spoke softly. “She shouldn’t have been cleaning the house; it wears her out.”

He looked sad and so I asked, "How sick is she, Dad?"

"Ask your Ma when she gets back."

EJ licked the extra ketchup off his plate. Dad frowned. "EJ, that's not how we eat. It's gluttony, and you're not an animal."

The big word puzzled my brother. "What's gluttony?"

"A disgusting way of overeating," I explained.

"I'd be a bird, to go wherever I wanted. Tottie, what animal would you be?"

"I'd be a bear, a mama bear, and I'd stick up for the other animals."

"What would you be," I asked Dad.

"I'd be a fish and swim upriver to Canada. I'll wash; you dry the dishes."

EJ sprawled on the living room floor watching television. As Dad washed the frying pan, I tried again for answers. "Dad, what are the doctors telling Grammy?"

He worked the copper scrubby harder. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, Tottie, about the train."

I let him off the hook. "That's okay, Dad. Tell me what's going on."

He wiped his hand on a towel, not answering me. I tried a different angle. "EJ asked me how long she'll live. Did I miss something, Dad? How serious is this?"

He stared at the wall and sighed. "There's hope."

I stammered, "I think EJ is afraid that Grammy is really sick."

He didn't respond.

“You're not going to tell me the truth, are you?”

Dad touched my shoulder. “When it's time, Tottie, when it's time.”

When the kitchen sparkled, a standard Ma set to compensate for a chipped linoleum floor and 1940s cabinets, I went up to my bedroom and shut the door. After Dad grew tired of my blaring music keeping them awake across the hall in their bedroom, he bought me cushy headphones. The cord was attached to a stereo on a shelf, a solution of safety to avoid tripping over it. Dad had found a wooden step ladder that someone had tossed on the curb with a missing rung. He'd made it solid again and painted it green. I used the ladder to reach the turntable to play albums.

It had been a day of questions with no answers. None were given to my brother by me, and none were given to me by Dad. Lying on my twin bed, I put on my headphones and floated on an imaginary cloud, as a voice half-preacher, part friend, sang in my ears. *I Got a Name* was the first album that was truly mine—a birthday present from Grammy when I turned eleven.

Jim Croce, the singer and guitar player, was my sole experience with death. Two years had gone by since he died in a plane crash. I felt so connected to him; the news shattered me. I cried for days when it happened. So young, it was heartbreaking for his wife and one-year-old son.

I don't know how he knew what to say to me; he just did. Jim's songs spoke my feelings out loud. He used the word *love* a lot, which wasn't said freely in my family. I reached for my cuddle pillow, squashed to half size by moments when I didn't understand, having not lived yet.

Paperback



Ebook

