Things Just Happen

Sandra Barnes  
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1990/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Amaranthus by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
Maizie sat perfectly still in the hidden spot behind the lilac bush below Ma's window. She sat so still that two brown sparrows, unknowing or not caring, chirped and flitted in the branches inches from her nose. She was silent as a statue, rarely blinking. She had been that way since early morning.

If there was little movement on the outside of the house, there was plenty happening within. Maizie's mother lay up on the bed twisting and turning, attempting to bring another life into an already overburdened family. No one had questioned whether it was prudent to have another child. Things like that were never discussed between Maizie's parents. You did things and things happened and that's the way it was.

Only Maizie had expressed an opinion and then only to herself. She hated it. It wasn't because she was the youngest, although she was. Being the youngest had never afforded Maizie any advantages. Pa was always too busy with the boys or working to hardly notice her, and the boys, both bigger, considered her fair prey and were often cruel to her.

She didn't cry, though. Maizie never cried, not even when she fell hard or the time the mangy yard dog opened a two inch gash just above her left heel. Some of Ma's friends thought she was a little queer. "It isn't natural," they said, "for a girl to be so solemn."

But Maizie learned early that life was difficult and Ma was busy and there was no time to deal with a little girl's tears over a scraped knee or a purposefully dismantled toy.

She'd come upon the boys once, Hank and Skeeter, down by the riverbank. They had rigged up a horrid device with ropes in which they had imprisoned a cat. It could have been still mostly kitten, but it was too emaciated to be sure, and it really hadn't mattered anyway. They were shooting it with little stones from a homemade slingshot. If the kitten screamed and struggled too hard, the rope pulled tight, effectively dislocating a leg. The device was such that had the cat stayed still, ignoring the sting of the stones, he could have saved himself—but being only a cat he couldn't have known. So Maizie heard him screaming and thrashing long before she actually saw him. When she saw the boys and the cat, a sick feeling rose up in her and she wanted to cry.

"Hey Maizie, gonna cry, huh little baby, gonna cry for the little kitty cat?"
It was Hank chanting and dancing about her. Maizie tightened up her fists in a ball and pulled her lips back in a sneer. "Pa says Git," was all she said.

It would have been easy for them to call her bluff, but if she was actually speaking the truth and they paid no attention, the consequences would have been dire, and so they ran.

Maizie waited until she was sure they were out of sight and then she approached the terrified animal.

"It's all right, baby," she crooned. "It's okay." She began to untangle the ropes, attempting to half hold the cat as she worked. The cat stayed still until he felt enough of the tension ease, and then, sensing freedom near, he made a great leap away and disappeared into the underbrush dragging his dislocated legs behind. Maizie was left with the remnant of rope and two huge, oozing scratches for her trouble. But she didn't cry. She only cradled her wounded arm against her chest and sucked her thumb along the way home. When she caught sight of the cabin she took her thumb out of her mouth and wiped it to and fro on her thigh until it was dry and no one the wiser.

They could have left. They could have left the pathetic inadequate cabins and the tired soil and moved to town. Pa could have found factory work and maybe Ma too. Then there was always welfare. But they never would have considered such an idea. So they hung on scraping by with barely enough of anything except pride. They asked for nothing and they accepted no handouts. Things happened and that's the way it was.

But there had been a day once, one perfect golden fall day. Pa had gone to Fayetteville. He had a brother there by the name of Reville. Reville worked part time in a bakery turning out huge loaves of crusty bread and great trays of gooey caramel rolls. He farmed part time and was rumored to be the smart one of the two brothers. But he hadn't been smart enough to stay out from between a falling tree and the ground and Pa had gone to Fayetteville to see to the burying.

On the day he left, a stranger, a tourist person in a dove grey car, had pulled into the yard and made Ma an offer for one of her quilts hanging on the line. While handouts were forbidden, an outright sale was another matter, and Maizie's mother parted with the quilt for fifteen dollars. When the lady had gone, Maizie's mother looked at the money and suddenly she snatched Maizie up and said, "I reckon we're going to town." And they had. After a quick creek bath and with her hair still stuck damply to her neck, Maizie and her mother were on their way. When they arrived, the sun was straight up and she was starving. Ma took her inside a real restaurant and they had flowered cups with matching saucers.

After, Ma bought her a peppermint street and looked in the windows of a store. She twirled the end of the peppermint stick between two fingers, just a dainty white point. She had never seen a doll anyone had ever made. She was about to catch. For a moment she thought she was in disbelief and longing, but she swallowed and the moment passed.

"No use crying over spilt milk," she said, and she pulled Maizie away.

They proceeded down the street and Maizie looked in the windows of a store. They passed a bakery and the smell of Rolls and pies and tiny cakes with pretty icing cases. It was wonderful.

And then they rounded a corner. In the window of a dress shop was a fine white point. She had never seen a doll anyone had ever made. She had wanted to catch. For a moment she thought she was in disbelief and longing, but she swallowed and the moment passed.

"No use crying over spilt milk," she said, and she pulled Maizie away.

"Can we do it again Ma? Can we do it again?"

"We can and we will," Ma answered.

But they hadn't. The golden day and Ma got so quiet and thin again. But her belly got larger and larger and no more trips into town.
about her. Maizie tightened up her

in a sneer.

to call her bluff, but if she was
paid no attention, the consequences
they were out of sight and then she

"It's okay." She began to untangle

cat as she worked. The cat stayed

ease, and then, sensing freedom

Maizie was left with the remnant of

le caught sight of the cabin she took

it to and fro on her thigh until it

have left the pathetic inadequate

town. Pa could have found factory

was always welfare. But they never

They asked for nothing and they

the perfect golden fall day. Pa had gone

by the name of Revile. Revile

ut huge loaves of crusty bread and

farmed part time and was

brothers. But he hadn't been

a falling tree and the ground and

rist person in a dove grey car, had

offer for one of her quilts hanging on

an outright sale was another

the quilt for fifteen dollars.

her looked at the money and

aid, "I reckon we're going to town."

ath and with her hair still stuck

her were on their way. When

and she was starving. Ma took her

inside a real restaurant and they had sandwiches and drank tea from

flowered cups with matching saucers. Maizie had never felt so grand.

After, Ma bought her a peppermint stick and they walked down the

street and looked in the windows of the shops. Maizie pursed her lips and

twirled the end of the peppermint stick against them, wearing it down to

a fine white point. She had never seen such wonders—real dresses

already sewn up, hanging crisply on wire hangers, and bright coats, and

white nightgowns with lace on the bottoms.

They passed a bakery and the smells encircled Maizie and drew her in.

Rolls and pies and tiny cakes with pink frosted roses filled the display

cases. It was wonderful.

And then they rounded a corner and Maizie saw her. She stood alone

on a revolving platform in the center of a window. She was dressed in a

pale blue garment made of velvet. She wore matching shoes. Long blond

curls spilled from beneath a white bonnet. She was the most beautiful

doll anyone had ever made. She was so lovely she made Maizie's breath

catch. For a moment she thought she might cry with a mixture of

disbelief and longing, but she swallowed hard and blinked rapidly and the

moment passed.

Ma was pulling at her. "No use clucking over what you can't have,"
she said, and she pulled Maizie away.

They proceeded down the street past the beer hall. Ma told her to

cover her eyes and not look but she did anyway. There wasn't much to see

from between two fingers, just a dark doorway from which wafted sour

smells and the sound of fiddle music. They stopped near an alley and

Maizie saw her mother tapping her foot in time to the unseen fiddler.

"Didja ever dance, ma? Can ya?" she asked.

To her surprise and delight, Ma pulled her swiftly into the alley and

commenced to do a jig right there. Maizie watched as Ma hiked up her

skirts above her ankles and her strong brown legs flashed as she twirled.

In a moment she was done.

Still flushed with her effort she scooped up Maizie and hugged her.

"Girl, I was the best in the county." And still holding Maizie she started

walking for home. Maizie let herself be carried for a good long way.

"Can we do it again Ma? Can we?"

"We can and we will," Ma answered.

But they hadn't. The golden fall had surrendered to a harsh winter

and Ma got so quiet and thin and sickly, she seemed to fade into a shadow.

But her belly got larger and larger and Maizie knew there would be a

baby and no more trips into town or looks at the lovely doll in blue
Maizie jerked back to the present. Things were happening now. Ma was screaming real loud and people were talking and there seemed a lot of commotion inside. Then it was silent and she heard nothing for a long time. She had to go to the bathroom and she didn't dare move. Then suddenly she saw Pa. He was heading out to the shed and he carried a sack in his hand. She saw him go in and after a little time he came out and in the hand where the sack had been he carried a shovel. Slowly, stiffly, Maizie uncurled her limbs and eased out of her hiding place. She walked straight to the shed and went in. Inside it was dark and smelled of the earth and she stood waiting for her eyes to grow used to the dim light.

She saw the sack on Pa's tool table and she went over and opened it wide. And there, in silent perfection, knees drawn up, tiny arms folded across its chest, was the baby. Maizie stared in wonder and then, with one small finger, she traced the outline of the soft cheek, up and over the nose and down to the tiny lips. She uncurled the miniature fingers and put her own small one there and curled them back over her own. For some reason she thought of the doll in the store window, beautiful and plastic and pretend. Not real at all, not like this.

Maizie touched the soft hair of the baby and a soft moan began in her throat and then there were noises outside. She moved back to the door and she could see Pa banging away with the shovel at the rocky ground. She watched while he was digging and then when he pulled out a rag to run over his brow and eyes, she darted swiftly away and ran to the front porch. The boys were there, Hank and Skeeter sitting close to one another, silent and watchful. Maizie went inside and looked but the curtain to her mother's bedroom was closed and the lady sitting by it put a finger to her lips to shush any inquiries. She did uncross her legs and opened wide a place in her lap and beckoned Maizie up, but Maizie turned away and went up to her own little bed.

Somewhere in time she must have slept, for when she woke the room was fully dark. Maizie kept thinking about the baby out there in the shed and she got up. She moved silently through the house and across the moonlit part of the yard to the shed. It was even darker inside and she had to feel carefully around the tool table. The baby was gone.

She moved slowly out of the shed and went over to the place that Pa had dug. She had slept too long, it was done. The hole was filled loosely with soil. She hunkered down on the hard ground and put her thumb into her mouth.

"It's okay baby," she said around her thumb. "I'll stay awhile with you."
Things were happening now. Ma were talking and there seemed a lot of and she heard nothing for a long and she didn't dare move. Then thing out to the shed and he carried a sack after a little time he came out and in e carried a shovel. Slowly, stiffly, out of her hiding place. She walked de it was dark and smelled of the yes to grow used to the dim light.

do and she went over and opened it knees drawn up, tiny arms folded e stared in wonder and then, with e of the soft cheek, up and over the uncured the miniature fingers and hem them back over her own. For n the store window, beautiful and et like this.

baby and a soft moan began in her side. She moved back to the door with the shovel at the rocky ground. then when he pulled out a rag to d swiftly away and ran to the front Skeeter sitting close to one ent inside and looked but the closed and the lady sitting by it put es. She did uncross her legs and beckoned Maizie up, but Maizie turned slept, for when she woke the room but the baby out there in the shed rough the house and across the was even darker inside and she e. The baby was gone.

and went over to the place that Pa done. The hole was filled loosely d ground and put her thumb into her thumb. "I'll stay awhile with

She stayed a very long time, crouched there swaying from time to time with the cold and the need to sleep. A shadow crossed the moonlit place between her and the shed. She jerked and looked up, her thumb falling out of her mouth. The shadow moved toward her. It was Pa. He didn't speak at all but sat down and gathered her to him. She felt the rough shoulder of his jacket with her cheek, and his hand where it touched her hair. They stayed that way, not moving, and even though she bit her lip as hard as she could and squeezed her fists, she couldn't stop them, first a trickle and then a great torrent making rivers down her cheeks and falling silently into the soft place in the earth below.