

The Boy Who Wouldn't be King

By Christine Shipp

Through the window, Lynn timer watched the last carriage of the Spirit of Progress follow theirs around the curve, her fingers dragging the chafing neckline of her shift dress away from her prickling skin. Their second-class car reeked of sweat and cigarettes, giving her a headache, and on top of that she was busting to pee yet again!

Josie's elbow was sharp in her ribs, but Lynn timer didn't care. She poked her tongue out once more at the stern-faced couple opposite then threw her sister a dark look. The woman at Goulburn had been the worst, Lynn timer had been so relieved to climb out of their cramped seats and walk around the platform, drinking in the fresh air and slurping cool water from the bubbler.

But the woman strode right up to her, jabbing her finger into Lynn timer's chest and calling her a lush before Josie had appeared, pulling her by the arm and back onto the train. And where had their father been? Lynn timer guessed he would be in the refreshment rooms, purposefully keeping his distance from them.

After stowing their battered ports in the luggage rack when they boarded the train, Emmett King had turned away from his daughters, choosing a seat three rows ahead of them as the diesel engine hauled them north.

Finally at Central Station, Lynn timer barely had a chance to take in the swell of the crowd and the intoxicating smell of hot, flaky pastry drifting through the swinging cafeteria doors before Josie was hugging her, their two bulging bellies pushing into each other. Then the man in the herringbone jacket had grabbed Josie's port and she was rushed away. Lynn timer blinked fiercely; her father wouldn't stand for tears. The two of them wove their way through the late afternoon bustle, Lynn timer clutching her patent handbag as they made their way to Chalmers Street. Almost running to keep up with her father, she crammed her faded beret back onto her head as they darted through the spattering spring rain towards the bus stop, to begin the final leg of their journey to Waverley.

Through the strange halo that glowed above the trees and rooftops, Linnie struggled to glimpse the stars as they flickered in the early evening sky. Outside the brick bungalow, she breathed deeply, inhaling the thick salty air for the first time in her life. Exhausted from the full day of travelling, Linnie thought her port must be packed with rocks instead of her meagre belongings and her back groaned as she climbed the steps. Standing under the dim porch light, the wide hallway opened before her and as the gate clanged behind her, Linnie knew she was alone. No more than a moment had passed when she found herself following a nurse who wore a thin smile and a disapproving frown along the gleaming hallway. Eyes downcast and chin trembling, Linnie stood next to the only empty bed among the dozen or so in the antiseptic room, and read the name printed on the card that lay on the flat, grey pillow: Marilyn Ruth King.

Copyright 2024 by the Christine Shipp. All rights are reserved and the writing may not be reproduced or copied in anyway without permission from Christine Shipp.