



“They say all the magic is gone up out of this place,” said Mama.

She looked straight ahead as she drove, past the white beam of our headlights, deep into the night, like she could see exactly what was up ahead of us. I couldn’t see anything, though: not a house, not a store, not even an old barking dog. A big fat moon, pale white and lonesome-looking, was our only streetlight. I watched the way the moonlight painted her profile: the dark shadows under her cheekbones, the tight pull of her mouth. I didn’t need to see her eyes to know how they’d look: sky blue and beautiful. Full of all the sadness in the world.

“Soooo . . .” I propped my feet up on the dashboard and wiggled my sock-stripped toes. “Does that mean there *was* magic here to start with?”

The wind answered before Mama did; it swooshed through the van and flung her blond hair into a cloud of golden whirls and curls. Only my mama could shine like that when the rest of the world was so dark.

“That’s what some people say,” she told me. And then she stopped clutching the steering wheel so tight and her shoulders relaxed and I knew exactly why: She was about to settle into a good story.

“Midnight Gulch used to be a secret place,” Mama said. “The mountain hid the town high-up-away from the rest of the world. And the river surrounded the mountain and kept it safe. And the forest stood up tall around the river and caught all of the town’s secrets and songs in its branches.” I relaxed into the sound of her voice. Her speaking voice is wonderful, but my mama’s story voice is like nothing I’ve ever heard, like something between a summer breeze and a lullaby. “The town *had* to stay secret, you see, because the people who lived there had magic in their veins.”

“Real magic?” I could barely even whisper the word. Just the thought of real magic sent shivers from my nose to my toes. This time it was my heart that answered, a steady drumbeat *yes* inside my chest.

Yes,

Yes,

Yes!

“That’s the story they tell,” Mama sighed. “They say some people could catch stars in Mason jars. And some people could sing up thunderstorms and some could dance up sunflowers. Some people could bake magic into a pie, make folks fall in love, or remember something good, or forget something bad. Some people had a magic for music. . . .”

Mama's fingers clutched knuckle-white around the steering wheel again. But she kept on telling:

"They could play a song and it would echo through the whole town, and everybody in town, no matter where they were, stood up and danced."

She cleared her throat. "They say some people glowed in the dark. And some people faded when they were sad — first they went colorless, then totally invisible. There are so many stories. . . ."

"And this magic town is the same town where you grew up?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Then why the hayseed would you ever leave a place like that?"

"All the magic was gone by the time I lived there. There was only a two-lane road and a traffic light that always stayed green. I figured that meant the magic had moved on out. Figured I had to move on, too, if I wanted to see any of it."

"Did you ever?"

"I see you." Mama smiled. "And I see Frannie Jo sleeping right behind me."

She glanced up in the rearview mirror at my little sister, who was snuggled up with our dog, Biscuit. Both of them were snoring sweetly, cuddled against all the clothes that we'd piled in the way-back seat. Frannie's nearly six, but people think she's even younger than that because she's so small. She blended in easy with the books and blankets and clothes.

“I got all the magic I ever need here with me,” Mama sighed.

I smiled at her words. I wanted them to be true, but I knew Frannie and I didn’t have the kind of magic necessary to get rid of Mama’s sad. But maybe that kind of magic did exist somewhere. Maybe magic was just a few miles away.

My heart fluttered again. *Yes*.

Mama glanced up at the lonesome moon. The moon glowed down over her face like it was very happy to be noticed.

“I can’t imagine anybody or anything lonelier than that midnight moon,” said Mama. “That’d be awful — sitting up against ten thousand stars without arms to reach out and hold a single one.”

For a time, we didn’t say anything else. We just listened to the van *per-clunkity-clunk, per-clunkity-clunk* down the curvy road. And I listened to my heart, still singing *Yes, Yes, Yes* to all the questions I wasn’t asking.

Suddenly, the *per-clunkity* gave way to a *boom-clackity* as we crossed over a long, narrow bridge. The crickets sang a little louder as we crossed that river. The moon shone a little bit brighter. The night air smelled like baking cookies. And my heart drummed steady: *Yes, Yes, Yes*. Good things happen when my heart says yes, especially if nobody else around me is saying much of anything at all.

Mama slowed the van and leaned her arm across me. “Take a look, June Bug. We’re here.”

She pointed to a sign that somebody'd painted up and shoved sideways into the hillside. A flickering spotlight shone up at the words:

MIDNIGHT GULCH, TENNESSEE
a proper place to call home

“Used to read different, before they painted over it,” Mama said. “It used to say —”

“A *magical* place to call home,” I whispered. I didn’t need her to tell me. I could already see the word *magical* shining as bright as sunshine letters, even through all those layers of paint. I could see other words, too.

The stars above us spelled out:

Summer

Wonder

Homespun

And the yellow lines caught in our headlights curved into these words:

Stay

Listen

See

I heard a poem tangled up inside a rush of the midnight songs the crickets were whistling:

Finally,

At last,

*Forever, and now,
Here you are.*

I didn't say another word to Mama that night, but I could feel something good even then: the *YES* in my heart, the swirling-around in my belly, the prickly tingling all the way from the freckle on my finger to the tip of my pinky toe. That much wonderful could only mean one thing:

There was *still* magic in Midnight Gulch.

This is how I turned it loose. . . .