

## Red Velvet Dress

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

The other people who lived on Lena's street were: Beverly, who was fifteen, who combed and combed Lena's glistening hair from the time she was little, as the afternoon light fell in smooth waves across the grass and curbs and softened the shadow of the postman with his cracked leather bag. Margaret, whose mother lived in a wheelchair in the back room of their house. She didn't roll to the front room very often, but once she did, and told Lena she wasn't bitter about her life, a secret that Lena carried with her like a fine pearl button. Annie, who ate a wide lasagna noodle boiled without anything on it. Norma, who was plump and pale as a Sunday bun in a basket alongside the German smorgasbord down by the railroad tracks. Peter, who pressed his face into the metal rungs of the fence, calling out in a thin voice, "Lena, Lena! Can you play?" The floating lady in the house with no paint. They could see her float by her upstairs windows late at night when they drove home from being somewhere out in the world. The Robitailles from Quebec with seven children and steaming blueberry pies. They wore French beneath their English like an undershirt.

Then there stood the many houses of no-names-known-to-us people which Lena and her brother and friends passed as they walked up the hill, to school and down the hill home. The crooked-drainpipes house and the house of yellow shutters and the house with three broken station wagons and men sticking out from under them and the house with the crazy

dog that bit Lena under the eye once and had to be taken to the dog pound for observation. They were people who could have been Lena's friends too, but were not because of the mystery of streets and blocks and knowing only some people while others belong to the quiet backdrop of trees.

Nobody had too much money. Almost everybody saved things. Lena's mother saved the little boxes strawberries came in and used them to hold her bills and spools of thread. Norma's mother saved the scraps of yarn from all the sweaters she knitted, then knitted a tiny striped sweater for their dachshund. The Canadians saved paper advertisements and let their children draw and paint on the backs of them. Only Annie's mother threw away the last little mound of mashed potato. Only Annie's mother did not darn Annie's socks. But it was nothing to do with money, more with style. Most people had a saving style in those days and nobody locked their cars when they got out of them. There wouldn't have been much to steal but an ashtray anyway.

Lena never thought twice about answering the front door if somebody knocked. It might be one of her friends or it might be a fireman selling tickets to the fish fry. Once it was a man complimenting the radiant rows of red tulips bordering their front yard. He seemed very dramatic. He stretched his arms out wide toward the sidewalk and driveway and said, "These are the most beautiful tulips in St. Louis! These are the most beautiful tulips in the whole world!" Lena's mother came out of the kitchen with her spoon to see who was making such a racket. They said thank you and he went away. Later they thought they should have given him a bouquet of them, at least, but they weren't in the habit of picking the tulips. They just left them alone and their petals slipped down the same way as old loose socks.

Once Lena dreamed two gypsies came to the front door and tried to drag her off with them. The man gypsy had a

silk suit and a top hat like Abraham Lincoln and the woman gypsy had a chicken in her purse. She woke up in a sweat and went to stand beside her mother's bed until her mother, startled, sat upright. "What's going on?"

"I had a bad dream," Lena said. She was eleven already and felt a little foolish to get scared from a dream. She did not want to say someone was trying to steal her.

"What about?"

"About—the unknown."

Her mother said sleepily, "Every bad dream is about the unknown. Probably every good dream too. You want me to crawl over or you want to go back to your own room?" Lena's father was snoring his snipping-scissors snore. Lena said, "I'll go back." Now the shadows casting their bony fingers across the top of the wall in her room seemed to point at her. Ha, ha, ha.

So the next afternoon before dinner when a loud knocking came at the front door as she was deep inside a book on her bed, she didn't run to answer. Her little brother did. She could hear the big door creaking open and him saying, "Who?" Then a long pause. She could hear mumbling.

She peeked around the corner. Two children she had never seen before stood there awkwardly. The taller one, a girl, said, "Is anybody else home?" and Lena stepped forward.

"May I help you?" she spoke like the lady in the ticket booth at the theater on Saturday afternoons.

The girl said, "We heard . . . well, we wondered . . ." and stopped.

Behind her, the floating lady was floating home with a basket full of groceries to hold her down to earth. She ate mushroom soup and marshmallows. She ate meringue and puffy muffins.

"You wondered what?" Lena asked.

"If we could see the Arab."

Another floating moment. In this long space Beverly next door would be pulling three long hairs out of her pink plastic comb. Annie would bounce a rubber ball up against the side of her house and feel the hard ping of it back into her hands.

"What Arab?"

"The one we heard lived here."

Lena looked around her living room. Piano, blue painting of candles, a lamp. Her mother was in the kitchen peeling apples for applesauce. Her father was in the backyard pitching twigs and dried leaves into a barrel and burning them. He thought it might be illegal, but was taking a chance.

"We don't have one," Lena said, and the girl and boy looked disappointed.

"Oh, but we heard . . ."

Lena closed the door as quietly as she could without saying good-bye. There was a small clicking sound instead of the usual swoosh. Her brother was looking at her. She went outside and sat on the back step next to the broom. She stared at her father in his white undershirt and square blue jeans. He was standing back from the spiraling smoke. He was tipping his head to one side as if he were hypnotized.

Oh, she knew where he had come from all right. She knew he came from Jerusalem, Palestine, the Holy Land, the land of Jesus, the land of camels and donkeys and olive trees, the land of her grandmother whom she had never seen. She knew the stories of Joha, the wise fool, which their father told them every night before they went to bed, and she knew about the pilgrims walking from the Old City to Bethlehem. When her father was a boy, he asked his mother if he could walk with the pilgrims, even though his family was Muslim, not Christian. "My mother said yes. She said, Be polite."

Lena had never been to her father's old home yet, but she was going, someday, one big day when the horizon opened up.

But he wasn't An Arab, the way that girl had said it. He was Daddy. He was Aziz to his friends and their mother. He was a funny tipped laugh and a red-and-white headdress folded up in his bottom dresser drawer. He was worried too, about money, same as everybody was. He didn't want Lena to do things she would regret. Should she tell him what those children asked for and what she said?

In the next neighborhood over from their neighborhood lived the Collins boys and the Parker boys that Lena knew from their jobs together working on the berry-picking farm and the Emerson girls who spent every Saturday morning at the library like Lena did and sometimes they all traded favorite books and the big grandmother with the high hair that Lena's mother stared at once in the grocery checkout line. "I should have been her," she whispered to Lena, which Lena found very strange. How could anybody be anyone else? But Lena would never go to their houses and ask to see the Africans.

Because once you knew Billy Collins, you knew about his lizard collection and his turquoise stone that he kept in a pouch inside an egg carton with old pennies worth ten dollars each and the rusted key he dug out of the ground one day while they were plucking the berries. You knew his voice and shirts. You did not think A Group of Different People, when you were thinking of friends.

Maybe the Robitailles weren't even like any other French-Canadians at all. Maybe Annie's grandfather who snapped his suspenders and brought them a fancy cold dessert called Tiramisu which he carried on ice cubes in his green car was just himself more than An Italian. In those days not many people talked about being half-and-half, but years later Lena would know it was one of the richest kinds of milk.

So her father burned the dry leaves and a bat flew over him. Lena called out, "Bat! Daddy! Look, it's not a bird!" and

he looked up. "*Ahlan wa sahlan,*" he called out, which meant "Welcome" in his own first language of Arabic, and she laughed as the bat dipped and rose in graceful arcs. He did not say, Get away. He did not say, I wish you were something else. He said "Welcome" and the bat seemed to understand by circling close above his head.

Then she took a deep breath and called out to him. "Daddy, some children came to the door. They wanted to see the Arab and I said we didn't have one. I never saw them on this street before. I never saw them at school either. But they might be from school. Are you mad at me?"

And her father came and sat beside her and took her hand in his own hand.

He sat between her and the broom and the night.

Inside the kitchen window her mother was reaching for a stack of four white plates with sheaves of golden wheat bowing around their edges. Her brother was turning the bathroom faucet off and on so the whole house shook a little bit.

Her father said, "The world asks us all a lot of questions, doesn't it," and stared off into a strip of pink sky.

Then there was a long slow calling of a dog from out in the field beyond the houses.

Then there was the clatter-bang muffler sound of Peter's father turning into his driveway next door.

Lena thought his feelings might be hurt. She said, "I'm sorry," and her daddy laughed so loudly he startled her. He stood up again and waved his hands in the air.

"You could have said Yes, but you were also right in saying No! All the questions have more than one good answer, don't you think?"

Lena felt gloomy. "That's not what they tell us at school."

"I could have put on my headdress for them! You could have pretended I didn't speak English. Maybe they'll come back and we can make them happy."

Lena's brother stepped outside, banging the green screen door of their back porch, and pitched his ball high into the air. He said, "Daddy, catch?" And their daddy was catching. He had stepped off against the nearly dark sky, so Lena could see him from a distance again and he could have been anybody from any place in the world. Without the long shafts of light from the windows of their house, they wouldn't have been able to see the ball very well by now.

A few days later a package arrived from the old country for Lena. Inside it was a red velvet dress, sewn by her grandmother and aunts in the village overseas, stitched with figures of children playing and two angels and birds and interlocking vines, all in different bright colors. At first Lena's mother said it would be a dress-up dress, but Lena didn't dress up that much and it seemed a shame just to let it hang in the closet. So Lena wore it to school. Her mother tied the long velvet ribbons in the back at the waist. She said, "Look at you! You look so elegant I almost don't recognize you!"

At school her girlfriends took deep breaths over her dress. They rubbed the velvet between their fingers. "Where did you get this?" they whispered.

Lena said, "It is my Arab dress from my Arab relatives far across the sea."

Some people said, "We never knew you were an Arab!" and she said, "Oh yes." But she was also thinking about the German words inside the dreams of her grandparents on her mother's side—they had told her they still had dreams in German even though they hadn't really spoken the language since they were children—and all the people on her block. What other country did Margaret's mother in the wheelchair belong to? The country of long quiet hours. The country of Slow and Ramps and Wait Till Everybody Else Comes Home. But Lena had also heard her singing.

The only problem about the red velvet dress was Lena

wanted to wear it every day. It felt so smooth, and comforting. It fit just perfectly around the neck. Not tight, not pulling. All her other dresses and blouses and skirts seemed shabby beside it. Down the street, Norma asked her mother if she could make her a blue velvet dress. She didn't want to copy Lena, but if Lena wouldn't mind . . .

Something had changed. Now Lena thought about her faraway relatives more. She imagined what her world would look like to them. What would they think of the art wagon at school and the tornado drills when everybody rushed down to the school basement to crouch on the floor and cover their heads with their arms? She wondered if her cousins would be able to climb the rope in PE. Now she thought of their faraway fingers pulling threads through velvet *for her*, thinking of her, and what that meant. It meant they were connected, just as she felt connected to all the people on her block and her friends lining their lunch sacks up beside her own. Now when she pledged allegiance, it was secretly to everywhere.