



Mother And God

by Edna Henry

“**G**OT any gum, Willie?”

He squinted down at me from the top of the ladder where he was listlessly pushing a wet rag across a window pane.

“Too early for gum. Sun ain’t hardly up yet.”

“That’s what you always say. Trouble with this town is that everybody goes to bed early, gets up early and then has all day long to wait.” I rubbed a bare foot across the cold dewy grass. “Mother says it won’t ever be any different either, for everybody in town is of the same variety — Scottish Presbyterian. We all eat oatmeal every morning, pray long, work hard, and learn patience while waiting for the Lord to act. Only wish we had more money for gum.”

The “half-wit” was what most people called him, but mother always said Willie was only childish. He was very susceptible to moods and today he was in a bad one.

“Pushin’, pushin’. Devil pushin’ me all round today. I’m tryin’ to push back but I’m losin’,” he muttered. I wanted to help but not knowing where to push, I smiled what I hoped he would accept as an understanding sort of a smile.

“Shoo, git!” He shook his rag at a yellow butterfly hovering near. “It ain’t good to see butterflies so early in the morning. The day my mother died, one set right on her head.” His voice lowered. “Did you know that her hair growed six inches after she died?” It seemed to me that for every word he said, he took one step down the ladder, and it was with a great sense of relief that I saw his foot touch the ground.

This was the moment I waited for. Willie dug down into his dirty, worn breeches and came up with a stick of gum. Slowly he removed the paper, rolled the gum tightly from end to end, and kneaded it a while before he tucked it into his toothless old mouth. I had been completely forgotten. But I had a plan and I knew how to wait. He never chewed his gum long, only long enough to get the first flavor out of it. I knew there was much more good in it than that, but I would have to watch closely now.

Barn pigeons were rolling their cool notes over and over. He glanced up uneasily.

“Bees, butterflies, birds. Takes wings to get your soul free from your body. Prob’ly be dead ’fore night.”

With a pfft he blew the gum from his mouth and mounted his ladder. Now was my chance. I used all my cunning, for no one must see me. There it was, shining in the grass. Black Jack! Shaking fingers encircled it carefully, and at that exact moment I was jerked bodily from the ground.

“Throw that down,” Mama screamed. As ever, she and God were on duty to stop all my fun. “Get along to the house. Your father is ready to read the Bible.” Under her breath I could hear her as I had heard so often, “We must get out of this terrible little town. It isn’t a good place to raise children.”

“Oh, God,” I whispered, “don’t let us get out of town too soon. I want to see if Willie’s hair grows six inches when he dies, and besides, this is a good place, where nothin’ ever happens but is always just about to. Amen.”