

Family Planning (Agnes)

If you don't believe what I'm going to tell you, it won't surprise me a bit. My daddy and mommy were the best people ever was. He didn't drink, he didn't hit, he didn't run around. Every week he had work he brought home his pay. Every week Momma tried her best to stretch it, but it was useless, like trying to fit a crib sheet to a double bed. Not that she had crib sheets. Too many babies.

There were six of us younguns born fast and hard, not two years apart. I always thought my Momma was old. Lord, she wasn't but 30 when it happened. Nine years younger than I am now.

She was 30, my daddy 34, sunk in debt and younguns like quicksand. She was 30 and pregnant. Don't get on your high horse about birth control now. My people didn't have money. They didn't have a doctor. And you can bet there was no Home Valley Clinic where they could go for facts and equipment. You married and took what you got. My folks got too much.

I was nine at the time, nine then and nine years older than Momma now. I was nosy, too, and our house had real thin walls.

I was supposed to be asleep, but it was hot (right

around the Fourth of July) and too many of us in the bed. I could hear Momma trying to talk soft, but her voice kept climbing.

"What can I do, Jeb? What can we do? I can't have this baby."

"We'll make out."

"How? We're not making out now."

"Times will get better." His voice sounded weak.

"Not for us they won't. Not for people with seven younguns and mine work uncertain as rain."

"The Lord will provide."

"You don't believe that!" she hissed. "You just don't want to talk about it."

Silence, then the smack of his hand against her cheek. He'd hit her! I couldn't believe it. My heart pushed me to the door to go protect her. Then I remembered I wasn't supposed to hear.

A low moan came from their room. Too low. It was Daddy. And Momma was comforting him.

"Don't cry now," she said.

Next morning they didn't look any different, but I knew they were. It scared me to find out they didn't *know* what was going to happen, that Momma and Daddy were afraid.

That night I listened again. Nothing.

Next night the same.

But the third night I heard Momma's voice, solid as a fence post.

"I know what to do."

Daddy didn't answer.

"We'll send two of the younguns to my sister Nola."

"What?"

"She's always claimed she wanted some," Momma explained. "And Jack has steady work. Factory work is good in Cincinnati."

"You mean send them till the baby comes?" Daddy sounded as little as Willis asking that question. Willis is five.

"I mean till they're grown or we get hit by a miracle."

"Lexie!"

"I see no other way."

"But why two? You're not carrying double?"

"No. But I don't want to send one and have it lonely. And Nola's not easy. Whoever goes will need a hand to hold."

I couldn't see through the wallpaper and lathing and anyway it was dark, but I knew what Momma's

face looked like: eyes hard, mouth stitched shut.

"You going to send Agnes?" My heart jumped. "She's mighty independent. She could manage."

"Not me!" I wanted to cry. "I don't like Aunt Nola! I hate Cincinnati!" I bit my hand to keep quiet, so scared I felt sick. And in the middle of that sickness and fear was a big hurt. Momma and Daddy didn't want me. They would give me away.

Then Momma said, "No. I'll need Agnes. She can help with the baby. I was thinking of Eva and Charles."

"Not Charles," Daddy said.

The hurt twisted in me like a washrag being wrung out.

"Willis then," she told him.

"Why?"

"It's got to be a boy and a girl."

"Why?"

Momma made a squealing sound and started to cry hard. I burrowed into my place in the bed. Eva was in the middle. I could smell her hair, a dense smell, like shoe polish. I tried not to think, not to hear, just to breathe forever, in and out, the smell of that coal-black hair.