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A New Family

TO annoy Miss Miller, Libby snapped her gum loudly as she huddled in the corner of the front seat of the car. She wouldn't look at Miss Miller. Instead, she watched the telephone poles whiz past.

"I'm sure you'll like it at the Johnson's farm," said Miss Miller as she drove through the countryside.

Libby was sure she wouldn't. A lump tightened her throat.

Miss Miller sighed. She'd been trying to convince Libby she'd enjoy living in the country. "If you try hard, you'll learn to love the Johnsons. They are good people."

Libby stared out the window and chewed her gum harder, trying to irritate Miss Miller.

She didn't like social workers—not now, not ever. She counted the mailboxes along the long stretch of flat countryside. Five mailboxes, then a turn. Her hands were icy. The muscles tightened in her back and neck, giving her a headache. She wasn't going to love anybody. Not ever again! Especially not foster parents.

“It's only another mile,” said Miss Miller, turning the car heater down to medium. Her fragrant perfume drifted through the car. “I'll be out to see you in two weeks.”

“Check up on me, you mean,” mumbled Libby, crossing her thin arms and sticking out her pointed chin.

“I didn't mean that at all, Libby, and you know it.” Miss Miller slowed the car down and looked hard at Libby. “I do like you, Libby. I want you to be happy.”

Libby sat up and looked straight ahead. “I am happy,” she said stone-faced. She chewed her gum even harder and wished she were a million miles away.

“There's the house,” said Miss Miller, turning into a long driveway.

Libby's eyes opened wide. What a house! She had never seen such a big, beautiful house in all her life. The lawn stretched from

the road to the house and far behind it. Several giant trees, already bare for winter, stood in the yard. Libby felt a tingle of delight as she saw on one of the trees a large swing tied to a fat branch, the grass worn away from under it. Then the tiny happy feeling vanished, and a hard knot settled in her stomach. This was just another foster home filled with strangers.

Miss Miller let in a gust of cold wind as she slid out of the car.

Libby clutched the door handle, looking with embarrassment down at her wrinkled, old clothes. She groaned as she climbed out of the warm car into the cold.

Miss Miller opened the trunk and motioned for Libby to take out her suitcase.

Reluctantly Libby reached for the lone, shabby suitcase, wishing she could sink through the ground.

“So, this is our new girl,” cried a tall, pretty blonde woman, hurrying from the front door of the house.

“Hello, Mrs. Johnson,” said Miss Miller, smiling. “Mrs. Johnson, this is Elizabeth Gail Dobbs. We call her Libby.”

Libby snapped her gum extra hard. Her heart raced as Mrs. Johnson smiled at her.

“We’re glad you’re here, Libby.”

Suddenly a terrible sound, coming from just behind her, startled Libby. She turned in panic. A large white goose, long neck out, ran honking right at Libby. She screamed. The goose flapped his wings wildly, honking again. Libby screamed again, kicking frantically at the goose. He flew against her, knocking her to the ground.

“Goosy Poosy, you stop it this minute,” cried Mrs. Johnson, shooing the goose away and reaching for Libby. “Are you hurt? Goosy Poosy is our pet. He didn’t mean to scare you.”

Libby’s heart beat so fast she couldn’t answer back with the angry retort that stuck at the tip of her tongue. She leaped up, out of Mrs. Johnson’s reach. Wildly she looked around for the goose. It was standing by the side of the house, eyeing her. Libby swallowed hard, backing against the car.

“He won’t hurt you,” said Miss Miller, patting Libby reassuringly on the arm. Libby drew back from Miss Miller but kept an eye on the goose.

Mrs. Johnson pulled her coat closer around her to shut out the chilly wind. “Miss Miller, would you like a cup of hot tea or coffee?”

“No, thanks,” she answered. “I must get

right back to town. See you in two weeks, Libby.”

Libby just glared at her, hoping Miss Miller was feeling really bad for deserting her on the front yard with a strange woman and a wild goose.

“Good-bye, Miss Miller,” said Mrs. Johnson. “Thank you for bringing Libby to us.” Mrs. Johnson stood quietly until Miss Miller was almost out of the driveway; then she turned to Libby. “Let’s hurry in. It’s cold out here.”

Libby didn’t want to walk into the beautiful house. She felt so ragged and dirty. Mrs. Johnson was well dressed and pretty. The wind whipped her blonde hair into a mess, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Libby flipped a braid over her skinny shoulder, hating her braids and her ugly clothes and her worn suitcase. “I didn’t want to come live here,” said Libby defiantly.

“I can understand that, Libby.” Mrs. Johnson stopped outside the door, her slender hand on the knob. “A girl likes to live with her own family. Since you can’t, we’re very glad you can live with us. Susan and Kevin are waiting inside to meet you. Susan is excited about having a new sister her age. Ben is working with his dad today. They’ll be home

soon.” Mrs. Johnson turned the doorknob and pushed open the heavy front door.

Libby stepped into the hallway. A grandfather clock chimed four times. Libby was startled and jumped. She looked around her in fascination. Never, never in her 11 years had she seen such a house. This was a house with a capital H. Libby always put a capital letter on anything that really impressed her. She turned in surprise as Mrs. Johnson introduced her to both smiling kids.

“This is Susan,” said Mrs. Johnson, her hand on the girl’s shoulder.

She said it as if she had something to be proud of, thought Libby as she looked the other girl up and down. They were both eleven, but Libby felt like a tall, gangly giant next to the short, fine-boned girl dressed in blue jeans and a faded blue sweatshirt.

“We’ll have fun together,” said Susan, smiling with pleasure.

“Oh, sure,” said Libby with a shrug and a sour look on her thin face. She really wanted to smile and be nice, but she couldn’t. She didn’t know how. She scuffed her worn sneaker on the plush carpet.

“This is Kevin, our ten year old,” said Mrs. Johnson, resting her arm on the boy beside

her. Kevin was short, a little chubby, and wore glasses.

He pushed his glasses hard against his face. “Want to see my pony, Libby?”

Libby almost smiled. A pony! She hadn’t expected that! But she only shrugged as though it didn’t matter if she saw the pony or not.

“I’ll take your suitcase to your room and you can go with Kevin and Susan to the barn,” said Mrs. Johnson, taking the battered suitcase from Libby.

Libby turned and looked out the large picture window. Miss Miller had told Libby that the Johnsons owned the general store in town, but she hadn’t told her they had a farm with real animals, especially horses.

“Let’s go to the horse barn,” said Susan with excitement.

“OK,” said Libby indifferently. But her heart raced. Finally she’d be close enough to touch a pony. She took a deep breath to push back her excitement. It wasn’t safe to get excited over anything or to start liking anyone at a foster home. During the past, she’d learned how to behave at foster homes.